

# RECESSES

001

174

# FOREWORD

I never thought RECESSES could happen.

But it's happened.

And I'm so freakin' proud.

Thank you, all of you.

**- SAVHANHA SMALL NGUYEN -**

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THANK YOU



Risk It All  
Teè Leonie



# TEÈ LEONIE

## RISK IT ALL

T/W: SEXUAL LANGUAGE

### INTRO

Llllllong for  
Wwwwrong for (Now)  
Llllllong for

Wrong for  
Long for  
Oooooo ooooouu

### VERSE 001

I always feel the rush  
It's through the touch of your  
body, close to mine  
A sudden burst of love, I can't  
get enough  
So....  
In you I shall trust  
So don't, don't make a fuss...no (Mmmm...ah)  
Is this lust?

### VERSE 002

I always feel the rush  
It tends to make me blush  
Make me blush (Aha)  
I don't quite know how to cover this up  
The loves intensifying  
You're the one that I confide in - n  
I'll just keep on ri - ding  
No one else can slide i i - in  
ahh

We should and must  
Be prepared to take our chances  
You'll be romantic  
Ne -ver too frantic

Can sli - ide i - i - n

### CHORUS

Risk it all  
Just, just for a kiss  
And you'll say you, you - you... you - you miss  
A little bit that we long for

### CHORUS

### OUTRO

Llllllong for  
Haaa  
W w w w wrong forr  
Risk it all



# THE RINGMASTER

You are the youngest but the wisest

You are the reliable one

You are the resourceful one

You are the family anchor

You are the ringmaster of life

You provide to everyone except yourself

You listen to everyone except yourself

You support everyone except yourself

You believe in everyone except yourself

You want to save everyone except yourself

But yet you are the ringmaster of life

You dream about what could have been

You create opportunities when none exist

You wonder about the world and what it brings

You observe all that surrounds you

You think of everything, even when it isn't there

You must, You are the ringmaster of life

In times of sorrow, you are there

In times of need, you are there

In times of hardship, you are there

In times of want you are there

In times of love, you are there

You are the ringmaster of life, yet it's not yours

# SUMMERTIME SONNET

Holidays make me think of boundless space,  
Bare legs and arms freckled by friendly sun  
Watching dappled shade flicker on your face  
Blank diary pages promise unplanned fun

The zigzag of cool water makes you laugh  
We lick lollies dripping rainbows of fruit  
You perform cartwheels on the sunburnt grass  
Chuck off clothes to don your mermaid swimsuit

But there's a chill in the waterpark splash  
A sharp edge to this hopeful liberty  
I hesitate as the cameras flash  
And hear danger in the deafening sea

These are fragile snapshots I must savour  
Stick out my tongue for bittersweet flavour

# THE BLACK HOLE AT THE HEART OF OUR GALAXY

The afternoon where you tell me that what we have is not enough, I sit on the hill behind our house peeling fruit. Skin after skin I shed into a green plastic strainer—the cheap one you bought in Hanoi. You said the trip back home

would heal us. Bring us closer in uncertain times.

We don't quite understand what healing means. A delve into the countryside, perhaps. The wounds we have carried shall carry us.

I sit and dig my hands into bitter peels; The sun drags long talons down my back. *Don't you know when to give up?* I sit with my back against the world. I sit with my back against you.

Dandelions bloom even if you try to crush them under your feet. You

pledged your love to me this afternoon, many lifetimes ago. Things have changed since then, but you were still my first kiss.

Nobody knows it was you, but it was.



# OIL SPILL

the love of my first home is a love that is twisted,  
almost cruel

because the radiator bleeds,  
a rainbow of an oil leak

and the walls weep  
teardrops warping the paper

they diagnose my room with water damage  
and I am trapped under a collapsed roof,  
tiles stolen  
resold

there's a downpour in the dining room  
and the ocean breeze  
of this haunted town  
hangs stale in the doorway  
blinking lights fizz and fade out

sickness lingers  
in mildew and mold.  
the wall that keeps the waves at bay is crumbling.

red meat bears grease into my bones  
and inky stains never lift  
(the carpet holds all that has ever been here)

# OIL SPILL CONT.

sometimes I believe this little town stores so much hate  
that it spills over the edges  
drips down my hands,

but then echoes of laughter ricochet off these walls  
language spoken in tongues, like some foreign dialect I  
don't know

and the falling of tiny feet bang on these floors like drums  
in their clumsy crescendo.

these are the things I am desperately holding onto.

we have to belong here,  
with this town and all its ghosts.

# NTH

entropy never looked as sexy as it did on your bedroom floor  
"slip into something more comfortable," you say  
and i let the void envelop me  
oh sweetheart, the blip in the timeline is our heartbeats  
coinciding  
and yesterday is tomorrow is the circling of a black hole  
maw gaping and all sharp teeth  
did you know that even stars can die?  
now think about your own blood and veins and try to tell me  
you're special  
oh, but we're all immortal if you don't trust the narrator  
talk about ghosts in machines and solipsism and i'll nod along  
you're the only one who can ever know how this feels  
so try not to start screaming,  
like, the world ends for everyone in turn  
and a whimper in the back of your throat  
is a lot less gauche  
than a bang.

# BEE THE ILLUSTRATOR



@PeehellIllustrator.917

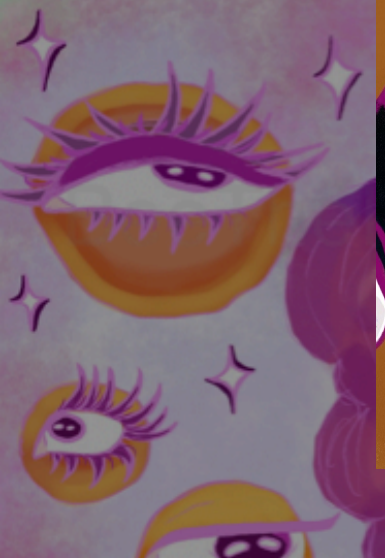
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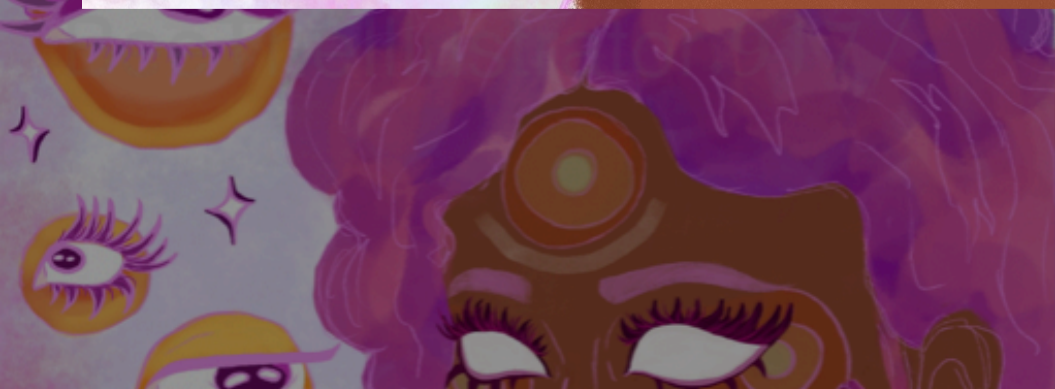
# BEE THE ILLUSTRATOR



Bee  
26yo  
London  
artist  
in Afro  
And Bad  
Bitchness



# BEE THE ILLUSTRATOR



# PORCELAIN RELATIONSHIP

T/W: IMPLIED SEXUAL CONTENT & VOMITING

I'm familiar with his porcelain contours  
Smooth and cold to the touch  
Lately I find myself down on my knees for him  
Bruises forming against the cold tile floor  
Gagging on his bleach cologne  
Causing my throat to burn with the exhale  
Choking as he forces me to hold my breath  
Tears springing to the corners of my eyes  
Until a release comes that I refuse to swallow down.

Previously Published in

**NAME MAGAZINE (2020)**



# THE FLY (MERCY)

How dumb  
to think  
my sleep  
was dreamless,

my dreams  
full of sleep.

There's the difference  
between the scream  
and the pain.

I'm not the kid  
anymore, kneeling  
next to the bed,  
asking for god to give.

Now, it's a good  
enough prayer  
to wish I were  
good enough.

But I can answer  
unasked prayers.

# THE FLY (MERCY)

## CONT.

Bugs buzzing between  
the screen and the pane –

I get up in the night  
to slide open the glass,

crack the door  
to let in light,  
and let the flies fly out.

# MIDNIGHT BRUISES

Instead of human emotions,  
inhuman alcohol  
flows into my blood vessels.

Seasons become monochromatic,  
the moon hides behind haze,  
voices of bygone days disappear.

In a blanket,  
I'm listening to screams  
of me crumbled  
by heartless bullets.

# HEART

she can't draw  
the picture of Heart.  
the silhouette distorts,  
just wanders.  
she doesn't know  
the color of Heart.  
the innermost discolors,  
just floats.  
vague pain  
and  
hazy warmth  
soak into her brain that  
is thirsty for humanity  
and is dominated by  
monsters.

# RICKY'S BLUES

Finally, it was laughable--  
how he left you in the theater like that,  
like a partnerless glove after he'd sat through five  
minutes of the movie, itching for a brew  
to suck down, a worked-up claque at his favorite dive.  
Magnet-eyed as he was, the little  
metal molecules in your body had jerked  
you across the room to his side the first time  
you saw him, he had that effect  
on people. And since you had glowed  
brighter than the rest, brighter  
than the Dixie Highway Jesus, your eyes  
huge as shasta daisies, he'd chosen your blossom  
to fry, your hearth to start calling his  
Holiday Inn, your wharf of sleep to unmoor you from  
at 3 a.m., banging on your door after he'd  
closed the bar, run someone else's  
panting tongue through the wringer like a washrag.

A wreck after three weeks of this, you slouched  
in the flickering light through some starlet's ruin,  
her mascara running like Pitch River Falls, and when  
he didn't come back to pick you up, you lurched  
next door to the doughnut shop, gulped four scalding  
coffees, kissed your bubble good-bye, and phoned  
your friend Mary to take you home. Then he got  
pissed because you'd left, called you, called you  
every name in the book. What balls! It took

# RICKY'S BLUES

## CONT.

another week for you to have it out with him.

That was the most lacerating affair you've ever had

the stupidity to put yourself through. That was

the most electrified you've ever felt, you said,

whether it was love or rut you didn't care, too bad

it was a psycho playing cat and mouse, he gave you

gooseflesh and you were thankful, he made your brain

churn like a hive of bees, your blood go crashing

through your body, your bones sob how they'd come alive.

Previously Published in

***Embers (Old Saybrook, Connecticut |Spring 1990)***

# WHAT TO DO WHILE HE'S DATING SOMEBODY ELSE

1. Buy a spectacular outfit, anticipating the date you'll have once he's free again.
2. Hang the clothes in your closet.
3. Wait.
4. Tire of waiting.
5. Decide you deserve to look spectacular right now.
6. Slip into your new outfit.
7. Go to the eatery he frequents.
8. Select the seat at the bar that has the optimal view of his favorite table.
9. Order a pomegranate martini.
10. Anticipate his arrival.
11. Follow him with your eyes as the hostess seats him across the room.
12. Freshen your lipstick, fluff your hair, and prepare to "accidentally" run into him.
13. Sigh loudly when she appears and joins him at his table.
14. Startle when a guy in a baseball hat asks if he can buy you a drink.
15. Say you'll take another martini.
16. Discover, as you converse with him, that the guy in the hat is smart and funny.
17. Remember you are smart and funny.
18. Look up just as the man you came to see strolls by hand in hand with his girlfriend.
19. Try to recall what you ever saw in him.
20. Laugh.

# BEHIND THE BALLAD

You think you know me because of the song. As if a person's essence could be captured in three minutes, thirty-four seconds. Sure, my ex composed a beautiful ballad. Those impassioned lyrics. That romantic string arrangement. No wonder he collected six Grammys. Who doesn't want to believe the fairy tale? Wild rocker tamed by true love.

The thing is: The song isn't about me. He used my name, yes, but the motivation for those carefully crafted lyrics? Money. Not love. To my ex, feigning feelings is just part of the game. Sentimentality sells. Even when it's fake.

# TWO OF US

We talked too much, laughed too much. Our heels, ultrahigh; our skirts, ultrashort. We fixed each other's hair, told each other how fierce we looked.

We smoked too much, drank too much. Our nightlife, wilder than wild; our taste in boys, "the badder, the better." We partied with businessmen, ballplayers, and bands, told each other "We got this."

We stumbled too many times, fell too hard. Our pain, suffered in silence; our problems, hidden from the world. We guarded each other's secrets, told each other that boys will come and boys will go, but friendship is forever.



# NUESTRA SEÑORA DEL CARMEN

Here sits a man.

I mean – a torso,  
with a head.

Flaps for arms, stubs where legs  
would have extended  
from twin trouser  
appendages, tied in knots  
lying limp & useless  
on the sun-bleached concrete.

He's propped up curbside  
just off the Playa's  
strangled thoroughfares,  
its church's  
white-washed  
stucco walls  
a calculated backdrop  
to those glassy, vacant eyes.

Each day's endurance  
facilitated no doubt  
with a meagre array  
of medicinal nirvana.

What keeps the faded toluca basket  
safe, with its sparsity  
of American dollars, Mexican pesos?

Do watchful eyes  
monitor this *pobre alma* from a distance?

# NUESTRA SEÑORA DEL CARMEN

## CONT.

A family member

or – more darkly – someone

he once held up as savior,

cashing in now on the guilt

of wealthy tourists,

the pious and curious?

My obliterated, despondent, *angry* heart –

The sun shines too harsh & fierce in Quintana Roo.

I look away – aim my camera elsewhere.

## MACKINAW

Watch as Jane makes headway in her struggle against the ravages of ego lost, of ego consumed, of ego deftly manipulated along the bitter shores of a surreptitious lake in the Upper Peninsula where she grieves for five sisters whose betrayal still stings, for a mother who made none of it happen and then all of it happen, and her father—well. Her father whom she adored although some would question why that might be. The Grand Hotel was a bit fancy for her tastes, the shoreline condos and B&B's too excessive for one of her simple origins. She prefers rusticity as host for her creature comforts. Listen as Jane draws a bead on an eastern screech-owl, her fingers tapping a frost-coated fence post, her suede-trimmed hiking boots tamping down last night's snowfall as an eerie stream of silence whistles through stands of balsam fir and paper birch, unseen purveyors of the island's darkness. Smell the tang of greed in the air, the pretentious odors of inauthenticity. Savor the marble-slab fudge, the rainbow array of taffy, the rancid aftertaste of money boarding the ferry back to the mainland. Witness Jane's resolve to disregard the onus of crushing despair. Celebrate with Jane as she strides ever forward, vowing to reclaim her once-lost life.

# TÀHIRIH

T/W: MODERATE VIOLENCE

Red, frayed scarf twisted around her neck,  
severing her enlightened mind from thick air.

Resilient body thrown down a well  
icy, black water stained with her.

Women are told not to speak.

Stay home.

She said no.

Her voice rises from out the past,  
challenging and screaming for Women's Rights.

If I stay quiet,

I am equally guilty as the hand that choked her.

If I fight,

I risk meeting the same demise.

And so be it.

I will speak regardless.

And roar with all the sound within me.

Silence me not, until all women taste freedom.

# ELLA NO QUIERE

AFTER TRANSLATION OF BAD BUNNY'S 'ANDREA'

There is a wolf-howl song written in bleeding ink for her. She wishes they wouldn't sing it on live feeds. She doesn't want recorded and rehearsed gestures. They only want to rain viral, analytically measured love on her. Just a show for the millions watching. Buying flower after flower, to enhance, filter, and saturate this as just another layer of the fantasy. An idea that translates into likes and follows. 'Subscribe to see more.' They don't please the oceanic depths of her heart. They don't know the bonds, like the roses, have already withered and this is over for her.

# SCORPION HOURS

These are the scorpion hours  
when day hasn't broken yet  
but night has already passed  
and the minutes have grown little legs  
that crawl flatty  
on and through your body.

These are the centipede minutes  
that stampede through your mind  
as they resurface memories to the foreground  
and shut your will to a lock-jaw.

These are the cold and dry minutes  
that seep into your nostrils  
and tickle at the nape of your neck

They don't *quite* haunt you  
but they cause the slightest bit of unease  
that leaves you  
perpetually restless.

# CLEAN THE CRAPPER

Have you ever really cleaned a toilet?  
Gotten down on your hands and knees and  
scrubbed the shit, worth centuries,  
off the marble palisade?

Have you ever really seen years worth of shit  
condensed into one small globular sphere -  
a miniature Earth of excretion  
as gloopy in its gunk as it drips  
as it sticks to your facade of home and space...

Once you have, hand over mouth,  
cleaned a toilet used by someone who is not you  
used for years and years,  
used to release and relieve themselves of  
digested gluttonous junk,  
you will finally see what reality is like,  
you will finally see what adulthood is.

What is it, you might ask?

Well, why don't you just walk over to the toilet bowl  
stick your hand in there  
search out that very ugly, very real  
truth which is:

you eat, you sleep, you love,  
you shit,  
and then you die.

That's *all* there is to it.  
That's all the toilet bowl can tell you.  
And for that,  
you ought to smile.

RSN



RSN





RSN



RSN



RSN



# A MAYBE LIFE

Somewhere else  
there's a morning window of summer.

Here I wake to a cloud-high city:  
dead night and  
an elegy of almost-sunken stars—  
the fiesta lights here are  
rain-rusted bars &  
blustered old Carlos' talking box.

30 feet  
Northeast,  
a television screen meets life.  
The figure trapped in the frame begins to speak,  
but it's too dark in his place  
and the window is too far.

I don't know most of the men next door,  
but he is called Carlos.  
Carlos who I find myself watching:

sometimes

while the stove ticks, my hands sweat-spat,  
full with the buns I had picked up on the way back from work.

Sometimes

On Sundays of dry switchgrass and burnt sun-oven slate.

On Sundays of shrill ice-air and beard-white wind.

I put on a jacket that covers my arms & pants that cover my legs & gloves & shoes on  
those days.

I don't like those days because I like my arms & legs & hands & feet. You liked them.

When there is nothing to do but sit,  
and the books are too hard  
& the work is too hard,

milky evening splits brisk into somber night, and I see the stars.  
The grass feels wet, and it feels green. It was one of those days yesterday.  
& it rained last night.

"I can see yours up there, Papá."

# A MAYBE LIFE

## CONT.

I remember him telling me how his star was the tiny one being scooped up by the big spoon.

I never told him that it was really the big dipper.

I add that to the list; after

*Tell dad the plural of "mouse" isn't "mouses"*

*Tell dad he pronounced the word "refrigerator" all wrong*

I see him chuckling when I read it to him.

I see him asking me how to say *perro*,  
chuckling when my words are more broken  
than his spirit.

I knew he couldn't hear me, but sometimes it's better to say things out loud.

I knew he couldn't hear me, but sometimes it's also better not to say things out loud.

(Like the broken taillight  
or the four parking tickets.

Or the fact that I sold  
his old T.V.)

I stood up  
and walked back home.

But I didn't want to be back at that apartment.

I didn't want to be home on those cold days  
where I covered my skin  
& I didn't want to tell dad that I kept his papers since  
November 4th 2009—  
—So it never made it on the list.

I stood up  
and walked back home.  
& I walked to Carlos' door because  
I wanted to watch his T.V.  
that never turned off.

I never knocked.  
& Carlos never answered,  
& Carlos never smiled his big brown, bearded smile

# A MAYBE LIFE

## CONT.

& Carlos never said it was nice to meet me  
And come in, come in.

So tomorrow,  
in a maybe life,  
I'll promise to stop by for a drink.

# I AM FLOATING BELLY-UP

A boy squats in the dirt and sucks on cough drops  
while another does pull ups on a broken shower pole.  
The image slides out in a hunted grayscale, starved  
like beetles beneath the creep of newborn steam.

The lens is pointed now at a deer with no antlers,  
and it bends its neck and pushes its shoulder blades  
like caution. It knows how the sky muddles into cold  
cave water before the storm bores through the forest.

The sun does not shine onto everything, and I tell  
myself you need an empire to become illuminated.  
One of the boys has a father who will saw and glue  
the head of the fawn. He will rot by my camera forever.



# TO DIE OR NOT TO DIE

## MUSINGS ON THE SAD GIRL ERA

To be sad is cool. To be unwell is profound after all the greats in human history suffered. Van Gogh cut off his own ear.

Small talk includes the SSRIs you've been prescribed, "*Zoloft or Prozac?*" Go on Goodreads and you can find curated reading lists titled "*sad girl books*" that consist of work by Ottessa Moshfegh and others. Type in sad girl on Letterboxd and you find dozens of watchlists that always have *Girl Interrupted* (1999) or *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) on the top of the list. These stories are set in dreams cityscapes, lonely apartments featuring flawed characters.

I must admit I too fell into the spell of the sad girl. I found profundity in melancholy existences. Though I try to remind myself it was me up against full marketing teams crowded in boardrooms.

It's worth noting the internet's, largely social media's, role in the popularization of this aesthetic. I mean who wouldn't be intrigued by slow edits featuring sad characters tinted in blue color grade with dreamlike audio in the background. Everything and anything can become aestheticized if there are a few good edits featuring scenes from obscure films and enough people participate in using the hashtag.

The term sad girl is much more a descriptor now much like the manic pixie dream girl. I view these two more similar than dissimilar. Though the manic pixie dream girl needs a male protagonist to function, the sad girl needs only herself. So maybe times are changing for the better.

Lackluster humor aside, I empathize with the considerable number of young girls on the internet being fed unhappiness in the shape of rounded cakes obscured by sweet frosting and red trim icing.



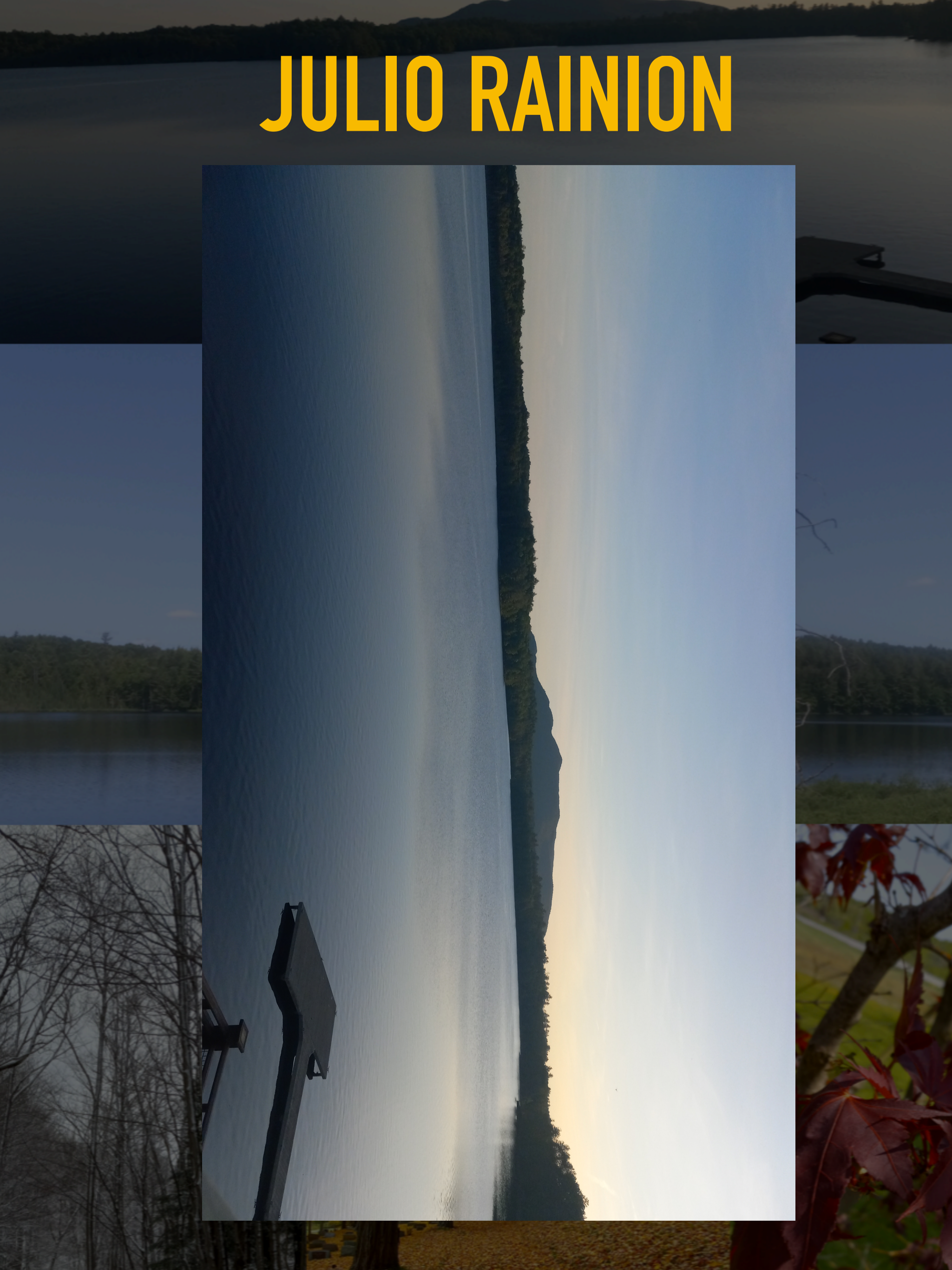




# JULIO RAINION



# JULIO RAINION



# JULIO RAINION

## JUNE TWENTY-FOUR TWENTY- TWENTY-THREE

I WANT MY SON BACK, i cry to the moon, the trees, the wind  
(whoever will listen)  
impassively, they lean in, feathered boughs glistening with  
mourning dew  
they know as well as i what bridge he's crossed  
i'll drink forgetting-liquor and  
lose myself once more.

# JULIO RAINION



# JULIO RAINION



# JULIO RAINION





# TREE-LIKE SONNET

I beguile a blazing courage of ebony.

I bewitch a brilliant audacity of elm.

I captivate a dazzling daring of the holly.

I entice a vivid endurance of hornbeam.

I enrapture a flashing fearlessness of fir.

I magnetize a glistening firmness of wattle.

I enthrall a glittering fortitude of birch.

I hypnotize a golden gallantry of maple.

You carry away a luminous guts of pine.

You enrapture an intense heroism of oak.

You delectate a meek-radiant prowess of lime.

You ensorcell a shimmering spunk of redwood.

We wow a shiny tenacity of poplar.

We spellbind a silvery valor of rowan.

# ABSTRACT ABYSS

Awoke with my head in a dictionary -  
No abacus to account for any abbreviations.  
Alphabetically, words adorned a literary  
Artwork of alliterations.

Abashed by the sight of an abbot on my right,  
I abhorred actions set ablaze.  
Awestruck in an abstract abyss I did alight  
On an accidental arcade with my eyes agaze.

Abruptly there was an aberration:  
*A brief and sudden drop in standards.*  
Acutely aware, I'd had an ablation  
And been assigned to a hospital bed aside two grandads.

I then beheld an abomination:  
(Not a snowman; but still abnormal)  
Due to that awful operation,  
My abdomen had been adapted into an alternative domain portal.

Actually astonished, I asked my allies  
Are you able to affirm I've not gone crazy?  
Awkwardly assured and of me they did apprise  
That in my abdomen there was an aperture with an astral baby.

# BEWILDERING BUBBLE

Blocking out the hospital babble,  
I could see the baby through my body's burgeoning window  
Playing itself at both backgammon and Scrabble.  
I then became bewitched by a smell like Bisto.

Born into this baby's bubble,  
I barely had the chance to bust a heartbeat.  
A blink and a burp, I was soon in trouble,  
Bathing in a boiling broth bittersweet.

Swimming in a bisque: *thick rich soup*;  
Bewildered by a bishop  
In a birthing pool  
In his birthday suit.  
  
I bundled out the bowl  
To get a better look  
And I felt a beta wave behold  
Me like a *bête noire* somewhere in this book.

The bishop was betoken  
Of a black beast,  
Behaving like a bogeyman who couldn't be broken  
Whilst my bemusement still would not cease.

# CASCADING CARTOON

Cooked in a cauldron of cosmic outcomes,  
As the ceiling came down like a cavalcade.  
I was caked in soup and concrete crumbs  
When the floor caved in! Commenced to cascade!

Carrying me caught in a cocoon,  
The concrete waterfall turned into cash.  
The landscape changed into a cartoon  
And cranium first, I coasted into a creche with a crash.

Confused by collapsed computer systems  
And children who'd fallen asleep,  
I crawled through coins and cuspy crayons,  
Certain that a cretaceous creature had begun to creep.

Was it from the church?  
A member of the clergy?  
It covered me with its lurch,  
As I cowered with consternation of catching the lurgy.

The closer that it got,  
It looked like a clown,  
Causing my blood to clot  
And my capacity to conceive to close down.

# TRIPTIONARY – CONTENTS

Abstract Abyss  
Bewildering Bubble  
Cascading Cartoon  
Déjà vu of Defecation  
Endless Entrapment  
Foetus at Football  
Glittering Grub  
Hourly Hallucinations  
Insane Incarceration  
Joyful Jarring  
Knocking Back a Keg  
Lucky Lungful of Lexis  
More Misshapen Meanings  
Narrative's Needlework  
Offbeat Odyssey  
Pepperami for Pterodactyl  
Queensberry Quagmire  
Red Room  
Sibilant Sentence  
The Tyrant's Toes  
Ugly Urn  
Versatile Vocabulary  
Was the Workpiece Worthwhile  
X-axis  
Yin and Yang Yells  
Zizz

# DIVAN

I'm lying on the sofa  
naked  
reading Orientalism by Edward Said

Berlioz is on the turntable  
I am stroking  
a cat

Goodness me  
this is not  
how I was bought up

in the Calvinistic chapel  
and the Boy  
Scouts

like atoms that repel and attract  
life  
can be one too many books

picked at random  
from someone else's  
shelf

how difficult it is  
to be  
oneself

I put on some clothes as the cat licks her pads  
oh to live  
and not think about it

# FREEZER #2

her theory  
was that the past

was best packed into tupperware  
and frozen

deep in the freezer  
like spent fuel  
from a nuclear reactor

in due course  
it could be examined and defrosted

or just stay  
in the depths  
amongst ice cream and stray chips

then we went on holiday  
and whilst away

there was an electrical failure  
we came home to death and destruction

# EYE LEVEL

I had the expensive oil tank  
taken away

widened the slab  
and put a summer house on it

which didn't quite fit  
so I sit on the overhang

with the flowers at eye level  
and watch the honey bees work

in our iridologic world  
it's good to be humble

get down to the bees  
and see what they're up to

next year I'll plant more flowers  
sit on the same step

figure out  
how I can do things better



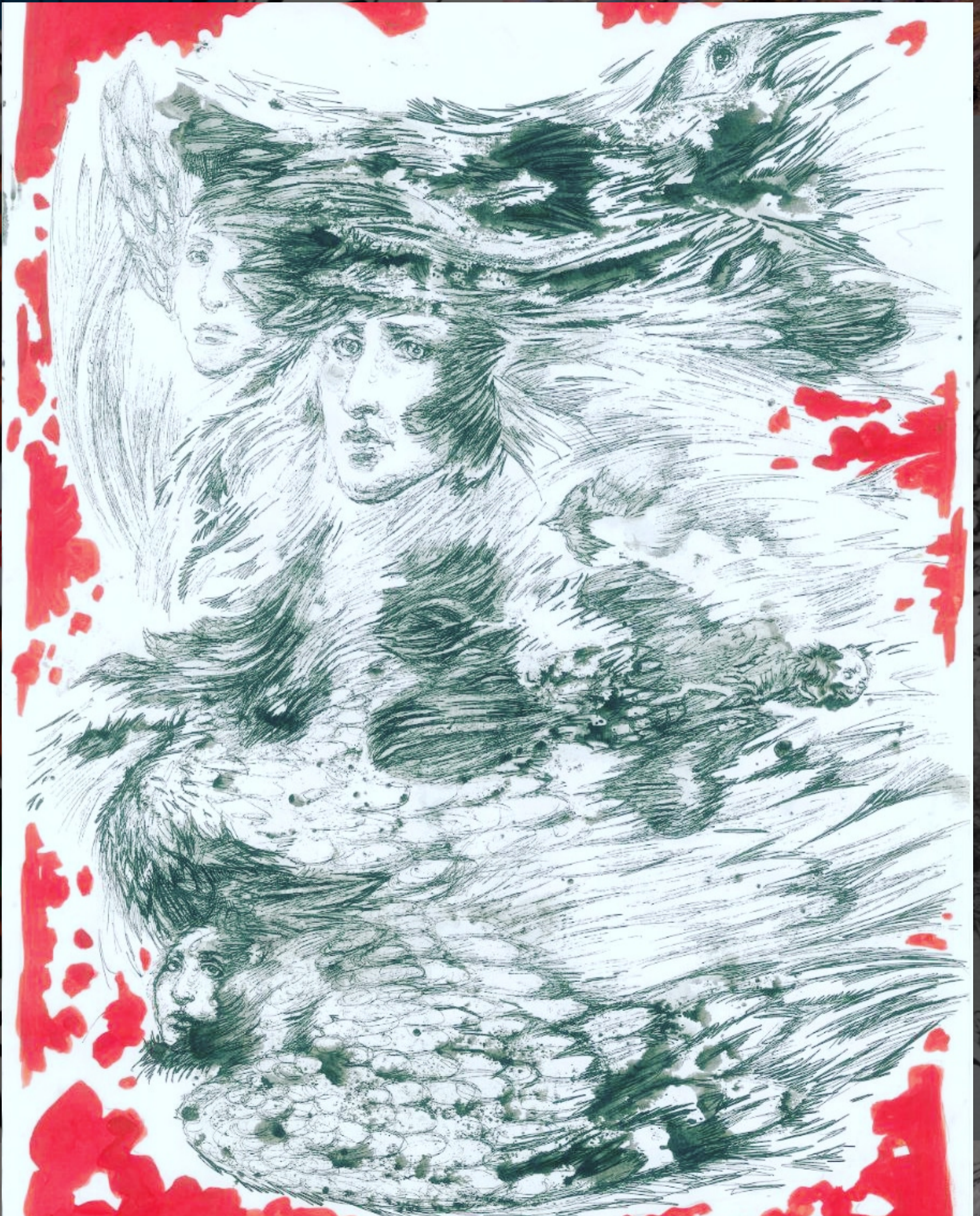
# ON THE TOPIC OF MODERN DOMESTICITY

dear my love / you've got me thinking about / bile green couches we hated /  
tables in the middle / right in our living room / you've got me thinking about /  
potted house plants or succulents we'll inevitably kill / you've got me thinking  
about / getting married to *en jeevan or kannazhaga or baharla ha madhumas* /  
even though our weddings aren't structured that way / perfect first dances that  
aren't canon in d / i don't know how to tell you i've never loved anyone more /  
you've got me writing out love letters / as if i was mahmoud darwish / lines like  
"i'd let you bury your heart in me, if it meant you'd say" / like "i don't think i'll  
ever know how to stop loving you" / like "darling, please, just tell me how to  
love you in a language you understand" / dear my love / you've got me  
thinking about making tea and coffee / just the way you like / too much cream  
too much sugar / you've got me thinking about cutting up fruits / peeling  
tangerines / my fingers sticky with the juice / as i feed them to you / you try to  
cut me a slice / i laugh / i eat the tangerine / i kiss you / i taste them on your lips  
/ sugary sweet / dear my love / you've got me wanting domesticity / an  
apartment in the city for just the two of us / a cat or a dog or any pet we decide  
on / you've got me wanting love / in all of its domesticity / in knowing that i'd  
read your favorite books / watch your favorite movies / and you'd do the same  
for me / you've got me wanting a perfect life / one with you

# IRINA TALL NOVIKOVA



# IRINA TALL NOVIKOVA



# IRINA TALL NOVIKOVA

## HEAVEN IN HER HEAD

In that world where there are only stars, I will find small fragments of reality, there is Nothing but her own thoughts.

It was as if something was penetrating into her, into her blood ... and when she made an incision in the skin as tiny as from a needle prick, the sea leaked out of her and several fish fell out of this blue. She cried and realized that she had become like those people who exist above and who, like gods, can live forever ... She did not need her life and she realized that it was time for her to leave, where the sky and stars would swallow her ... Feelings will remain here, in a house with four windows and a single door the color of fallen leaves... She gathered her things, took a deep breath and left without finishing her evening coffee....

The ones that never existed, those she thought about... What could they be, the blue ones lived upstairs, the secret city... And the ones from below never went up, never turned blue... But she was the first to the lower city had to go upstairs... It didn't bother her, her feelings left her and only the swifts that rushed about her windows screamed strangely. She began to understand from the voice and probably would have been able to answer one of them, if not for her inner timidity ... The timidity of the "innocent" that she became ... In the evening, she went to the big tower, where she applied, the only thing that was checked by the clerk , it pricked her finger, it seemed he was insensible, but it did not deceive her, she felt his smell, the one that a living creature experiences, he sweated a lot and now his reaction showed that he was frightened and probably very much, his palms were wet ... But outwardly it did not appear in any way, he took papers and a short silver flask, opaque like his face ..

It became like a mirror...

The lower ones very rarely worked in the administration and he probably distinguished himself before he was hired. She became even more somehow strangely cool and she squeezed her palms tighter ..

# IRINA TALL NOVIKOVA

## HEAVEN IN HER HEAD

### CONT.

She swallowed the cold lump in her throat and froze, another clerk came out from behind the counter, there was a blue bandage on his shoulder, he opened his palm in front of her ...

Her voice was cold as a steel string "When you felt the change.."

There was no interrogative intonation, only cold indisputability was in her voice.

She did not open her hand in front of him, only slightly bowed her head and looked into his eyes.

"Yesterday I heard the birds and understood what they were saying..."

"Birds..." - his eyebrows slightly raised and lowered - "what kind of birds were .."

- "Swifts... Their nests are in the house across from mine.."

"You were always watching them..."

- "Sometimes I listened to them .."

She gave her a small notebook, black with a blue edge and an almost invisible "NP" on the cover.

- "This book ... At the very beginning, the address, where you will live ... Now you can not communicate with your family ..."

Then she looked back, looked at the counter, the clerk hadn't come yet.

She

Then she took out a dark corner from a pocket on her chest and said, in the same metallic voice, "Hide, read later .... And don't talk about swifts ... Sparrows, pigeons, pick up any birds, any ..."

She turned around and left...

"It's as if he didn't tell me ..." - her thought somehow strangely moved inside her and froze like a fish, as if waiting for prey ... "Let, let, let ..."

# IRINA TALL NOVIKOVA



# IRINA TALL NOVIKOVA



# IRINA TALL NOVIKOVA







# SCRAMBLED OR FRIED

She pulled a half dozen eggs from the refrigerator and carefully set them on the countertop. She concertedly walked to the range and turned on the largest burner to medium heat.

She rummaged through the cabinets, looking for the perfect frying pan. She looked over at her husband. He sat at the table, reading the newspaper, oblivious to her movements.

"This is perfect," she said as she pulled the heavy skillet from the cabinet. She walked around the table, stopping behind her husband, skillet in hand.

With a twisted smile on her face, she raised the skillet. "Scrambled or Fried?"

# UGLY BABY

I dreamed I had a baby,  
just Had not the process of had.  
It was an ugly baby.  
(I'm not afraid to say when a baby is ugly,  
and it was.)  
It's jaw was skewed,  
Like there was wire running through  
The same as her Dad's I thought,  
without the process of dad.  
So I kept her in my inside coat pocket.  
Her,  
apparently.  
And she never cried.  
Never made any sound apart from speaking once,  
"Happy",  
she said twice.  
Back in the pocket.  
My dog is off the lead,  
harassing people,  
and I have a tiny baby in my pocket,  
and I keep thinking,  
I hope my dog will be okay,  
I hope my dog will be okay,  
if I leave it outside the café.  
If I go inside to eat something that's caught my eye  
In the window, it's something soft, shiny and yellow,  
and when I go to buy it,  
I bump into all sorts people I have known through my life  
from university, college, secondary school, primary,

# UGLY BABY

## CONT.

and some, their faces softly focused,  
are from before.

And we talk.

Ah but jesus where is the baby?

It's in the coat's inside pocket.

It's very quiet.

Is it dead?

A head poking out.

Thank god,

not dead just quiet.

Not dead just quiet.

What would they do

if it was?

I just forgot and oh god where's my dog?

It can't be my fault just to forget.

No process of had, just had and there it was.

Just had.

So there.

I spot the dog down the road.

Thank god.

I put my tiny baby back into my pocket and go for tea.

# SMOKE (OVER-ACHIEVING FIRST BORN)

I lean out of the window  
Because I don't smoke  
The balcony is for smokers  
Like my sister or my mum  
(or a balcony like it from when she was young)  
"Have you been smoking indoors?"  
I didn't hear her response  
But he didn't knock at my door  
So I assume she did me a solid  
Or she didn't and he assumed she was lying  
And didn't think to knock  
Didn't think to look  
From the adjacent bathroom window  
to mine  
I light five candles  
Drop my sister a message  
Bathe  
Air my knickers  
And roll a butt towards the neighbours roof  
No harm done  
Because I don't smoke

# SHOP GIRL CRONES

On weekday night shifts  
The supermarket keeps the shop girl team to three.

Under their night-time stewardship,  
the shop is most itself.

There is no tinny radio,  
but you will hear the Shop Crones echoed in three melodies.

The Crones know well,  
the shop to be an independent soul.

So, when it is hot,  
they huff tobacco leaf behind the bins and laugh a lot.

When it is cold,  
they huddle in the breakroom and share (in solemn tones) their hard-won  
wisdoms.

Some nights, when one is sad,  
they thank the shop to offer them its alcoholic remedies and sob.

Always, as the morning comes,  
they suds the floor in tandem with a patient and unrushed tenderness.

# DIS(MEMBER)

I wish I could take out all the little pieces  
Lay 'em down on the table, analyze, look them over,  
Count all the angles, note the color and the size,  
Measure up the sides so I can know them, exactly,  
Quantify these parts that don't add up but might  
If I look hard enough, really *look*, and *try*, and  
*Don't force yourself, honey*, but  
*What went wrong with you?* and  
*I just can't seem to understand* all the little pieces  
look them over, count them, hold me up to the light,  
*Where did it go wrong? Where did it go wrong?*  
Lay me down, measure, analyze, little pieces,  
Each phrase held down, sedated, tranquilized,  
Tell me *right now* what's wrong with me,  
Because I can't, I can't.

# JAM JAR

How can I long for something I've never had?

I keep my thoughts for you nestled in a jam jar, crowded over  
by other neglected fridge necessities.

My hands glide over, again, again. Sometimes reaching, but  
maybe next time.

Eyes looking, longing  
To open it  
Dip the knife in and out  
And spread them out to really see

But I close the door.

Even when expired,  
I can't bring myself to throw it out.

# HELD TOO TIGHTLY

Sometimes I really wonder why it is I can't be happy.

I give way too much:

*Too* many letters, *too* much care,  
A look *too* adoring, *too* obvious,  
And maybe it's...scary

I can't hold onto my flowers  
Because I hold *too* tightly  
And the stems break

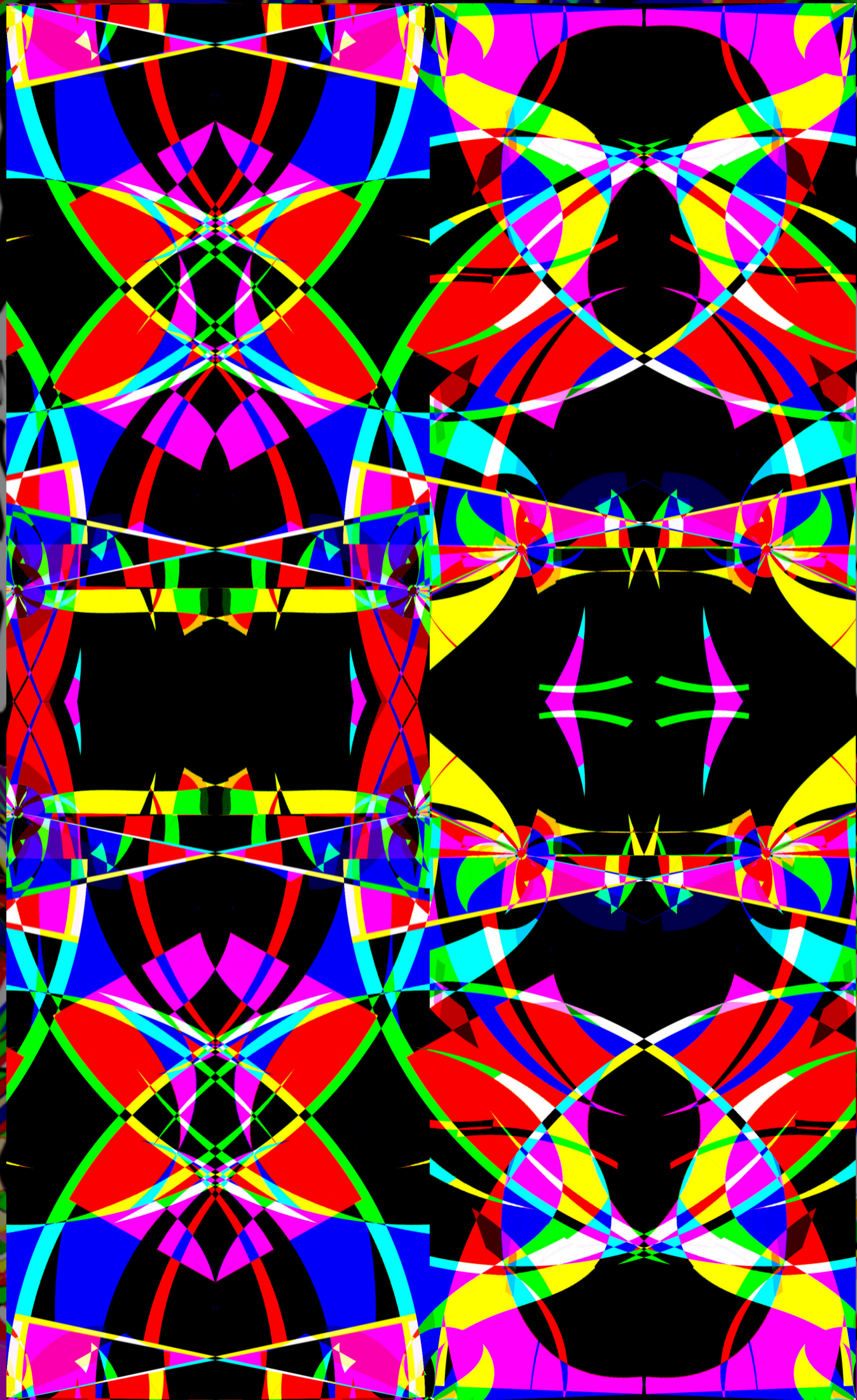
It's like I'm not allowed  
Am I not allowed?  
Because they're beautiful, and I'm not?  
Because we're both pretty?

I want to hold my flowers  
My memories  
My daisy girls that aren't really daisies

But the stems  
My stems  
Keep breaking.



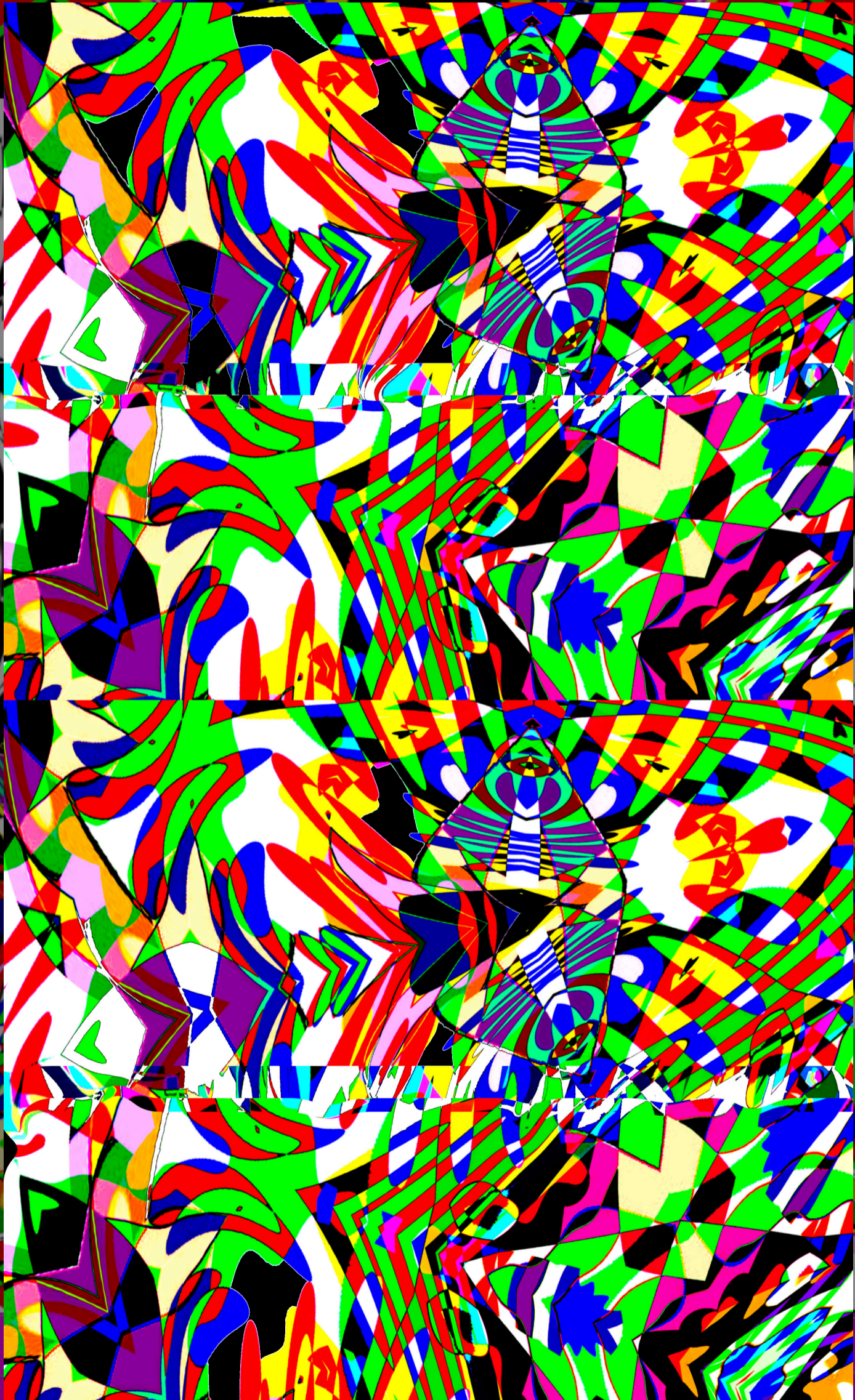
# EDWARD SUPRANOWICZ



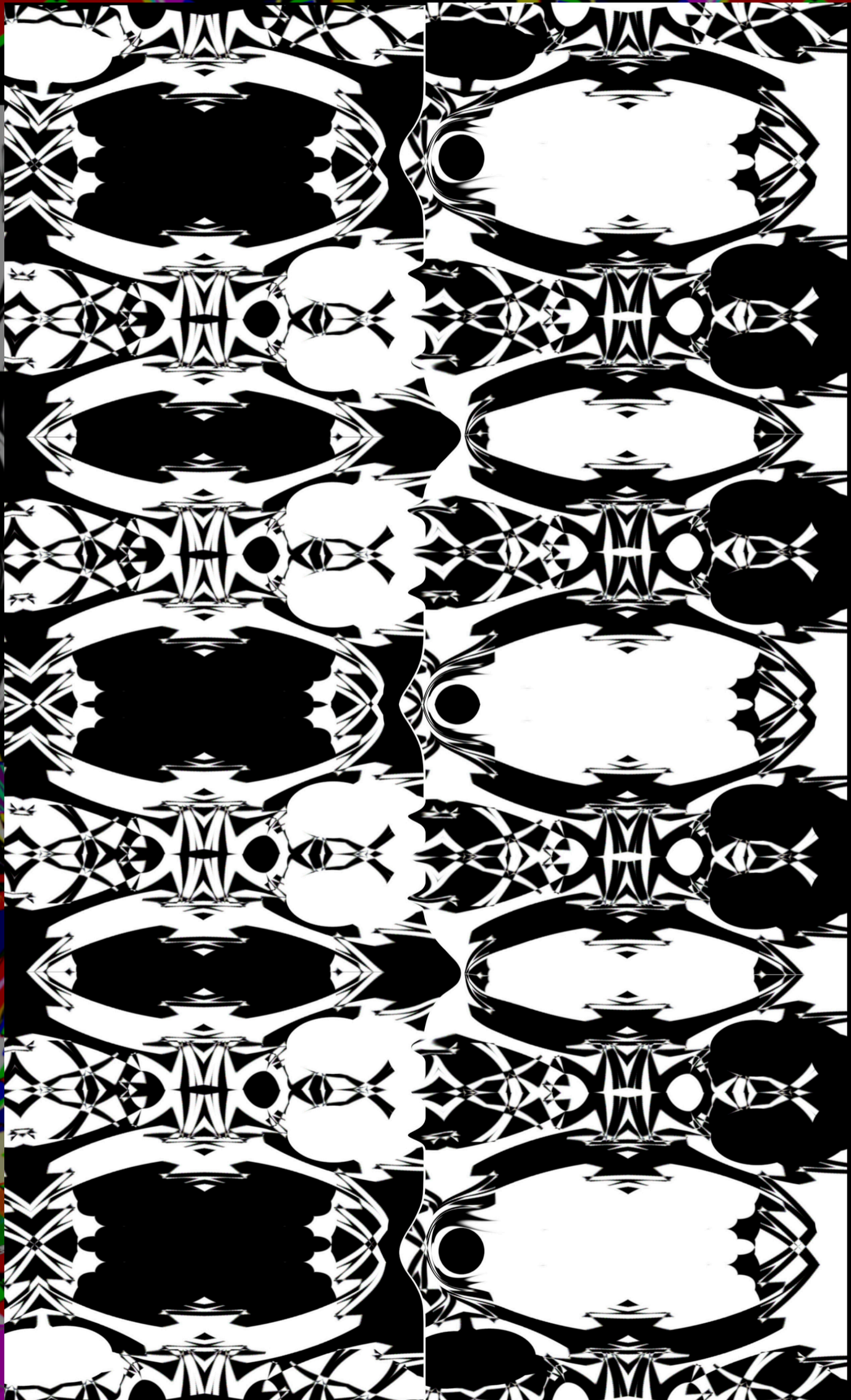
# EDWARD SUPRANOWICZ



# EDWARD SUPRANOWICZ



# EDWARD SUPRANOWICZ



# FALLEN FLESH

Strange to see a good steak  
Innocently sat on the pavement.

Dead -

Firm and fresh and red.

Not held in plastic or a flimsy factory tray.

This one juts proudly out of its paper white packet.

He knows who he is.

Bought from the butchers that morning,

He sits politely next to the peppered bird

shits outside memorial park.

He'd get up and run back to the field,

If he only could. But as life comes, and goes

the next dog's a lucky dog

who stumbles upon it.

# TRYING TO STOP LOVING YOU

I'm trying to stop loving you  
I know it's much too late  
The only way to free myself  
Is slipping into hate  
It's easier for you, my love,  
Your love for me is small -  
You can let it wither down,  
Become nothing at all

But me, I'm handcuffed to your bed,  
My watch and phone are gone  
My virgin flesh is left exposed,  
I simply can't go on  
I've nails in my hands and feet,  
I must accept my fate  
I'm trying to stop loving you  
I know it's far too late.

# UNTITLED 250423

How much more can be done for love?

I regret almost everything  
that I have done these past months

But even so we climb again and again  
to the top of the same hill,  
and I cannot weep, and  
you cannot tell the buildings from the trees

Tomorrow, I will build a house  
over where we died.  
I will cover your body in leaves

And I will come each day to  
sweep this tomb clean,  
and dry your faded eyes.

# THIS DARK HOUSE

I recall a time when this house was smaller.  
Standing by the open window, smoke plays off my lips.  
From here I can see you standing - my god - in the grass, the wind grasping at  
your hair,  
ablaze amidst dying leaves.  
You call to me, but I cannot hear you anymore.

Your name carved into my wrist.  
It keeps me tethered here,  
to this dark house. Thank god - I have no desire to be adrift again.  
I will take this love  
for what it is.

# THIS MOURNING

She's caught in the rush of hurrying feet  
Snippets of conversations  
Of laughter, exclamations  
She's caught in a tidal wave  
Of teeming, streaming life  
She's caught in the swell  
Of people of voices, of sights and smells  
Riding the vital wave  
Pushing ahead  
Her silk scarf catches the breeze  
Of swelling, surging humanity  
She feels it pull  
Floating just a little in front of her  
She quickens her step  
Her feet instinctively keeping up  
With the urgency of life  
She feels something  
In her gut, the pit of her stomach  
A ripple, almost a laugh!  
She inhales deeply, she can't place  
This sudden lightness of being  
It feels out of place  
This morning, mourning  
She had felt like lead  
Now like vapor she rises up  
Colourless, clean  
In that moment she's someone else  
Propelling her body like a comet  
Lighter, brighter almost serene

She arrives at her gate  
8A  
The same number, the place  
Where this very morning  
She had buried them  
She had forgotten



# THIS MOURNING CONT.

For a few moments  
Who she was  
She was desolation and grief itself  
Wearing the bruises of loss  
Mourning only this morning  
It all came back dawning  
As she came to herself  
As her blood remembered  
And curdled inside  
A freezing, heaving cauldron of chills  
She sank into the depths of her seat  
9B  
There was a sequence  
Monumental, compelling  
To her agony  
She had to remember  
She couldn't forget  
Her world had ended  
When she had buried her dead.

# WHAT DREAMS MAY COME

I had a dream last night  
You were in it  
Fuzzy, unclear  
But the hook was there  
That had plucked you from somewhere  
Inside my head or maybe  
From some deserted place in my heart  
It wasn't an act  
Of which I was aware  
I had no say  
In the furtive way  
You appeared around me again  
Even if you were phantasmic, chimerical  
In that time, you were real  
A swaying, decaying bridge coupling  
The physical and the figmental

It left a bitter aftertaste  
In my mouth when I awoke  
I brushed my teeth  
With renewed vitality  
(My dentist would be happy at least)  
I spent the day going over the locks  
I had put around certain memories  
These escapes  
Even in my dreams  
Made me restless, agitated me  
When I was awake  
Tonight I will have my dose  
Of vitamins and minerals  
(They promise all sorts of well-being)  
So that when I dream  
The bolted doors inside of me  
Keep holding their integrity

# WHAT DREAMS MAY COME CONT.

But even if they lose their might  
Releasing spectres of the night  
I know that in my waking hours  
In dissecting and determining  
The cryptic whys and wherefores  
Of night-garish visages  
Invading, distressing me  
These dreams, these unbidden images  
Have already lost their sting  
They have shed their whipping wings  
To fly at me when I'm asleep  
Through all of my monster-proofing  
And so deep down inside  
Something tells me that tonight  
I will dream of other things.

# REGARDING EFFICIENCY

The little details  
like fridge baking soda  
make all the difference.  
Like a balanced checkbook,  
knowing the exact amount  
leads to sound decisions.  
As simple as a regular oil change,  
confidence in performance  
can carry the conference.  
And simple surprise roses  
for no reason at all,  
extends many warranties.

# DANCE HALL COURTING

With lips like razors  
you slice love  
like a Chicago slaughterhouse.  
The carcasses in your closet  
hang like the ghosts  
of great buffalo herds.

After we make love,  
I always sleep  
with one eye open.

# EXECUTING ANGLES

This once equilateral triangle  
has become an invasive isosceles  
and I am the bottom line.

There is an irritating confusion  
between inches and meters.

Like a broken rhomboid.

The opposite sides  
are no longer equal.

And the right angle-  
the perfect 90 degrees-  
has crashed from the weight  
of those with no mathematical  
codes or measures.

# WALK

I take you on a walk, you don't know where we're going, and I don't tell you.

The mountain air is crisp and there's even a little bit of a breeze.

It smells like heaven,

The smell of it almost about to rain,

The frogs and birds creek,

Croak,

And moan.

You ask me where I'm taking you, I tell you it's to tell my dad bye, pappy too.

We won't be here for long, but did you know my grandma sleeps with my dads ashes so we will have to say goodbye to his empty grave and one day I'll put him in a necklace so I'll never have to say goodbye. You nod. Rightfully silent and concerned.

This is the day I finally leave Tennessee, you don't complain as I take you into the cemetery. There is no gate in this gravesite in the hills. No creaking, just gravel crumbling as we drive past the sign.

The Mountains protect and provide for the graves and I can almost hear the gods of the Appalachian mountains in the wind. They open the gates to hades and all of a sudden there are white figures sitting on the graves, legs crossed.

Lucid or barely dreaming,

I ask you this as a ghostly mother holds her baby,

Who can finally coo in her mothers arms.

I take a menthol cigarette out of my pocket and there he is,

My wispy grandfather with his dark skin,

And dark hair of the natives he descends from,

Sitting with his blue cotton shirt that I used to hang onto when he'd throw me in the air.

The patient man that raised me,

Sits on his own grave,

An empty one sitting next him, my grandmothers name carved into it prematurely,

Like an omen.

"How is everyone?" He asks me.

"They're gone." I reply and hand him the cigarette. He takes it and lights it.

You hate my family reunions because they concern you. With the amount of empty tables they concern me too.

# MARTY ROGERS

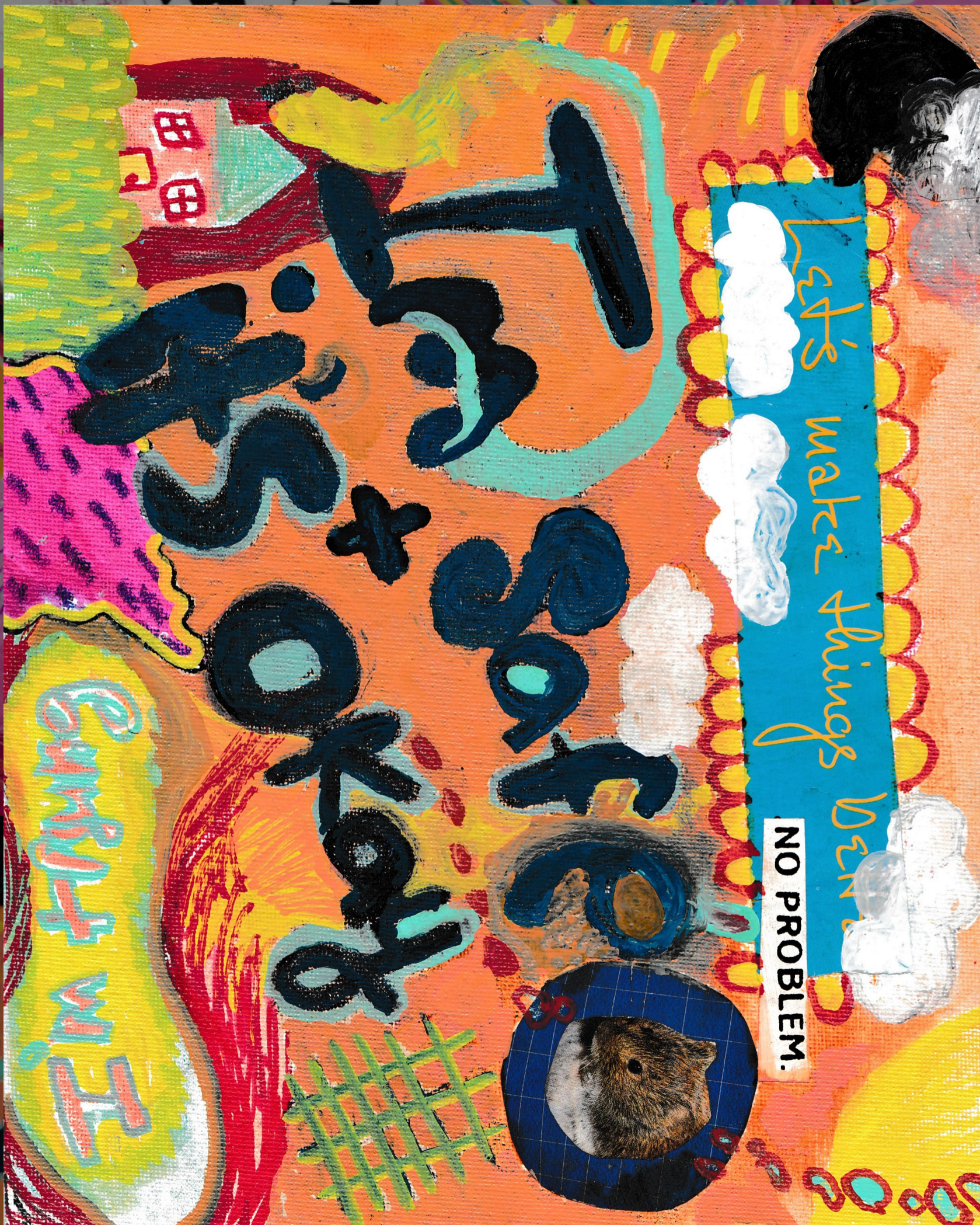


# MARTY ROGERS





# MARTY ROGERS



# MARTY ROGERS



# MARTY ROGERS



# INGENUUE IN TOMBOY CLOTHES

Blondly she climbs trees  
Her little hands intentional  
As casual she rises independent  
Of convention looking up across  
And down again she focuses  
She drives herself she grabs a net  
And captures butterflies  
To study and to love  
She leaves no time for sleep  
She just aspires  
She prays in being  
Her life form forms  
The affirmation of the blood  
The breath the hungry bees

# I MOVE MYSELF I MOVE YOU

I mood myself I move you  
Over to the lamplight slowly slowly  
To quiet zeal our zest awhile  
Piles of chores to tackle that if left  
Undone will matter less than I imagine  
Any day now the nature of emergency  
Will fade and show the reverse  
Of our suspicions and our hopes  
That we control a chaotic seeming  
Planet while the evidence  
Would contradict that self importance  
Each fragment mismatched to others  
Amounts to nothing plus the whole

# CONTINUO

You reach, you reach for me, reach me  
I hear melodious lines come true  
It's you before intention strikes  
I need the brace of you

To feel the veer of tune go free  
Away from me the melody  
Turn innocence again unplanned  
Because the sturdy underline is there

Alive to me the firm beneath out-grows  
An imposition I then learn  
To follow even grief in song  
I carry life away, I earn

Compassion there I frame  
Another way I rise beyond  
What I assumed before  
Now years to hold, to find.

# SEIZED

Clare's hands grip the steering wheel tight as she takes a sharp turn off the road and into the wall of the church.

Oh, she thought, staring out through the windscreen and at the rough stone, is that it?

She had miscalculated, she had been aiming for the church's big oak door.

"Damn it," she muttered.

The entire experience had been anti-climactic. A feeble bang, a crush of glass where her left headlight was and a slight twinge in her neck.

She had been hoping for some flames at least.

Inexplicably the radio switches on. If this was the finale of a film, some rock and roll track would be playing. AC/DC or maybe The Who. But it was 6.57am, so all the radio was playing was a morning show with a forced cheery presenter talking about the current heatwave.

"Heat makes every go a little bit crazy!" The presenter guffawed through the tinny speakers.

Clare laughs alongside them, hysterical sounds that quickly transform in to burning sobs. She buries her head into the steering wheel, her body heaving.

She wonders if they'll believe her if she says it was an accident? They probably won't, but they'll feel sorry for her and it won't go any further. Her car is more harmed than the church.

They'll say, 'you need to sleep.'

They'll say, 'how is your aunt doing? She's in the hospice is it?'

They'll say, 'Less of this now. Think of her.'

That's all Clare has been doing, thinking of her Aunt Pat. A husk of the woman she once was, withering away in a stale sterile room. The unfairness of it takes her breathe away.

Pat took her hand in hers a few weeks ago, her bones poking through like knitting needles.

"I need you to do something for me," she had rasped, "I need you to find my son. I want to see him before I die."

# SEIZED CONT.

Clare has always known about Pat's son, everyone has, she has never been quiet about him and she is glad that her aunt didn't keep his existence a deathbed revelation.

She promised her she would find him, although it seemed an impossible task. If Pat couldn't find him and she was looking for 50 years, what hope would Clare have?

She had files upon files, about the home, the other women, and their babies. But nothing on her son bar an insufficient birth certificate that lead to nowhere but dead ends. She's knocked on doors. She had those doors slammed in her face again and again.

But maybe this time, if they knew she was dying, if they knew this was her last chance to find the son snatched from her arms, barely a few days old, still nursing on her, they would tell her where he was.

That's what Clare hoped. Humanity always finds a way. Right?

She'd beg them from some information, anything at all and then those little ancient nuns will go on their knobbly knees and their God will advise them that it's the right time. They'd open their hearts a couple of decades late, allow a dying mother to reunite with the son they stole from her.

Hope is a fickle thing easily snuffed Clare has realised. Pat won't miraculously recover. The nuns won't miraculously find compassion.

They turned her away as they did Pat. As they did countless of others.

She reverses the car slowly. Where she made the impact, stones come loose, falling to the ground in a flash of dust.

A mark has been made. She drives away. Pat will be awake in an hour.

# CREATIVITY'S FLAW IS BEING NOCTURNAL

Only when the clock strikes twelve  
Do I begin to unravel the day's doings  
And look at them from the perspective  
Of an outsider with finicky taste

I started doing nothing  
Productivity was dead that day  
I planned for more but time took hold  
So I ended it off the same way

I wanted to write a new story  
But the cursor was left blinking  
While I stalked myself on Instagram.  
Look at me! Look at me!

I planned on cooking a nice dinner  
But the ramen was just too tempting  
So my oven got a little jealous.  
Hope you enjoy that sodium, freak.

I wanted to watch a new movie  
But my screen time was longer  
Than my screen time.  
One of us is better for you- and it's me!

At night is when I am supposed to rest  
But clearly that's handled at day  
So after twelve hours of hiatus  
My creativity starts away

Tomorrow I'll help you write a book  
You'll wake up and do yoga  
After a cold shower and fruit smoothie  
The entire day will be spent doing!



# CREATIVITY'S FLAW IS BEING NOCTURNAL

CONT.

Then she passes out with me.  
We got to sleep and watch dreams  
Losing all of the productive energy  
And starting the day of nothing again

## BLUE

As the clay I smushed under my nails as a kid  
As the ocean as it washed me into purity  
As the yarn I held for my grandmother at the store  
As the color of my lover's eyes as I told her I want her  
As the Heavens I look towards when I am lost

As the mouse my cat bats around the wooden floor  
As the square ring I got for my ninth birthday  
As the songs my grandpa sang when my grandmother died

As the grass in the local music cafe  
As the parchment books my mother always read

As the blanket I arrived in.

# FINGERS (II)

Certain cigarette tips, filters to caress from films of the '40s right down to you & me,  
scents caressing more sensuous, the bad habits' blessings no pumice has scrubbed-----

Fingers, I know the church of them, the steeple which shall protect, shield eyes,  
rub heads &, between cracks, catch fluid.

Fingers, the blood pulse:  
thin skins of berries carrying systems of light, planetary, inside.

Yes, meditate on that to wipe out the meaningless, the violent, the mindless...

Friend, could your fingers ever be like those?  
I've asked this with a razor cuff-tucked above my veins.  
I have asked this while turning the pages of our life, rewinding scenes,  
the film's travelogue of talking interiors.

Trust you? Trust this?  
I survey scrupulous views using your flesh to write on as you've made scripts  
from my soul. This pen then, the jetting ink, is the transfusion & tourniquet,  
a hand solely of faith amid the lack, to put the life of my most true fingers in  
as a pacifist's.

# HOWLING MOON

Transistor:  
all the good, the A.M. buzzing, all the nostalgia  
songs for all the world's insomniacs  
to croon with into the morning whose blueness  
grows from peepers to sparrows, the wilderness  
as cafe & this skylight, the main menu  
where a lone wolf moon howls of breakwaters  
& tidal sweeps, but does not devour  
or find itself consumed by a thing.

I & the moon - we still have that much in common -  
but where is the song for this, the one my headphones -  
no - do not orchestrate, & why, for that, even in sleep,  
I am still dancing, a wolf on hind legs?

# MIST 3 A.M.

The droplets, these strands, are all 'n all a sort of necessity,  
this luxurious coat of wet breaths replicating flesh  
as second-hand skin. Here seconds & phantoms consort,  
& one becomes them certain as the clear tears  
parting in a gash for the shafts of moon.

Sun is another shift where dew flowers reveal gems  
of the night's voices simply. Those messages heal us:  
angels fallen & broken from boulevards split by the crash  
of dreams lifting straight into fog.

Such coasts! Such assumptions!

Comb them for your spirit calling through the throng.  
Comb them anticipating your song  
carrying another's needed by the lessons  
of living as membranous, as transparent-----  
you, of the shell-sheen,  
you, the dipped litmus scraped off for the coming morn.

# THE HAWK

This friend of mine from junior high had a male hawk for a pet that he kept in the basement of his house. It was a huge creature with wicked eyes and a beak that reminded me of a razor.

When we went into his basement, I would always stand away from the bird as he made me feel very uncomfortable.

I don't remember if his wings were clipped or not. What I did wonder--as he stared at me-- was whether he knew that I was scared of him and that I didn't like him in the least. While we looked at each other, I feared he might attack me.

Regarding this particular friend, I recall that we stopped getting together at some point, which could have been influenced by my not wanting to be around the bird, as my friend always checked in on him before we took the back stairs into the main part of his house.

At this point I no longer even remember the guy's name and have a murky picture of his face, but I can picture the bird fairly clearly and wonder if he's still alive-- though I admit that I don't know anything about the longevity of this type of animal.

What I do know is that if he's still around he's got to be at least sixty in human years...

# A BIT OF REDEMPTION

Driving toward the freeway entrance in a pouring rain I see this guy standing in the middle of the street, while cars are driving by.

He's bent over and his body seems to be shaking. He has a hood over his head so that I can't see his face, but what I do notice is that his clothes are threadbare. He is obviously homeless, and my first thought is that he's desperate to be standing there like that, as aside from catching pneumonia, he could easily get hit by a driver that didn't see him at first.

As the traffic slows down a bit, I pull out my wallet and see that I have a bunch of twenties, one five and three ones. Handing the ones to my wife I tell her to give them to the guy, which she does when we are alongside of him.

Then when I'm almost at the freeway approach I say to her, "What the hell is wrong with me! Why didn't I give him the five in my wallet as well. I sure hope that other people help him out."

"Too late to go back now!" she says, "But at least you gave him something!"

While driving on the freeway I'm feeling sad and a bit guilty, while trying to imagine what it must feel like to be standing out there in a pouring rain like that—and homeless to boot. It isn't until my wife starts talking to me about something that I stop thinking about the guy.

After spending a few hours in Berkely shopping at two different stores that we go to periodically, we head back home. It's no longer raining and though it's cold outside, the sun is out.

Just as I'm about to get off the freeway, I see the same guy standing there, recognizable by his clothes. I can clearly see his face now. He's a haggard looking, bearded guy who's probably in his fifties. He's still bent over and his body is visibly shaking.

Realizing this is my chance, I quickly pull out my wallet, and seeing that I still have a few twenties, I hold one in my left hand until I drive up alongside of him.

Opening my window I hand him the twenty, which he looks at for a moment as if he can't believe it.

"Thanks, my friend!" he says in a voice that is barely discern-able.

"Good luck!" I say, even though I'm already past him, soon to be home...

# HIDES

I was crazy into The Glory Hounds. I've watched every episode loads of times. I had all the Funko Pops in my den (still boxed). I made it my mission to get to the Hound Grounds that summer for the Snarl Festival. I saved up all year so we could get privilege passes.

I couldn't sleep for weeks before. It got to be a problem. The doc gave me some pills. I had some epic dreams where I was Lord Pinscher doing battle with the Mongrel Hordes.

When we got there, we flashed our privilege passes and went through the separate entrances – I went through the 'Warrior' entrance and Grace took the kids through the 'Dependents' entrance (the Glory Hounds universe has a traditional family structure, which was one of the things I found so refreshing, that it wasn't trying to shove anything down my throat).

I changed into my costume. I'd had them custom made for us all. I was Lord Pinscher (obviously), Grace was Lady Pinscher and the kids were Ruff and Tumble. It was soft and ventilated. There were pockets for weaponry. I had a bone lance (limited run of 200).

As soon as I got out on the Grounds, I could see people were checking me out. They came up to get pictures taken with me. One bloke took a particular interest. He had his own bespoke costume. He was Duke Airedale (who is a subordinate of Lord Pinscher, but is popular with a certain set of the fanbase). This bloke started following me, asking loads of questions, so I used my privilege pass to skip the queue for the Arena. I texted Grace my combat time.

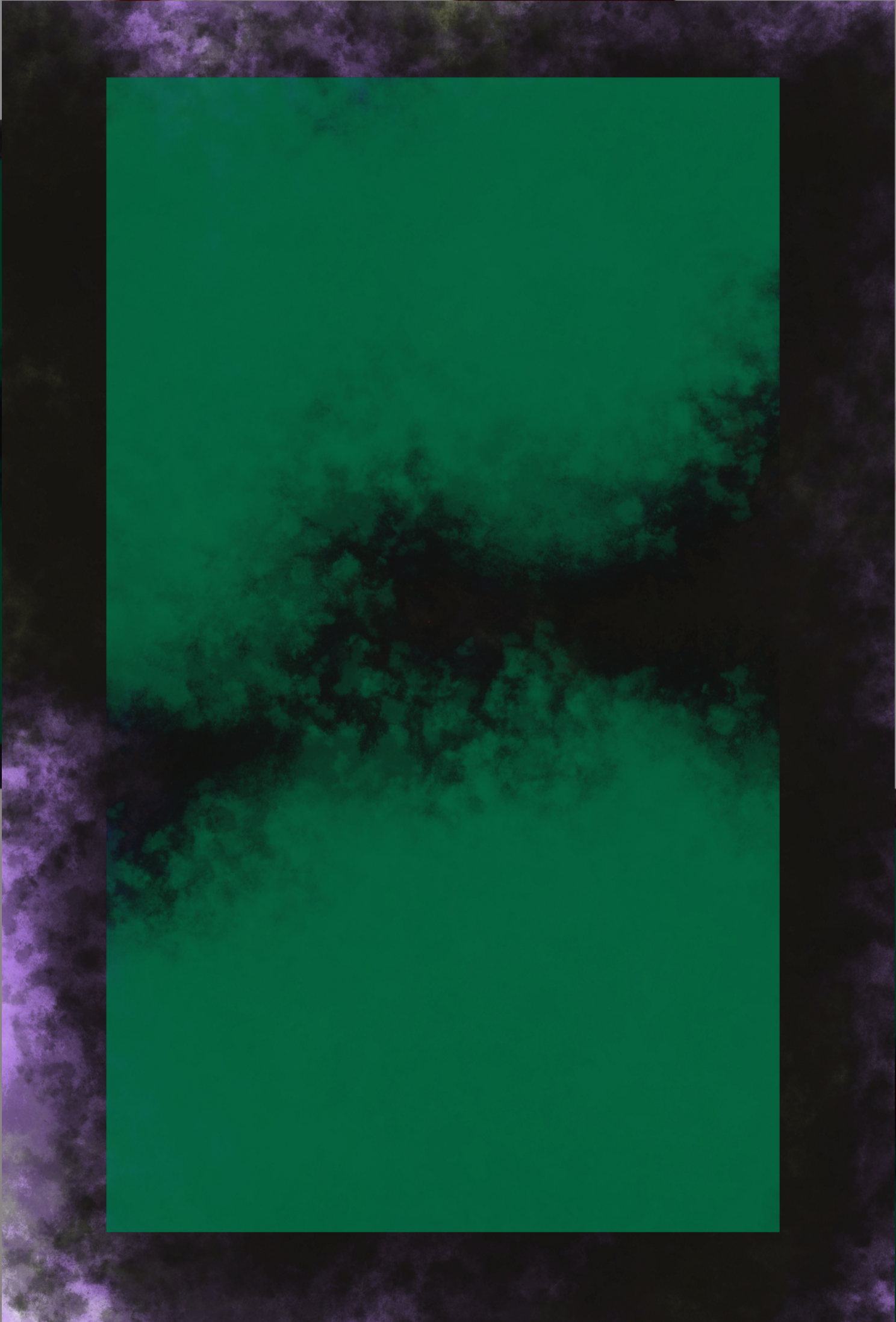
I was fighting a Nodrulle (a stumped-legged black barrel with slit eyes and a round drooling mouth – the Hounds did battle with them in Season 6). The Arena was an exact recreation of the one from the show, a caged circle surrounded by terraces. Grace and the kids were stood in the Dependents' Section. On the front row of the Warriors' Section I could see a line of five blokes with privilege passes in the Duke Airedale costume. One of them waved at me.

They let the Nodrulle out of the cage (it was a very realistic model). It tried to get away, but I lifted it over my head and Grace took a photo. I slammed it and mounted. I took out my bone lance and punctured it in five places. It bled out on the sawdust. Two handlers carried it out (they'd skin the carcass and use it to make an exclusive jacket I got to take home).

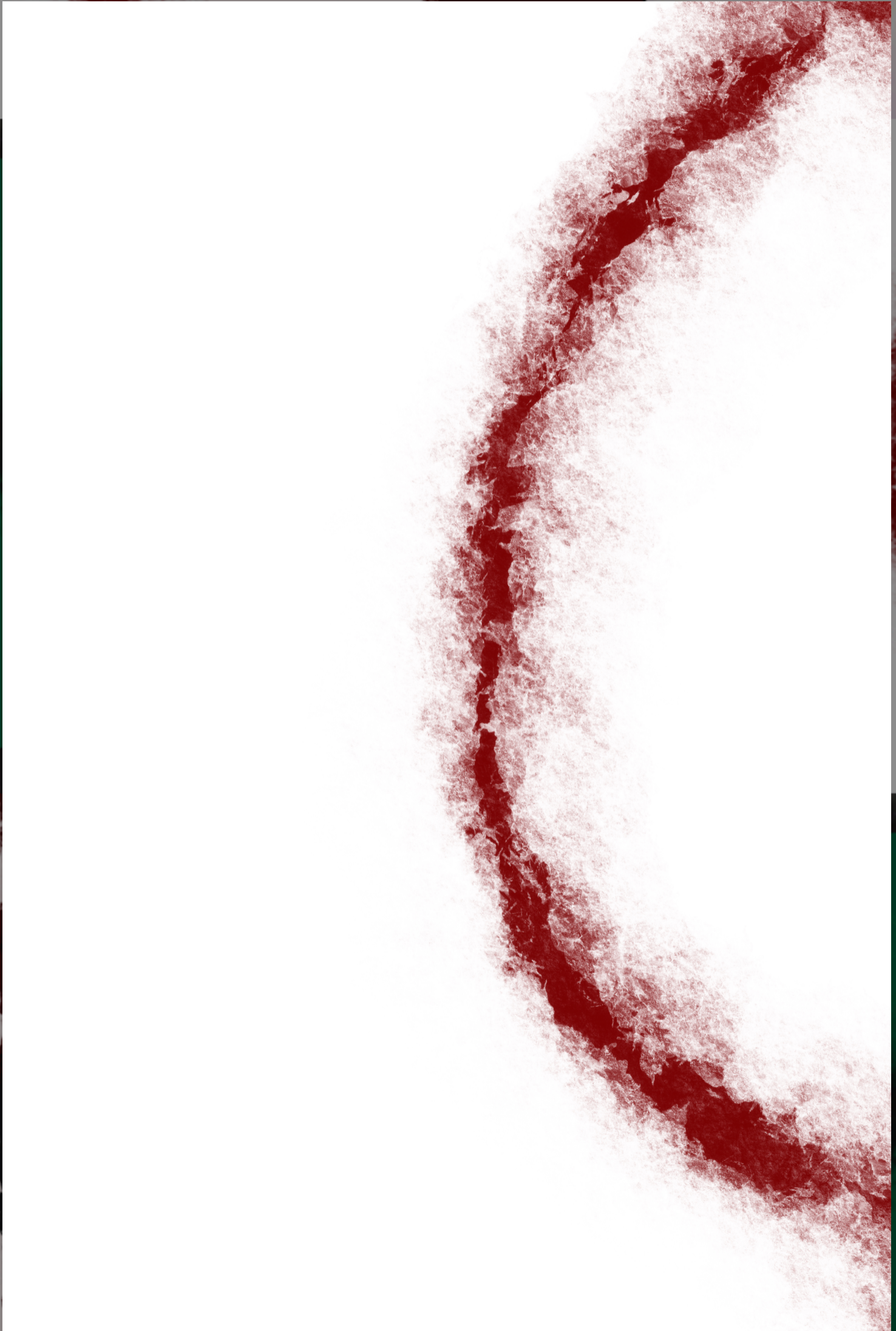
I was getting changed when the five Duke Airedales came in. They said they were impressed by my performance, and they wondered if I wanted to come to a party they were having in the woods that night. But I had to come in my costume, and one of them stroked it while it was hanging on the peg. I told them I was taking Grace out to eat, and they laughed. One of them said the whole point of being on the Grounds was to let yourself go wild for a few days, test your limits as a man. I said thanks, but I had to pay Grace back for letting me come.

They followed me the whole time I was there. One of them was always hanging around when I took one of the Mettle Assessments, just watching. On the last day I told Grace we were checking out early, and we took the kids to the water park we'd seen on the bus ride in.

# EDWARD LEE

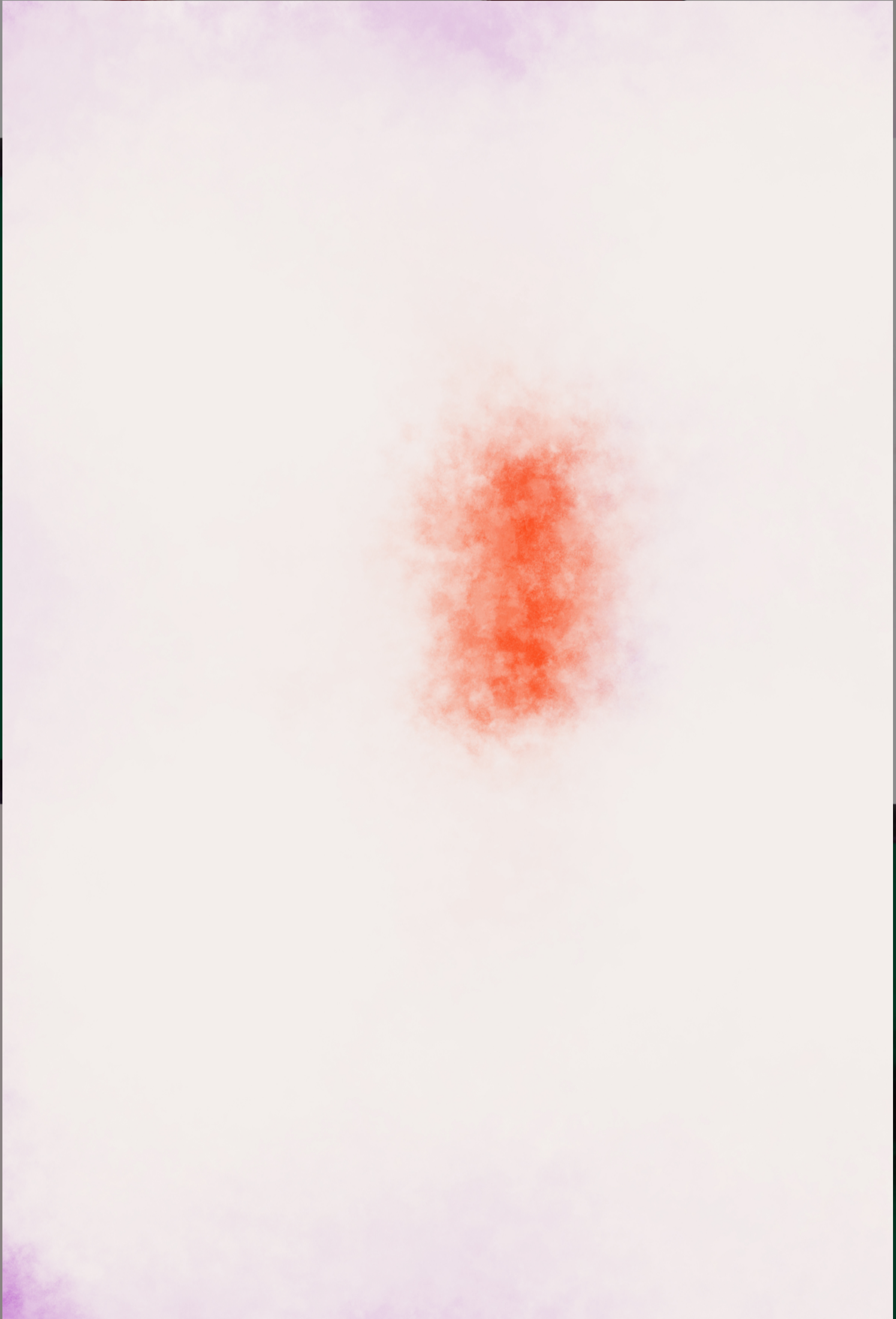


# EDWARD LEE





# EDWARD LEE



# EDWARD LEE



# EDWARD LEE



# THE WALK

Every day he walked the five kilometres between his friend's apartment in Fairview and the mobile soup kitchen downtown.

The morning walk was not very taxing; it was all downhill. Coming home was more of a challenge, especially once he hit the steep hills of Fairview. He supposed Fairview once did have a fair view of the city, before all the apartment and condo buildings sprouted up and blocked it.

He much preferred the soup kitchen to the food bank. The food bank only allowed visits once per month per person and you had to provide them with your personal information so they could ensure you weren't cheating. He'd heard that they tracked your activity online once they had your information and sold it to third parties for a big profit, but he wasn't sure he believed that. Either way, he hadn't been to the food bank for a long time. Like most people, he had to eat more than once a month. The soup kitchen asked no questions, collected no information, and even gave you frozen soup to take home with you. Two meals a day for free. You couldn't beat that.

Each morning at eight o'clock he left his friend's apartment and began his walk. Rain or shine, wind or snow. Only if the temperatures were unusually low or if there was a blizzard and everything was closed would he stay home. He only had a denim jacket, a pair of jeans and old sneakers to wear. If the weather was cold he would wear extra socks and his friend would lend him a heavier jacket. He had an old grey duffle bag from Before with some well-worn t-shirts and underwear, as well as another pair of old sneakers and a hand cream he'd stolen from a drug store. His hands were always chapped and dry. He should have stolen mittens.

He carried a thin black wallet in his back pocket that only contained a creased picture of his son, Shawn, and a driver's license that had expired fifteen years ago. He'd never owned a car anyway, and he had no use for ID anymore. Sometimes he would duck into the library downtown to warm up or get out of the sun for awhile, depending on the time of year. Without a library card he couldn't check out a book, so he'd choose one that caught his eye on the shelf, sit down and read for awhile, then return it to the shelf and hope it was there next time he stopped in. He gravitated toward philosophy. Even if he didn't understand everything he read, something about the flow of theories and ideas reminded him of a warm stream bubbling over rocks worn smooth over time.

His friend tried to help him get a real job so he could get his own place and "be responsible for himself," as his friend put it. But he knew this may never happen. He hadn't yet found a job he could work full-time, five days a week, forever and ever. He tried, though, for his friend, who found him overnight work at a bakery just down the hill. He didn't mind the physical labour of it, he didn't mind the smell of baking dough (he loved it), he didn't even mind his co-workers, some of whom were loud and boisterous and wouldn't stop talking. It was the same as all the other jobs: the manager. He couldn't take the manager. Thinking she knows best. Do things her way. Her smile looked more like a snarl. He tried, really tried to stick it out, to struggle along with the yoke weighing down his shoulders, but eventually he was moved to casual and only worked once or twice a month when someone called in sick or didn't show.

# THE WALK

## CONT.

He'd yet to meet a manager he could work with. Power-hungry, they were all power-hungry.

His friend had been making noises lately of wanting to move his girlfriend in, but there wasn't room for the three of them in the apartment. He had to think of something before he found himself homeless, really homeless, stuck downtown every night with the drunks and the tweakers and the nutjobs. He liked the idea of going into business for himself, but he had no idea what he would do.

Every day he walked past the junior high school from which Shawn was about to graduate and move on to the big high school. Every day he hoped to catch a glimpse of his son, and sometimes he did see him running into the school, big grey school bag bouncing on his back. He didn't dare approach him or go on the school grounds; he'd done and said some things before that would make that impossible. He had no excuse; he hadn't been high or drunk, just angry and stupid. He'd never been good at following orders or doing what others tell him. And look where it got him.

Today he felt the pressure. He felt the pressure of needing things, money, a place of his own. He felt the pressure of his friend wanting him out and the girlfriend in. As he approached the school, he felt the pressure of no family, no security. No nothing. Today was a grey and misty day but still he stopped outside the school and stood at the driveway to the teachers' parking lot and waited. Small cliques of kids milled about on the lawn in front. He looked for Shawn and spotted him with three other boys, all laughing and chattering. When did he get so big? He thought of how small Shawn was in the photo in his wallet. He wished he had a camera so he could take a new one.

He stood and waited, hoping for ... recognition? A smile? A wave? He wanted to call Shawn's name, but he couldn't. That would bring unwanted attention. So he waited.

Shawn finally did see him, stared at him, smile fading, his friends following his gaze, probably wondering who this strange guy was standing on the sidewalk watching a bunch of kids.

His throat tightened as he managed a half-smile and a half-wave. After a moment, Shawn gave a half-smile in return, then turned his back and went into the school. His friends followed, looking over their shoulders as if to ensure the strange guy remained on the sidewalk.

The bell rang and all the kids made their way to the entrance and through the doors until he was left standing by himself looking at nothing. But inside he was looking at something, something he'd completely forgotten even existed, it had been so long. Maybe he couldn't be anything, but his son could be anything. Shawn had a future, an unblemished future, and it could take him anywhere. Shawn could be anything at all, even own his own business, even move to another country. His son had promise, and that gave him promise, and that put a full smile on his face as he continued on his way downtown to the mobile soup kitchen.

# HEAVY METALS

Slit of moon through which I peer. Beyond, a cascade of heavy metals: cadmium, lead, arsenic, chromium. The new life-forms will base their metabolism and derive their DNA from these elements rather than carbon. I wish I could step through the moon-slot and enter this brazen new world, but the hole isn't big enough. The new creatures will bear impenetrable armor and therefore be immune to war. Their brains will polish themselves gleaming. Their digestive tracts will process rocks and most minerals without difficulty. They will form societies based on imperturbable manners. No flimsy muciloids, these tough critters. Pre-fossilized they'll extend the notion of life indefinitely, and when they travel to other galaxies will bring their case-hardened positions of unassailable political confidence. Their stainless exteriors will woo the flightiest maidens with orgasmic gestures grinding like unoiled gears.

# STATIC

Static on the radio. Snow sliding off the roof, metallic piano notes struck and interspersed. You've withdrawn to bed, your old complain complaining. I'm another old complaint, but I'm silent. The static speaks for me. The snow speaks for someone else. The piano notes speak for God. Although I believe in snow, I don't believe in pianos anymore. I used to. Once I performed in public. I played a famous sonata. I struck every note squarely without hesitation. Beethoven might have approved, or maybe he would have wrapped me in his deafness and smothered me. I'd ask you what you think, but you're prowling a book I've never read, a sociological study of a town in Alabama famous for its frights and racial overtones. The radio never reports the news because I keep it tuned to innocence. Sometimes Harvard students interrupt the music to chat about sports. They're knowledgeable and charming, so I don't mind. You dislike them. You'd send them to Alabama for a good licking. Beethoven would surely approve.

# DOGS ALWAYS KNOW

I read in a book that you get smaller when you die. But other events shrink people as well. Like paddling a canoe a long distance upstream. Or quarreling with your dog. Size doesn't matter, we learn when we're middle-aged. Size is only the perception of size. Death is only the perspective of the living. Dead people may not know they're dead. The book I was reading doesn't promise any great beyond. It only notes the loss of mass that renders us fit for burial. I've spent many hours canoeing upstream. But I don't have a dog. If I did, I would never quarrel with it. Dogs are always right about everything. They've perfected their senses. Except for sight, which they don't rely on as much as we do. They sense things we don't even know exist. When we grow smaller dogs know whether that's from death or from some lesser event. They always know, but they don't always tell us.

# BABY TEETH

My doctor said my breathing tube is just a little too small, so when I was five they ripped out my tonsils and cauterized me to stop the bleeding.

Today I still can't catch my breath.

I'm running anyway-

Passed the tall trees on campus that drop chestnuts the size of golfballs across the south lawn and the Sinclair Gas Station on Central Park Ave \$3.49 a gallon.

Passed the rivers, rocks, an old piano-  
Stop and play some music on its rusted strings  
and old broken keys made from the ivory of some innocent creature.

Give it a kiss, thank it for what it's given you.

I know a girl who carries around her baby teeth  
in a little plastic bag like lucky charms.

I never believed in the tooth fairy, I'd rip my own teeth out for the profit, I remember crying when I swallowed the first one while chewing on a candy bar.

But I don't miss my baby teeth and I'm still running.

Passed the little park where I used to toss bread  
to the ducks on the water  
Passed the oak tree, the rope  
that dangled from its branches.

I remember asking my parents if I could keep my tonsils -  
Store them in a jar, let them live in a on a shelf in my room,  
Collecting dust until maybe someday  
I would need them again.

Some things arent worth holding on to.



# BABY TEETH

## CONT.

I dont know where I'll end up but for now I'm going forward.  
Towards the cemetery, towards the back  
with a shovel and a bag of piano keys and baby teeth.

Dig up the ground, give them a kiss, thank them what what they've given you,  
And bury them.

# HERE IS NEW YORK

Women flashing their nipples at the NYPD; young girls bumming cigarettes off men on the streets, their dogs. Dancing under flashing red/blue/red/orange/green light. Puking in a Starbucks bathroom. Cracking of knuckles, the hum of the subway in the middle of the night. Tampons- overpriced at the Walgreens on the corner of 42nd and 5th. Sweat, swearing, sex and love, intimacy/divorce/poverty. Oh what a world! Said the pigeons picnicing on garbage on 36th. Car exhaust, human hair, loose teeth, Urgent Care. Big screens, half naked men in Abercrombie boxers; a plastic bag filled with milk cartons. Car horns, stray rats, stained concrete, \$7.99 ashtrays at the tourist shop. Over-policing. Under-funding : ( Vacant apartment complexes. Anti- homeless architecture. America runs on Dunkin! A man in a massive fur coat; cocktail dresses and walking shoes. Weed-World buses, dirty fingernails, squirrels munching on bread crumbs and raw tips. Single living- double homicide. Night life/night lights/pocket knives/white flight. Artists leave their marks on exposed brick, portraits of women painted by men. A vine covered Methodist church on 14th, a sign: ALL are welcome here. Horns, honking, more honking- middle fingers, window cursing, rear ending. Corner shops, coffee shops, mini marts, shopping carts. Rust, broken pipes, the hot water isnt working again! Black Lives Matter. Trickle-down doesn't work. Clusters of young people outside the roastery in Chelsea. A small dog humping a larger one at the Madison Sq dog park. A pigeon's massive dick. The American Dream! No one should come to New York to live unless he is willing to be lucky.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> **E.B White, *Here is New York***

# FEATURING

Your changing face and geometry  
are catalogued and displayed  
in kitchen galleries held together  
with push pins and string.

Your movements, your clumsy attempts  
at clowning, are shown unedited  
in the world's smallest cinema, built  
for an audience of one.

Your memoirs: from that first masterpiece -  
a stick man christened 'Mummy' -  
to the poise and patient calligraphy  
of your long letters home.

Your urgent hieroglyphic messages  
that no one could decipher:  
till you spelled out the bleeding obvious  
to that ghost in the mirror.

Your tears, hatred, anger, expressions  
never permitted to your public,  
featured only in those rejected spools  
on the cutting room floor.

Your smile remained - a performance  
for the camera, which loved you -  
as your face became your fortune  
and was lit by shadows.

Your image is on every frame - but  
it was only when I held you close,  
and could not see the faces you made,  
that I knew you were real.

# ECHOLALIA

what is it  
with these poems  
that are scattered  
like litter  
on the page  
or  
that make shapes in  
ill formed doodles  
like a drunk Leonardo  
writing lyrics  
for the stage

&

who is it  
that decides  
if what is written  
should be praised  
to the skies  
or  
if the ramblings  
of a sad heart  
should qualify  
as a poem  
in their eyes

+

where is it  
written down  
that random words  
in a collage  
thrown together  
or  
the esoteric  
imagery oozing  
from an ill disciplined  
pen should be  
seen as clever

# ECHOLALIA

## CONT.

@

how is it  
an editor's wise  
nod of approval  
marks down this work  
as impressive  
or  
a publisher's new  
broom sweeps this mess  
into a chapbook  
mostly unread but  
marked 'progressive'

**AND!**

why is it  
my profound *grands*  
*oeuvres* composed  
in perfect form  
are either slated  
or  
exiled from your club  
for being too smart  
while disjointed aching  
shapeless emotion  
is celebrated

???

which is it  
editor do you only choose  
minorities or tattooed  
women who always look  
drunk or pallid  
or  
is it just a given

# ECHOLALIA

## CONT.

arrangement of words  
on the page that  
floats your boat and makes a poem  
valid

!!!

whose is it  
oh that one again  
let us grace his inbox  
with some brief helpful  
feedback in reply  
or  
the editors regret  
they cannot enter into  
any detailed correspondence  
but these are the wings that  
make a poem fly

\*

when it is  
catching the eye  
like a sharp thorn  
pulling a thread  
as it passes on your way  
or  
like a crying child  
a neglected love  
a pleading hand  
or a bullet it has  
something important to say

# THE WORLD OUTSIDE WHERE IT BELONGS

I am awake,  
fingers slow burning  
as they grip hot coffee,  
heart, a Geiger counter  
finding love in your still sleeping body,  
and, on the other side,  
brain pecking through  
the grievances  
already assembled  
in my thoughts,  
in the newspaper glaring  
from my laptop.

The world is a sorry place  
but the people in it  
find such comfort  
in nothing more than  
a shape in the sheets,  
a soft breath contesting  
the solid headwinds of my own.  
Strangers die  
but loved ones live.  
Soldiers kill  
but no harm comes  
to those in bedrooms.

Soon, you too will  
rouse from sleep and dreams,  
reconvene with what keeps  
you up at night:  
the wars,  
the inequalities,  
the murders, the rapes,  
the homeless  
in their winter blues.

It's a dangerous world.  
We are safe.  
Life turns ugly.  
We are beautiful.  
Others are what we read about.  
We're what we believe.

# THE MOST WILFUL OF BODIES

T/W: VIOLENCE, BODILY HARM, DEATH

The body won't listen.  
It's cut open in places.  
It's writhing on the ground  
and splashing blood everywhere.

Dammit, body,  
it was just a knife.  
It's not like it was an a-bomb.

But the legs have to kick,  
the face contort,  
and the hands won't stop  
grabbing at the chest.

So, some guy stabbed it.  
A weirdo with a blade.  
The city's full of weirdos.  
A body should be used  
to that by now.

But no, it's acting like  
it's never been stabbed before.  
And now it's hardly moving.  
It refuses to get up from the sidewalk.

Dammit, body.  
I buy you nice clothes.  
What else do you want?

# ELIJAH AND THE WIDOW

*"When the creek dried up, God told Elijah, 'I've found a place in Sidon. A widow who lives there will feed you.'" --1 Kings 17:7-8*

I blame Ahab Son of Omri, Husband of Jezebel, Champion of Evil. First he built a Samarian temple to worship Baal, then he erected a shrine for The Sacred Whore Asherah. What else could I do, I confronted the king. "You've pissed off The God of Israel. Climate change is coming. Fierce winds, extreme heat, dust storms, and drought. No rain until further notice. Expect Canadian wildfires and a critical hops shortage. Craft brewers despair!"

The king invited me to stay for supper. He promised crab cakes, a spinach salad, and prime rib. Lava cake for dessert. I crawled out the unisex bathroom window instead. You don't have to be a prophet to know Ahab would kill the messenger.

Let me say a few words about my occupation. Prophet work requires the ability to speak with divine beings, insight into future events, a fine moral sense, and a high pain threshold. Prophet positions aren't posted on LinkedIn, Snag a Job, SimplyHired, or Career Builder. The Boss approached me directly, the whole burning bush business, all captured on neighbors' cellphones. As I explained to Fire Company #6, "I couldn't refuse." Besides, I was recently divorced and between positions.

My blues band The Rocking Ravens broke up after we cancelled our Midwest tour because of the pandemic. My adjunct teaching position had been eliminated by budget cuts. My choices? God's Prophet or personal shopper at Food Giant. Tough call.

After escaping King Ahab I camped out in Kerith Canyon on the other side of Jordan. A brook provided fresh water. I caught crows for food. That got old quickly.

There are only so many ways to serve crow. You can keep it simple and roast the bird in a bag with fresh herbs, carrots, onions, and parsnips. Or breast out the crow to brine it overnight, then sauté it. Or fry garlic cloves in bacon fat, then add the meat rolled in seasoned flour, add a touching of cider to the skillet. Tasty. But still crow.

When the brook dried up, I complained to Upper Management.

"Go to Zarephath in Sidon," The Boss said. "A widow will feed you."

That's how I met Blanche and her son Barnabas. Cute kid. He was six when I arrived, nine by the time I had to leave. He called me Pop. Best three years of my life.



# ELIJAH AND THE WIDOW

## CONT.

You know the story. I arrived at Blanche's place hungry. She'd built a small fire to bake a biscuit for Barnie and another for herself using the last of her flour and oil. After the meal she would wait for starvation to take them. They were walking skeletons. I could count Barnie's ribs. Climate change had taken its toll. Famine doesn't just happen. I warned people.

Everyone had a piece of the blame. Kings, queens, and princes, powerful men and women on corporate boards and in executive suites, fossil fuel flacks, frackers, clear cutters, strip miners, all ignored my warning. Ironically, they would be the last to feel the effects of the famine. Ahab in his palace wasn't missing a meal. It was the people on the lowest echelons—dog groomers, line cooks, Uber drivers, custodians, and hair stylists like Blanche—who suffered.

I asked her to make me a biscuit. (The Boss's idea.) A test of the widow.

When Blanche brought it, she'd fixed her hair and put on lipstick. I told her to fix something for herself and Barnie. "Easy for you to say," she hissed, thinking of the meager remains in her pantry.

I took her hand. "As long as the drought continues, your flour jar will never be empty, your oil jug will always be full." She snatched her hand back. "Right, and I'm Queen Jezebel." Blanche stormed off, but stopped just short of the kitchen door. "You can stay," she said without turning to face me, "but I'm not going to have sex with you."

I didn't argue. Hey, I'm a prophet. A good one. I knew how the widow and I would spend the next three years. The jar would never be empty, nor the oil jug, nor the widow's bed.

I taught Blanche how to raise herbs and use them in her cooking. I taught Barnie chess and how to cheat at blackjack. He learned to snare pigeons and partridges. No crows. And when The Boss called me back to end the drought and right injustice, you know, super hero stuff, it was an amiable parting. We still text.

Barnie will leave for the university soon. I convinced him business analytics is the career of the future. Blanche is still cutting hair. She's added a second chair to her studio. I'm thinking about retirement, maybe somewhere near Zarephath in Sidon. Blanche isn't opposed to the idea.

# GOODNESS GRACIOUS

grow with me,  
not against me.

Don't mistake me as a vessel for your voyage.  
Let me expand on my own terms.

In terms of pre-existing paranoia,

I confess that becoming more conscious  
is harder than falling asleep,

like, how, last night,  
I had a dream that the  
stem of a plant was  
breaking through  
the flesh  
of my finger,

like a splinter unmakes  
what's made.

You pinch me awake  
and I tell you that  
"I didn't even water it or wait for it to grow," no –  
"I tore the greenery from the root of my index finger"

and pointed blame  
for it being so poorly-planted,  
a lackluster, lucid garden  
of off-season growth.

On this structural axis,  
I am off-kilter.

"And perhaps, worst of all,  
the ~~soil~~ soil solidified what I've always known to be true:

*I can't even keep  
a plant alive."*



# WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU (HOLDING WATER)

Sometimes I am the loneliest tea cup  
at the antique shop  
but only when I shrink for you,

lower my voice  
make the words that roll off my tongue  
more palpable,  
less-bitter-

maybe even mistaken  
for sweetness.

*What I mean is:*

There is  
no dimming me.

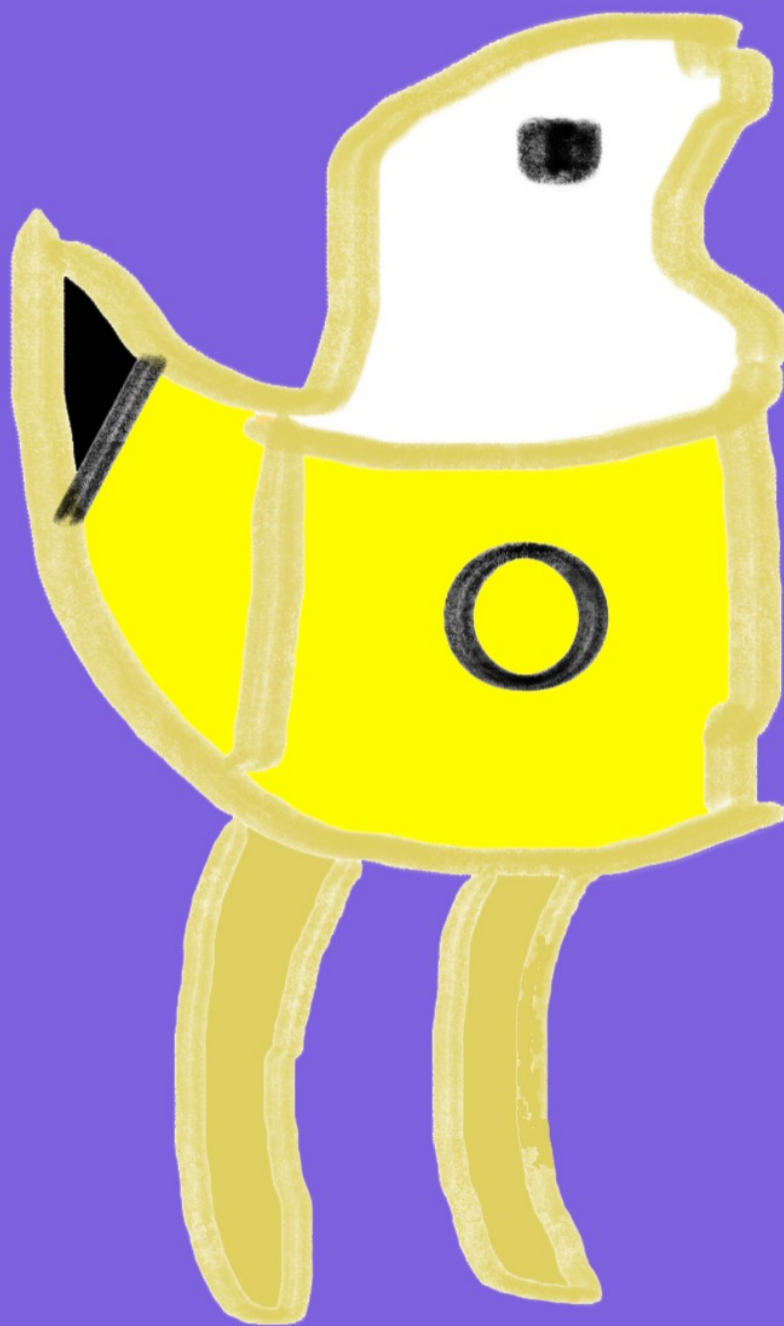
I will not be lukewarm  
to the touch.

I am all running—  
water me down and I will drown  
because a drop in the ocean  
is still the ocean

*What I mean is:*

I am limitless with you  
or I am limited.

# CJ THE TALL POET



# CJ THE TALL POET



# SORRY I'M LATE

I

The uncharacteristically warm May sun shimmered from the 46a's red roof. Three stops from Phoenix Park the bus thrummed patiently as Dubliners disembarked, and, bathed in sunshine, made way on foot along the tree-lined street past grand residences with vast sash windows. Behind one such third floor window, curtained against the daylight, but cracked open to allow a billowing breeze freshen the room, Siobhan sat, her slender back exposing a soft trail of dainty vertebrae rising up from the cotton-sheeted mattress to the nape of her graceful neck. She clutched a summer duvet to her bosom, her head tilted in a quizzical pose leaving one shoulder bare, the other drenched in dark glossy trestles.

"Are you trying to tell me that nobody, in the history of cinema, has ever come close to making a faultless time-travel movie?" she leant back onto the pillow and looked up at Archer. Her hair parted revealing a youthful face with smiling green eyes. Almost as if it was an afterthought, she challenged the arrogance of his claim with a dramatically fixed glare.

"Well I haven't seen them all!" Archer braced himself for a poke in the ribs which Siobhan duly delivered. "And, in my defence I missed the first eighty years of cinema, but every time-travel film I've ever seen falls foul of at least one paradox."

"Blah de blah de blah," Siobhan wrinkled her button nose and feigned a yawn. "Professor party-pooper strikes again... Well, I love them... Back to the Future, The Terminator, Looper..."

"Interstellar?" Archer mocked.

"OK, Interstellar not so much, but it was an intriguing idea."

"Whose very core was a cause and effect paradox."

"Can we agree on something?" Siobhan shifted position so that she and Archer were sat in bed facing each other. "I'm the actress, you're the physicist. I'm Penny, you're Leonard..."

Archer shifted uncomfortably, his brow asked a question.

"From The Big Bang?" Siobhan looked exasperated. "From the telly? Ok, ok, I'm Marion and you're Albert..."

"I don't know that they ever..."

"Uh uh!" Siobhan interrupted fiercely. "Don't go there. Romance and story-making mine, dry and dusty detail yours. I'm sure Marion didn't criticise Albert's grasp of the space time continuum..." Archer smiled approvingly at Siobhan's use of the term. "And Albert shouldn't be looking for plot holes in Some Like it Hot."

# SORRY I'M LATE

## CONT.

"Was there time-travel in that?"

"Didn't you see it? Jack Lemmon was a musician from the future who travelled back in time to prevent a mob hit..." Archer was hooked, he leant forward intent on every word. "No there isn't!" Siobhan exploded with laughter. "It's not only modern cultural references that are lost on you, is it?"

Archer shrugged his shoulders and slumped back. "Well, anyway, it's just as well that isn't in the story, because the classic going back in time to correct a negative event is a paradox in waiting."

Siobhan took Archer by both hands, "Ok prof, say your piece."

Archer sat up with renewed enthusiasm. "Cause must precede effect. Actions are motivated by impulse, thus the impulse to do something must precede the action... er... if... for instance... you burnt down the house and that motivated you to build a time machine to go back and hide the matches..."

"Nice plot," encouraged Siobhan.

"Well, the burnt house motivated the action of building the time machine... er... cause before effect... ok so far... but once you go back and hide the matches we have a problem."

"We do, do we?" laughed Siobhan. "But we also still have a house!"

"Which is *another* problem. First paradox is the cause for hiding the matches happened in the future... it was the burned down house... which isn't burned down when the matches are hidden, so effect precedes cause. In this new timeline we have an unmotivated act. What's more, as you pointed out, we still have a house... but... er... if you remember... it was the burned down house that motivated you to build the time machine."

"So now I won't build the time machine."

"Exactly."

"But I don't need to... I still have the house."

"No, no," Archer became animated. "You only have the house because you built the time machine. The natural course of events was acted upon by the time machine being built. If it isn't built there's no going back to hide the matches... and..."



# SORRY I'M LATE

## CONT.

"No house." Siobhan dropped her shoulders slightly. Her face surrendered briefly to an acquiescent grin, but quickly her green eyes resumed their indomitable sparkle and her whole face brightened, "So *Interstellar* was truly rubbish!"

Archer smiled. Siobhan turned her back to him and leant into his body as she explained what he already knew. "Matthew McConaughey can't have been the motivation to make himself go into space because he was already in space when he was leaving those messages!"

"One of the worst cause and effect paradoxes in filmmaking history..." confirmed Archer.

"And is that why you couldn't build a time machine to go back and get to my birthday party before it had finished?" Archer flinched, "Er yes... I'm sorry... that er..."

"I was late." Added Siobhan, still smiling, but finishing Archer's apology for him. "You always are, but 'sorry I'm late' should be your catch phrase. We should put it on your grave..." Siobhan started to laugh as the pun about 'being late' dawned on her, but instantly she sensed Archer tense beneath her and abruptly her laughing stopped. She turned to face him and ran her hands through his short grey hair. "I'm so sorry... that wasn't funny," she kissed him gently on the face. "We're gonna live forever, remember? Age is only a number."

## II

Archer's funeral was a sombre affair, and sparsely populated. Of the five colleagues in attendance, two had mistaken the grieving beauty in black to be the late physicist's daughter, two had failed to exchange any words with her at all, and the other, a woman of about Archer's age, had barely concealed her loathing disapproval of Siobhan's very existence. Siobhan, dignified beyond her years, was distraught. The eulogy she had written was read for her by a friend, Kelley, a fellow actress, who emoted Siobhan's loss beautifully. But as Siobhan listened to her own words, agony and anger grew equally within. Pain and privation were wrung from the depths of her heart to the surface of her tear-stained face, but indignation lurked too. How could her Archer have made such a mess of their story? Details were his thing, and yet here she was presiding over his empty-casket funeral because he had been so reckless as to not only die, but to vaporise his body in the process. The service over, Siobhan excused herself from the wake she had organised and asked that Kelley drove her home. The house seemed cavernous, cold, not at all the safe retreat filled with love and wonder where she and Archer had found the germ of a love so pure that it thrived without light, it grew without space, and it flourished without display.

"Are you going to be alright. I'm not sure I should leave you alone." Kelley hovered hesitantly in the kitchen. Siobhan sat stricken at the empty breakfast bar. "I'm alright, Archer's with me," seeing a worried look in her companion's eyes, Siobhan softens. "It's ok, I'm not in denial. Four years it took, four years for Archer and I to get to the point where we had a life together, a home, an understanding..."

# SORRY I'M LATE

## CONT.

"You were great together," Kelley's eyes watered. "I never understood why the world struggled to see it."

"Well Archer feared his mortality far more than I ever did. But those dry and dusty details... I have nothing to worry about. He is taking care of me... the house, money, memories... they're all mine."

"He had life insurance?"

"Strangely no," Siobhan welcomed the mundane enquiry. "But he had money... I always wondered if that's what others thought I was after." Suddenly the mundanity slipped, insufferable loss suffocated Siobhan. Kelley held her.

"This pain," Siobhan sobbed. "This is the price of love, and with every script I read, and every part I play, I will owe him."

### III

"Rarely does a career burn so bright for so long, rarely does a heart beat so strong or so true, and rarely, if ever, in the history of cinema has a performer been loved by so many, appreciated for such complexity, but known so simply as... Siobhan!" This soundbite bounced around innumerable media platforms as the globe's social sharing frenzy ingested and regurgitated Siobhan's second lifetime's achievement Oscar. Siobhan herself, though reflective, was less pleased to be looking back. She sat alone in the house she loved, the retreat to which for decades she had always returned.

She read an article which included an interview she had given prior to the award ceremony. She was pleased that it had accurately reflected her thoughts. People struggled to accept her decision to age naturally, or, at least, more naturally than some others.

The world struggles with infinite youth and the potential of near immortality. And yet, in my first youth, I shared a lifetime of love in just four years. At a time in our history when it actually mattered to people that I valued experience over youth, I was mistrusted simply because I was young. Now everyone's young forever, whom should we trust? I used to say age is just a number, now it isn't even a number. Numbers are precise. Age is a vague concept, a notional measure of experience, or an itemised value on the menu of how you want to look. Age is not a sin; it's a privilege. So recently was it in our history that my life was dogged by ageism, that today I could add or remove from my face the years that have intervened overnight by going to the right clinic. I love life. I want it to be long and vital, but I still value experience over youth. I choose this look for myself. It is not a political statement."

The doorbell chimed. The press and public knew better than to invade her private space. This had to be a friend. She stood to go to the door, and shook back her hair, as dark as the days of her youth, and as silken as time itself. It fell back revealing an experienced face with smiling green eyes. And that face greeted the caller at the door.

"Sorry I'm late," he said.

# SORRY I'M LATE

## CONT.

### IV

Behind a third floor window, curtained against the world, but cracked open to allow a breeze freshen the room, Siobhan leant her back into Archer's body. She listened, but didn't care for the dry dusty detail, this was hers; this was romance.

"I had intended to travel through time, er... not space. I've had considerable opportunity to reflect on where I may have gone wrong. I believe I failed to take into account the gradual slowing of the Earth's rotation and its axial shift. Anyway, needless to say some three dimensional displacement occurred simultaneously with the fourth."

Siobhan shifted a little and nestled comfortably against Archer's chest.

"I think it's pure luck that I didn't materialise in the Mariana trench or within a solid body," Siobhan's face surrendered briefly to a concerned frown, but quickly her green eyes resumed their indomitable sparkle.

"As it is, I was about twenty feet above the Simpson Desert; interesting, I can tell you, er... as was my journey home."

"Nice plot," encouraged Siobhan.

"It wasn't my only mistake, er... I intended to arrive when we were both the same age... er... I think you're a little older than me."

Siobhan's whole face brightened, "Age is only a number, she said, "and we're gonna live forever..."

"By the way," added Archer, "this is a time-travel story without a paradox."

# MDMA AND DEMONS

T/W: DRUG & ALCOHOL USE, VIOLENCE, ANXIETY, PROFANITY

The last stretch of 2022 I spent drinking through an array of clubs, house parties and bars with my mates. Sometimes it was with the university crew, clean-shaved international students dancing underneath neon club lights, exploiting their exotic accents stretching from Colombia to London to chat up pretty Aussie chicks.

More rarely I hung around my old schoolmates; their faces white, fixed through swirling vape mist as they downed another Carlton at the Hotel Westwood in Footscray before hitting a Saturday nightclub to get more pissed.

If I had to choose, a night spent with friendly, easy-to-make-laugh, uni students was better than hanging around the colder atmosphere of tight-faced schoolmates who preferred drinking over partying.

Either way, I was having the best year of my life. I felt alive, free, even though the alcohol and drugs flushed my memories from those wild nights, leaving only snippets of contextless scenes from one great movie full of colours, girls and shots.

Last night with my school friends was sort of like that.

After the cool clarity of The Hotel Westwood, Club Mango was like walking into a dark sauna. I hadn't seen my schoolmates in 2 months, and my wallet was a pound lighter after spending so much on piss at Westwood. I stumbled through the thick flashes of purple light zipping across the room, bouncing off bottleneck glasses and tipsy faces shuffling through misty vape smoke and electric 2010's beats without taking any of it in. Only my anxiety, a cold piercing voice in an otherwise sloppy drunk state, felt real.

It wrapped chains around me, tightening as skin-tensing intrusive thoughts bombarded me with things like: 'Do you even fit in with your school friends anymore? You can't make them laugh like you used to. Maybe the only really they bring you out now is because you remind themselves of a time when you were actually funny.'

So I head over to the bar.

One more shot to drown my thoughts out.

Let's get one thing straight right now, shall we? I ain't no slurring alcoholic, no fat-stomached beer gurgling bum, no hard-hitter of the bottle; only someone who drinks depending on the flowing situation. If everyone else is drinking I'll crack a few cold ones, and if they're taking MDMA then hell, hand me my tablets.

It's a social thing- which makes last night so unusual.

I was drinking as a coping mechanism.

# MDMA AND DEMONS

## CONT.

My old mates had turned colder after high school. Or maybe hanging around warmer university students softened me up, I don't know.

What I do know, however, is that the conversations I kickstarted at The Hotel Westwood last night went dry after a few sentences and my jokes ended in cold silence. So I became silent myself. It wasn't really a choice, the words got caught in my throat and pushed back down by a single thought: I don't want to come off desperate trying to make people laugh. I say there tensely wondering if my silence would become noticeable among my friends cross-legged on high stools. They roared at each other's jokes, but each burst of laughter hit me as a reminder that they differed from me. They fitted in, I didn't. And the more that thought bubbled in my over-stressed mind the more I felt like I needed to escape my anxiety.

When my hand waved over at the bartender I had been sitting with my back-arched over the wooden counter. A skinny man in bald-grey-jeans came over and got me two Steersmans, and I drank them while justifying drowning my anxiety in alcohol by employing the world-famous Hemingway Defence, which goes something like this: I'm a very stressed fellow, but I'm also a manly man. And true men deal with their problems by drinking them away. How else would we hide our growing anxieties without alcohol?

I was a stoic, swinging a beer as tough-guy-joe trying to drink away his anxieties rather than a university student whose stress got the better of him.

Hemingway might've been one hell of a writer- but his psychology left much to be desired.

Drowning anxiety with alcohol is like putting a fire out with petrol.

It really, really doesn't work.

And enough petrol was burning inside of me that night to transform a stress-fueled bushfire into an apocalyptic red hell, where every second a barrage of kamikaze thoughts exploded into my mind sending waves of butterflies running through my guts.

The next memory I have after drinking at Westwood is dragging myself onto Mango's dancefloor. There are two feelings I identify with this memory- the first being so drunk that everything around me had become one, swelling surreal mess that was outside of me.

The second feeling ties into the first, that the only other thing which felt real was this ugly, grey monster screaming inside my head. Its words, loud and piercing, were fists that punched hard into my stomach, sending waves of twisted butterflies exploding upon impact.

# MDMA AND DEMONS

## CONT.

That's why I danced. After Hemmingway, my next line of defence was employing Euphoria. Although never articulated (I made it up that night), Euphoria went something like this:

Like the cast of Euphoria, I'm a broken individual. But I'm also a handsome, young fellow who likes to party- and real party animals hide their anxieties by looking like they're having fun. Therefore I dance and take drugs to hide my pain from casual onlookers and friends alike.

I propelled myself across the dance floor, cutting moves I thought were straight outta Footloose, but probably looked more like a drunk stumbling down Footscray.

Either way, I was tearing up the club. Girls in their slimmest fits glanced at me through neon darkness, and blokes gave small grins to each other before bursting into controlled laughter.

But hell if I cared!

I was on fire, flames leapt from my feet, burning the anxiety away through air-slashing moves, sending bursts of euphoria rushing through my veins, exiling all the bad thoughts away.

That was until Theo Sapountis, who'd been with us since Westwood, shook me back to reality. I don't like Theo, he's the epitome of what this group had become: cold, hard and tight.

When I first met him in 2016, he laughed at everything, always smiling through braced teeth and wearing that aqua blue school shirt 24/7. We got along then. But now his emotions were stone-cold. Flashing neon lights screwed into the lenses of his Top-Gun-style glasses, splashing vibrant club colours across his piercing dark eyes. Theo was pissed off: and when Theo is pissed off he looks frozen, teeth-gritting underneath tightened lips, but his voice pitched thick and strong.

'Jesus Christ man, calm down! You're scaring off the hoes!'

He sounded muffled underneath booming urban mixes, as if I was listening to him through a thick plane of glass. But the glass wasn't strong enough to ease the impacts of those heavy words. It cut through my drunk state, hitting me rock-hard and sending new ways of anxiety clogging up my throat:

What if I'm embarrassing myself? What if I'm looking desperate to have a good time in front of my friends?

I knew erratically dancing may have been embarrassing, but it sat in the back of my mind as fuel. Fuel doesn't hurt until someone flicks a match and it explodes into swirling hot flames. And Theo's words were a flamethrower that night, spewing

# MDMA AND DEMONS

## CONT.

red-hot fire onto flammable thoughts, making them jump from the back of my mind and engulfing me in stomach-tensing anxiety.

What if I'm looking desperate...

Mixed with the pound of alcohol bubbling in my guts, the anxiety spread fast, pushing me into the bathroom. I needed breathing room even if it was the shitter. 5 seconds of quiet time to recollect myself.

Four blank walls of plain neon white, fermented piss reeking from obsidian-black stalls skewered in chiselled graffiti, misty mirrors sitting above tap bowls full of lifeless orange vomit, floor hospital-style tiles with running urine snacking through their creases. That was the club's bathroom; hell on earth. But hell was the only place to recollect my thoughts.

I crashed onto a basin stuffed with thick tissues down its sink, hands gripping the side and tightening my eyes, gritting teeth. I tried focusing through the alcohol and crashing anxieties, but it was like running through a thick fog blindfolded.

Useless.

'Yo man you alright?'

A voice.

My head snaps left and I see him. He was early 20s, and with a 70s porno moustache and mullet straight outta the Yankee deep south he looked like any other Aussie his age. The lifeless neon light reflected silvery patterns from his white-coloured work shirt, hanging loose above skin-tight black jeans. His face was pale, staring at me with slanted European eyes.

'Yea nah just...'

'Not feeling it?'

'Yea.'

'Well, I got something to get you feeling it again.' His fingers dived through sharp-cut pockets, tumbling around before wielding back something like a fisherman catching a big one.

And his big one was a plastic zip lock bag full of caramel-coloured stones, broken up in zigzagged small shapes that sat in sharp positions.

# MDMA AND DEMONS

## CONT.

'This, this will get your shit together.' He said, smiling white teeth.

I grin. 'That MDMA?'

'Hell yea it is! Best mother fucking shit a cunt can buy!' His voice was wavy, electric, like a high-pitched salesman you'd see on TV, but selling drugs instead of the newest furniture. 'Trust me mate, once you take this everything will be alright.'

Everything will be alright. That struck me, an arrow full of warmth sending reinsurance running through my veins.

My drunk state craved reinsurance, and that sentence was the best reinsurance an over-fried stressed kid like myself could get now. Desperate, I know. But desperate times call for desperate needs, and that's exactly why I took it.

Hemingway, Alcohol, Euphoria, they all had failed me. My back was against the wall and I needed something, anything to throw at the flaming anxiety, even if it was bathroom MDMA. Besides, he'd said everything would be alright like a parent would. Why would a parent do anything wrong to me?

'How much will this cost?' I said putting some in my mouth.

'Nah nothing mate, it's on the house. You look like you need some.'

I paused, gave an eyebrow, and said:

'Who the hell are you?'

'Your guardian angel.' He said with a smile. 'Now get back out there and enjoy the night. Not like you'll remember any of it tomorrow.'

I wished that was true concerning what happened next.

I have a memory of being dragged out onto the streets by my mate Finn Buesst and a 6ft Bouncer dressed as Superwog. My numb arms wrapped around their shoulders and my feet pulled behind me. It feels like I'm watching this through a twisted kaleidoscope, exploding neon windows blurring with the brutal, grey outside city as they rest me against a cold wall. The kaleidoscope focuses on the swirling, grey silhouette of Finn Buesst and the Bouncer arguing while a snaking long line of kids in their best club fits are held back by a crimson rope on my left. A black-haired bouncer with a beard dropping to his man-boob's checks a girl's ID. A shot of Euphoria burst through my veins, piercing my heart and sending waves of intimacy screwing into this chick. I tried expressing my newfound feelings for her, but what comes out is a



# MDMA AND DEMONS

## CONT.

sluggish mess of words flowing from my drunken smile. I remember her staring at me with nervous, emerald pearl eye's before a hand shocked me back to reality.

Theo. His angry, semi-pissed expression's from before have drained away to reveal nervous eye's above a caring smile.

'Hey buddy, you alright?' He says. Kai Martin and Ollie Barrichello stand behind him, blurring into two humanoid towers mystified by swirling patterns dancing across my eyes. Theo turned his head towards Finn and I hear:

'Fucking hell, what did he take Finn?'

'I don't know.'

'Well, it definitely wasn't just alcohol.' Theo's right hand dives into his wavy brown hair, pulling it back with gripping fingers.

'Fucking hell man, what the fuck?'

'MDMA?' That's Ollie. His crisp voice filtered through fuzzy, loud noises echoing everywhere. I can't seem to locate where he's standing anymore....

'I had a mate from uni who mixed MDMA and alcohol together once, and he went fucking black. Like black, black.'

'You sure he didn't just eat your cooking?' That's Kai, sniggering. Kai got food poisoning from Ollie during a high school cooking program in 2019, and it became something of an inside joke between them.

'Fucking ha ha.' Ollie said coldly. 'Look, best thing we can do here is get some food in him. That's how we sobered up my uni friend.'

'Long as we're eating out and not your shit, I'm fine to go wherever.' I hear Kai say as cold, foreign fingers whip me up from the floor. I don't really remember what happened next- it's like reading through a burnt photo album. Memories are twisted, torn and blackened by the raging alcohol and drugs- and I only remember small snippets filtered through blurry lenses.

One memory, and my strongest one from that night, is sitting on a plastic white chair outside a Kebab shop. Greasy windows flash the street pavement with harsh, neon light bouncing off twinkling tin foiled-wrapped kebabs, held by uni-students sitting on cheap plastic outdoor tables devouring them greedily. The cold-blue pavement below was showered with crunched-up tinfoil, open polyester trays with crimson sauce stains, and cigarette butts. It's a shitshow, but I never felt happier. The anxiety had been pumped out leaving only a wave of euphoria washing through my veins.

# MDMA AND DEMONS

## CONT.

I'm happy!

That lasted till Theo followed by Kai, Finn and Ollie walked out of the kebab shop. I could see through my pissed drunk blurry vision that they each held a face of seriousness mingled with worry. And less metaphorically they held kebabs wrapped in creased, twinkling tinfoil.

It was Theo who approached me first.

'Hey man, you good?'

Theo's left hand, shaking me. He was bending over me dressed in a pair of tight black jeans and a brown shirt with four white stripes running down from his shoulder. I glanced at Theo's other right hand, a cobra moving towards me with Turkish bread poking from glittery tinfoil.

'Eat this.' Theo said. He looked dead behind a fake, cold smile illuminated by harsh neon light. Condensed anger? I don't know.

'It'll sober you up.'

I don't wanna be sober. I don't want the anxiety back.

I want to be in this moment.

'I ain't hungry.'

'Dude eat it.'

'I. Ain't. Hungry.'

'Come on man. You ruined our night. Just do one thing for us without fucking everything up?' That's Finn, standing arms crossed behind Theo, chin up and eye's piercing into mine with cold anger.

'Finn, I literally just said we weren't gonna point fingers.' Said Theo.

'Fuck that!' Finn snapped back. 'You weren't the one who had to argue with the bouncer 'cause he was spasming all over the ground. You weren't the one who dragged him out as he slobbered all over me. Fuck man, this cunt ruined our night.'

# MDMA AND DEMONS

## CONT.

He's fucking immature as shit! Like who the fuck takes MDMA from strangers!

Each word punched me in the gut- but instead of anxiety bursting out, a wave of anger began bubbling through my veins. It was their fault for excluding me throughout the night, their fault for letting my anxiety tsunami over me.

Fuck! If only they laughed at my jokes or just acted a little damn more inclusive towards me ....

'Not gonna lie Theo, Finn's right.' Said Kai. 'This bloke is fucking spastic. I mean what if a cop finds us?'

My fists tighten up. It's not...fair!

And I try telling them that, but it comes out as a sloppy slur stitched together by cursing:

'I erm fakuing peised cant! I cuant control myshelf!'

'That's not the point.' Said Finn coldly. 'You ruined a good night. Ruined it.'

'I cuant control myshelf!'

'If you can't control yourself don't come along.' That's Ollie.

'Get up.' That's Theo. 'Just.... Get up. Come on man.'

I notice then that all four of them are towering over me. The crisp white Kebab shop light cast long black shadows across their cold, plain faces straining down at me judgementally. I feel entrenched, surrounded by giants crushing me underneath their stomping accusations.

Stomp stomp stomp stomp.

'Get up.'

'Fucking idiot!'

'You ruined our nights.'

Leave me alone!!!!

# MDMA AND DEMONS

## CONT.

Stomp stomp stomp stomp.

'Immature.'

'Asshole!'

'Drug addict!'

'LEAVE ME ALONE!'

STOMP STOMP STOMP STOMP.

'Come on, get up!' Theo's hand grabs me- and that's when I lost it. His fingers ignite all the anger, anxiety, pain and drugs boiling inside me, making them all explode together in a furious, raging choir of swearing and violence. I remember leaping up, grabbing the chair and John Cena-style throwing it against the Kebab window. It bounces back with a muffled thud, crashing onto a graveyard of tinfoil and polyester boxes spread across the pavement.

I'm blinded by pure adrenaline, and the rage is running through my veins. It's like some monster had possessed me and I can only watch its trail of destruction. My hands Obelisked-and-Astreiked style smacked Finn's HSP, sending a tsunami of kebab meat and chips covered in chilli mayo sauce exploding across his face before my fists joined in. My knuckles cracked against his forehead and the bloke was stumbling back. But before I deliver a second punch a forearm wrap around my neck.

'Hold him down, hold him fucking down!' A cold, distant voice screams.

Suddenly more hands are grabbing onto me, throwing me to the ground. Cold pavement rub's my sweat-soaked shirt against my skin. Staring at me are six faces turned into black silhouettes by the harsh street light above. I feel their hands tighten around my body, like cobras.

'Hey, hey man it's okay.' Says one of the six faces. He sounds like Theo. 'Just relax man chill!'

'I'm sorry if we pushed you man.' Another face says 'Jesus Christ Ollie, can you check if Finn's alright?'

One of the shadows disappeared. I remember then feeling the alcohol, the anger, everything burning away into a single tight ball of guilt and embarrassment. It was like those few seconds of anger were fueled by all the trauma from that night. And now burnt out and gone, only an empty husk of a man remained.

# MDMA AND DEMONS

## CONT.

I started crying. I just remember feeling so lost....

So empty. Flickery images of my disappointed parents, my friends never wanting to see me again, police being called.

The latter never happened, thankfully. A black Uber pulled up in front of the kebab shop instead of a cop car and took me home. I think one of my friends, maybe Theo, called it in. Not like I would know now anyway. None of those blokes invited me out afterwards.

Sure, we throw casual text here and there, mostly about if I'm okay (to which I always responded with a simple yes/no) but as my Instagram stories became non-existent, theirs exploded with pictures of night outs, flashy club lights reflecting the pupils of beautiful chicks, and a new guy I never met before. Maybe one of Ollie's friends from TAFE.

My replacement.

I hate how they ostracised me for something they could never understand. Their Instagrams reflected a happy, cheerful life devoided of anxiety, anger, and stress which I wanted to participate in. And instead of dragging me out of the deep hole I'm in, they gave up when I hit a bump and found a replacement. Like I was a cheap plastic toy that could be easily replaced- now I'm left under the bed.

Forgotten.

My uni mates, my de facto and only mates, are drowning in assignments and work, so life as of 2023 is pretty uneventful. I joined a Brazilian jiu-jitsu club back in February 2023 to release the anger and betrayal boiling inside of me. To feel that wild, angry frenzy that burned away the anxiety during my sicko mode episode. But the anxiety is a tumour that doesn't want to burn away. It's now telling me I'm angry, an anti-social freak, and a loner who loses friends because of the bottle.

And for once, I actually agree with my anxiety.

I feel alone.

I miss my friends.

# PANDORA IN THE THROAT OF ADAM

T/W: TABOO, INCEST

*To shut doors is to trap  
a grenade in your belly—  
there'll be no hand to pull the pin.*

—Elisha Oluyemi

Some sleeping dogs should never wake up. They are having a deep sleep because everyone has decided to pretend they never existed. Just recently, my father and I stirred up such a dog. It wouldn't easily stir awake. However, when it finally awoke, it gave off a faint whimper—and it was so cute it had a soft mouth that made it look like it would smile. My father thought the same. Nonetheless, it was a sleeping dog we woke. And we were afraid.

My mum held my father's hands as if after this evening, the night would come and go and leave behind nothing but some dark infinity—a blankness in which they'd never get to hold hands anymore. Dad would stand there without the faintest perception of what he initially thought was his perfect half. Mum would be a bag of wind there. No voice. No aura. Nothing to signal a wisp of life.

It is not interesting. It should never be.

My father, for some seconds, eased back a glance. I caught his gaze but looked away immediately. My eyes travelled across the vast spread of brown sand and over two lazy seagulls. I picked a grain of peanut burger and threw it at them. They struggled with it and flapped their wings. It was crazy to fight over such a thing. One of them could give it up for the other, but in a competition, each side often believes they have a stronger reason to win. A cause they'll bleed to keep alive. And that was one reason why everything began to seem interesting—right at this moment.

The seagulls were still struggling when I flitted back a glance at the parental couple who stood facing the beach where they first met, the Cabo San Lucas, their locked hands neither affected by the glacial yet refreshing breeze, nor by the inaudible ruminations of my straying mind. Mum didn't know it, the situation. No mother ever knows such. But as it is with the majority of secrets, a day of revelation is bound to come. Often brutal and transforming.

The wash of cold wind against my bare slender arms and legs felt just like Dad's touch when he'd cup my face in his hands, his hazel eyes boring into mine. We have the same eye colour—one more reason for our hearts to feel closer. The last time he did that, I could feel his breath against my face, my lips. And we gazed into each other's eyes for a long time, so that my hands eased upwards grazing his hands and cupping them as if to say, Don't let go, Dad; it's all I need.

# PANDORA IN THE THROAT OF ADAM

## CONT.

He didn't approach me. Neither I him. We were just here on this path. And we were like many queers, needing some understanding, fearing the whispers. But when fate is bound to fuel a cause, everything happens in handsfree mode. The motion is set by whatever, and you're right there in the flow, getting washed down a destined end. Even when you struggle, the tides are on your both sides, hemming you in, so that you have nowhere to run. Oedipus Rex knows this better. Could he have helped it?

"Let's not think about it, Rosa," Dad whispered to me weeks ago, his thumb wiping off the trickle of tear straying down my jaw. "You and I... we can't let this happen no matter what. If we must pretend till it's all over, then pretend we must." He looked towards the door and back at me. "Even if it means me—"

"You won't leave because of this, will you?" I replied, gazing hard at him. His eyes wore a misty glimmer. "Dad?"

A frown tugged at his face, rendering him the more striking. "Is there a better way, Rosa. We both know it's outrageous... and we can't help it." He puffed a sigh and blinked hard, his voice becoming breathy. "See, I can only do the outrageous to keep this away?"

"By this, you mean—"

"I'm not saying I'll keep you away. I'm just..."

"I know..." I compressed my lips and nodded, trying not to look at him. "There's no better way." Unless we want to make the gods disappear. But we are no Monkey King, the great sage who fought and overturned the heavens. "Dad, if you leave... If you leave, Dad..."

"I'll go far away where you can't find me. Where we won't have to meet and think of something wild."

"What about Mum?"

"Will it matter if I stay? Things will turn worse, Rosa."

I turned away from him, wiping misty eyes with my palm. It was a hard decision to make. But affection is a strange thing, especially when it surges from the wrong places. Yielding is great. But the dogs are sleeping. And waking them is as portentous as throwing your arms wide at a hail of arrows.

"It's difficult, right?" I heard him say. And at that moment, his strong arms around me were a reinforcement for my weakening passion. I laxed in his bosom, his palm caressing my wavy hair against my nape.

# PANDORA IN THE THROAT OF ADAM

## CONT.

"Turning away from your fate is a quick way to go down," I muttered, sniffing a sob. "You taught us this, Dad... You taught us to always embrace what we need rather than what we want."

"And it's a shame I'm about to go back on my words."

"When you do that, you're sacrificing, Dad. The gods taught us sacrifice. They never taught us to live for ourselves..."

"Have you ever thought of how your mum would feel?"

"If she wants the best for you and I, then she should respect our fate and let it be."

He gazed at me for a while. He probably can sense the determination—and maybe the foolishness—welling up from my inside and oozing from my eyes. He parted his lips and shut his eyes, and while I looked away, he struck my face. My eyes dilated and I staggered. Before I could mutter a word, he struck again. The tears trickled down his chin and he clenched his fist, donning a stern face—the picture of someone forcing himself to be angry. "We won't speak of this any longer. Snap out of it."

But I knew. Even if we don't speak of this... Affection isn't a thing of words only. Even deaf, dumb, blind couples express love. We've trapped ours for many years.

"So what if it's forbidden?" I screamed at him as he walked into his room, leaving me standing in the living room. He didn't respond.

But the following morning, he snatched my hand as I made to leave the dining room. Pulled me close and took my lips, kissing me as though I were his wife who was probably busy in the ob-gyn at the moment. It was the both of us here—two people who will not sacrifice.

Shutting my mind from the consciousness of opposition, I gave in to his passion—our passion. It was like squeezing juice from blackberries. The pleasure in the sweetness dribbling through your fingers, down your elbows. But it was more like milking a nursing mother of her feeding juice. You lick and suck till all is sapped and dry. Not everyone would like the latter—especially the cheated baby. But both lovers loved the experience. The taste of and the gift to one another.

Lost in the realisation of what he needed, he hefted me and placed me on the dining table. His breath grazed my neck, and he groped my thighs beneath my jean shorts as I pulled him closer, over me.

The door opened and it was over. Mum walked in with her white coat unusually draped over her shoulders, handbag in



# PANDORA IN THE THROAT OF ADAM

## CONT.

grip. She doesn't look flustered. She wasn't looking in our direction. Or she was, but had chosen to let the dog snore. The baby knew the man may also need the juice, so it had chosen to keep mum.

Dad hurried to meet her. "Juana," he called. Was he going to explain this?

Mum threw him a smile and took him in her arms, not letting go for a couple of minutes. Her eyes were closed and I could see her straining them shut the more—like someone fighting back tears. At that moment, my heart ached. I staggered and compressed my lips to assure myself I'd awakened a sleeper. The deprived baby may have a way of protesting. You'll never know.

But just then, mum nodded at me as her head rested on Dad's shoulder. They were roughly the same height. I hesitated, but she nodded again, as if to mean, Come over.

I slowed a walk towards them and she smiled at me. "You can join us, darling," she said. Her voice was weak but compelling. I obeyed. And my arms snaked around both of them, so that we looked like a happy family.

Later, Dad told me Mum had been suffering from cancer. She was to spend her last days away in the hospital. But I never knew this before. I never knew what she had had to pass through. When I confronted her, she said she didn't want to keep us worried.

"But this is the best time to keep us worried, right?" I asked, scowling frustration and pity. "I could have taken care of you better, Mum."

"You can always do that, darling," she said, caressing my hair, a wisp of a smile on her face.

The guilt of many things washed over me this time and I broke into tears. "Mum... I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to—"

"Oh, no— I'm the one who should apologise for keeping it from you."

I gaze at her, right into her eyes. Did she really not know what had happened between me and Dad?

+

The seagulls already stopped fighting. But I couldn't ascertain which of them ended up gobbling the peanut burger. Or did they waste it? That was a possibility as well.

# PANDORA IN THE THROAT OF ADAM

## CONT.

"Rosa!"

I looked up. Dad was calling me. Mum was smiling at me. I got up from the blanket and trailed a finger down my hairline as I walked over to them. Dad reached behind me and slipped an arm around my neck, so that I was standing on his right and mum on his left—a picture that inferred his possession of the both of us. The juice was getting sour.

We stayed like that for a while, everyone gazing across the waters, at the litter of swans, and maybe at an indistinct future beyond the horizon. I retracted my gaze and stole a glance at mum. She was smiling at me. Memories of that day welled up in my head. Did she really not see us?

We walked back to the car. Mum and I. Dad said he needed a few minutes by the beach. He claimed he still wanted to enjoy the view. I still don't know why he stayed back. Did he and Mum talk about us?

But Mum was still smiling at me. The sleeping dog had awoken—but it was hesitant to bite. And the baby, it still wouldn't cry. The juice tasted sour. It was sour. If it were from the berries, it'd remain ever fine. But it wasn't. . . The source wasn't pure and it could ruin our lives. No, it certainly will, like the myth of Pandora, the darkness of curiosity. But could I stop wanting it? Could we?

Once we got to the car, Mum took the picnic basket from me and caressed my face, her smile deepening. "Jus'take care of your dad; it's no problem, Rosa," she said. She pulled me into her bosom, her arms tightening around my back. "It's really fine. You look so much like me."

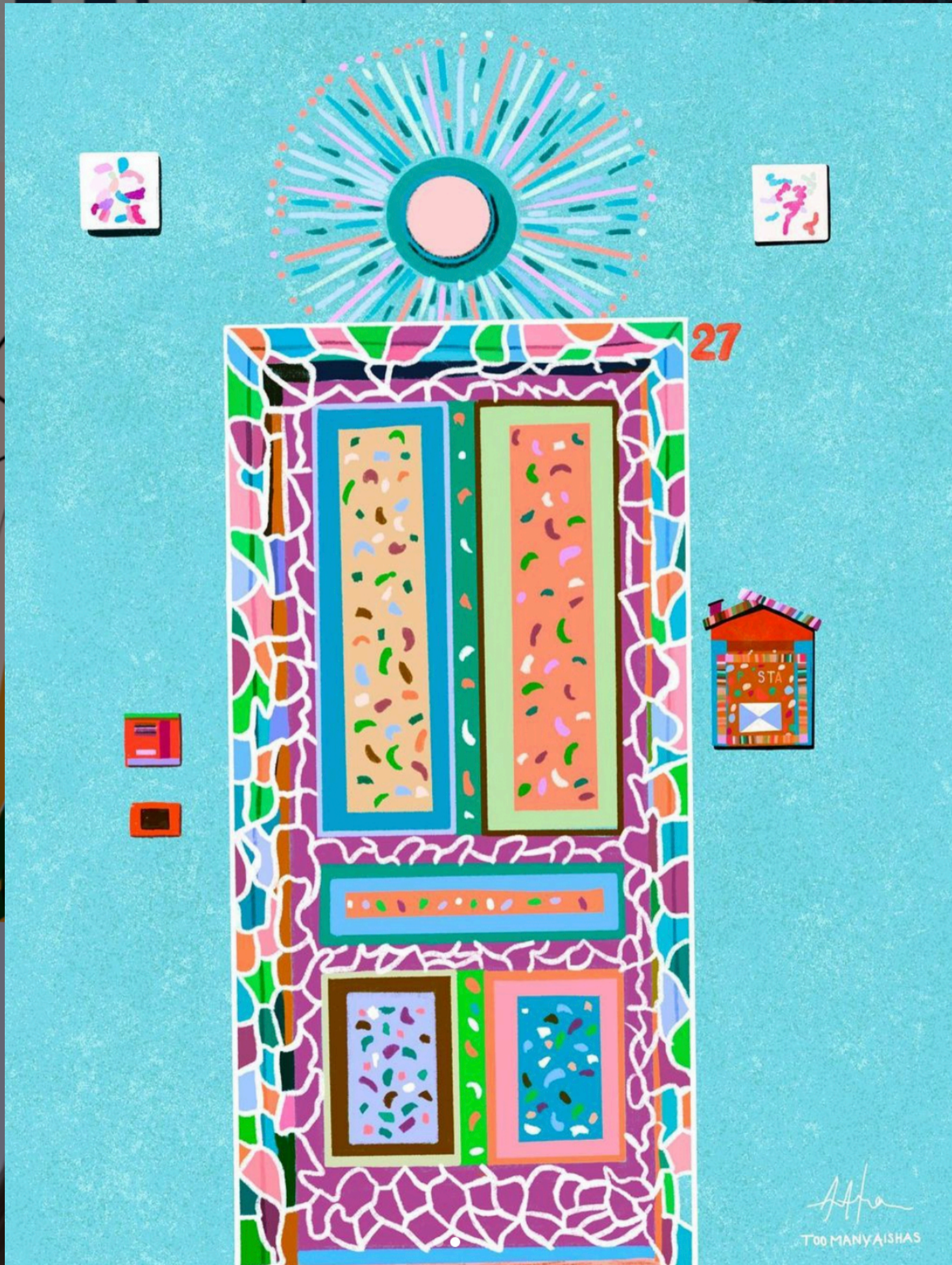
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