



**MIDDLESEX**

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**MIDDLESEX**  
*A Literary Journal*

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**Middlesex, *A Literary Journal***

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Cover Painting

*The House with the Cracked Walls* by Paul Cezanne, 1894

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## FROM THE EDITORS

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With this issue of *Middlesex: A Literary Journal*, which happily coincides with the arrival of spring, we mark a time of emergence—from the cold and dark of winter as well as the cold and dark of the pandemic. College campuses finally feel back to normal with students, faculty, birds, butterflies all bustling across campus en route to completing their important tasks.

Amidst all the activity and new life, we also pause to reflect on a notable loss for our journal as well as for the College: the passing of founding editor, professor, and gifted poet and scholar, Daniel Zimmerman. Dan was one of the visionaries who helped conceive of the journal back in 2008, and he went on to provide his editing and poetic talents to every issue since. We honor his enormous contributions these many years by featuring some of his very best poems. In the spirit of spring and renewal, we also feature some of the wonderful photographs of Dan's talented daughter, and an artist in her own right, Rachel Zimmerman.

This issue also marks a shift toward featuring more student work. For the first time, professors from our creative writing and literature classes have put forth for consideration some exemplary work written by their students who may now claim a publication in a literary journal on their resumes! Congratulations to all.

Continuing in our efforts to expand the range of the journal to capture the talents of more members of our community, in this issue we also proudly feature some marvelous pieces submitted by staff, faculty from across the disciplines, administrators, alumni and friends of the College. The diverse artistic voices that make up our community remind us of Whitman's poem "I Hear America Singing." Had Whitman been here with us today and had he had the opportunity to read this issue, no doubt he would proclaim "I hear Middlesex singing!"

A final note of thanks goes out to all the contributors for sharing their amazing talents with us, and we also send a very special thanks to Tom Peterson and Damian Gonzalez from the College's Marketing Department. Tom and Damian have worked tirelessly with us since the journal's inception on proofreading, design, layout, distribution, and more. Their commitment to, and artistic passion for, each issue shines through in the professional and beautiful appearance of each issue. We are honored and grateful to have worked with them.

**ONE YEAR AT A TIME**

this spring, spring won't die, though it seems to.  
flowers crumble after frost, though grass defies it.  
maybe the flowers just did their duty.  
I haven't seen a frog or snake in years.  
after grammar school, I'd fill coffee cans  
with garter snakes to let loose in my yard.  
yesterday, a bumblebee inspected me  
& left, satisfied I bore no pollen.  
I thanked it that it thought it possible.  
may every day echo the approaching buzz  
& swerve that herald of the season gave.  
better weather forecasted for tomorrow.

**FISHING**

*what lovely eyes you have.*  
*what big teeth you have.*

flattery, then fear. a strategy.  
serve & volley, watch the ball  
take a vacation. what you see  
is what you forget: a squall

intervenes, distending the moment.  
no one can reel the real in.  
the flies sit on the surface.  
the cast resumes the cast again.



**NO THANKS**

my fake muse mumbles  
like a politician, promising  
lines leading to light.

I refuse those pitches,  
hope for a base on balls  
despite a solid hit's delight.

an umpire makes the call  
behind me, in a mask,  
master of the strike zone.

I could have got it right,  
taken the swing  
if I'd only known

the future from the past.  
I might have hit a single  
& stayed in the fight.

**JESUS AS AUTHOR**

written in dust, then erased,  
what did the viewers remember?  
could they repeat it, or did it stick  
in their throats? did it change  
their faces? some veterans never  
discuss their combat experience,  
as if their words couldn't find a page.

the garrulous still carry stones  
ready to cast at objectors to mayhem,  
as if oblivion to past sins forgives  
sweet eternities of lock and load.  
what would Jesus do? don't ask them.  
they never saw the palimpsest,  
the eloquent dust of the sage.

**ADMONITIONS**

never write a poem on a mirror,  
not on a window, not on a microscope  
slide. turn off the x-ray. turn off  
the bubble machine. disavow stone.

incise no, fire no clay. whisper to paper  
& listen for echoes. jot only enough.

molt, & have a nice day.

**SENIOR MOMENTS**

intentions fade with distance from the site  
of their inception. backtracking often works,  
as if their ghosts still lurk in the twilight.

why am I here no longer  
an existential question, just one of the quirks  
that makes the moment a blur.

back home, oh hi, nice to meet you.  
thanks for telling me what I went for.  
strange to know it was my other shoe.

**NATURAL IKEBANA, 2023**



**NYC FEBRUARY, 2023**



**AFTER CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN, 2023**



**LATE AFTERNOON, 2023**



**SELF PORTRAIT WITH DOG, 2023**



**SHINE BRIGHT, 2023**



**CLOUDS: FOREVER, 2023**



**SHE CATCHES THE DRIFT**

1.

I'm usually not bothered by tics unless  
an incurable antipathy possesses me.

By now I was impervious to rough handling  
and long exposure and easily survived

the jealousy inherent in tense encounters.  
He nodded, and I told him all about my fears

and compulsive symptoms, the psychometric  
assessment of two doctors and myself.

2.

The boatman, to spare me the final voyage,  
roped his little craft and circuited the house,

seeking entry once or twice,  
satisfied he was going to bull me over.

I knew he hated being teased, and when  
I ticked him off, he would blink and twitch.

So I sat in the rain by the churchyard fence, determined  
not to make a fuss with someone so unscientific.

3.

He hitched *Reason* to the river's edge and said  
I should fly east, stay in town drinking

codeine cough syrup to ease my throat,  
keeping tabs on what happens to the body.

His worry seemed so human, touching  
maybe, and yet a trifle much. I sat near

the wire fence between two roots  
of an old sycamore and peered

into the boat. Even though I was having  
a little trouble concentrating, I was still willing

to confront the inevitable fissure between the slow drift  
into obligation and a sudden fear of commitment.

### **MAYBE THE FATHER**

Maybe the father  
needed to see  
his son suffer.  
How else could  
the godhead  
come to know  
what it meant  
to be human—  
famished kids  
staring bleary-eyed at  
the bleak face  
of the moon,  
and toothless women  
steeped in  
dark rags  
begging before  
the Duomo's  
bronze doors,  
or a lost boy, with  
a missing arm.  
wailing in  
the hayrick while  
the spiteful rain  
wastes  
itself on  
dead forests  
and fields?

## THE MAN AND THE GREAT ANGLERFISH

“Dad, can you tell us a story?” the kids whined in unison.

“I don’t know guys, it’s getting kind of late.”

“Please dad,” the youngest one begged, “We wanna hear The Man and the Great Anglerfish again!”

“Fine, fine, I know you guys love that one.”

The children quickly made sounds of excitement before quieting down in anticipation. “We begin our story in the ocean. Not the beautiful ocean filled with vibrant coral and sunshine that reflects off the scales of the fish, mind you. I’m talking about the far depths of the ocean. The parts of the ocean that are so deep that they swallow the sun. Where mysteries abound and nothing is as it seems. It is here where we find a single man. Now while this man lacked any remarkable physical characteristics, he did find his strength enhanced by a powerful mechanical suit.”

“Dad, what’s a kar-ack-ackstick?” one child interrupted.

“Shhh!” another yelled.

Their dad only laughed before returning to his tale with a little less fervor for intense vocabulary. “The man was weak, but he wore a very strong diving suit that allowed him to survive in the deep sea,” he awkwardly corrected, before quickly abandoning the style in favor of his traditional parlance. “After a dramatic series of mechanical whirring and clanking, the man’s right arm, coated in metal plates and gears, began to rise. The claw at the end attached itself to a nearby basalt rock formed from cooled lava, and gripped it tightly. Satisfied with a job well done, the armored diver tugged on the cable attached to his waist, signaling his

crew to return with their submarine. But the cable . . . was loose.”

The father paused for a moment, thinking a dramatic sting would be appropriate. Luckily a loud “Duh duh duh!” was provided by one of the kids.

“The man could feel his heart quicken. What could have happened to the cable? The bright flashlight that illuminated the area in front of the diver now seemed not nearly bright enough. The feeling that he wasn’t alone got the better of him and he frantically spun around, hoping to capture a glimpse of anything moving within his electric light. But he saw nothing and slowly relaxed. Maybe I’m being irrational, he thought. Considering his options, the diver determined the best course of action was to stop tugging on the cable and instead move towards the direction it was reaching.

The man offset the eerie silence with heavy, motoric steps along the craggy seafloor. Even with an advanced temperature balancing system in his suit, he believed that he could feel the bitter cold. Still, step by step he marched closer to the end of the cable. A sort of frightful anticipation filled the lone diver. He wondered about the safety of the crew. After all, the deep sea was a terrifying place. You never know what you’ll find. So much of it unexplored, untouched by Man. The murky depths were home to creatures beyond imagination. Creatures that held no duty to uphold the laws of the known world. Gargantuan crustaceans with twelve spider-like legs and barbed exoskeletons crawled the seabed in search of unsuspecting prey. Blood-red squid that had tentacles with teeth and jagged beaks known for cannibalism. But worst of all was the devilish anglerfish. A creature that lies in wait, luring its prey with a delicate, swaying light, devouring anything that gets near with its obtrusive lower jaw and thin, concave teeth.

The man cleared these thoughts from his mind, knowing they would cause more harm than good. Alas, the relief was fleeting. Dread dawned on him as he continued along the cable, realizing it was beginning to curve upwards. He knew he was about to lose the only thing that was keeping him sane: his feet on the ground. Taking one last, firm step on the sediment, the man activated the thrusters in his heavy boots and



lost his tether.”

“How we doing guys?” the dad broke away, checking on his children.

“I’m kinda hungry dad,” said one.

“I’m kinda tired dad,” said another.

“Don’t worry, we’re nearing the end now,” he reassured, before immersing himself once more. “The man’s light shone dimmer than before, flickering as though its death was imminent. He anxiously peered at his surroundings, hoping to get a glimmer of anything solid, anything that could help him find his footing in zero-gravity. But what he found was only an endless sea.

And then darkness.

The flashlight had run its course. No longer did the diver have the finite safety his light lent him. Nor did he have the cable in his sights. Instead, he was met with fear. Unadulterated fear. The opaque ocean water oppressed him so greatly that it seemed only natural he would curl into a fetus. He once dreamt of conquering the unknown depths. Now, as he falls into a despondent lull, the diver dreams only of escaping them.

But when all hope was lost, as though sent from the heavens, a faint light shone in the murky distance. It must be the USS Charybdis – it must be the crew. They had to have discovered the cable snapped and come to rescue him. At last, he was saved! The minuscule reinvigoration was enough to force him into action. Cradling his new-found hope, the diver launched himself towards the soft light, thrilled to greet his crew with tales of his terrifying experience. Yard by yard, foot by foot, inch by inch, he grew closer to salvation.

As the light became larger, the man could not help but salivate at the thought of the submarine’s rusty blue exterior. Slowly, he could feel his vitality return. He could almost taste the pasty gray interior walls and flickering yellow fluorescent lights. Right now, there was no place he’d rather be.

Approximately two-hundred feet away from the light, the diver came to a pensive halt. Something was wrong here. The light never looked like that before. The submarine light was much more glaring, more intense than what he was faced with now. But this – this was a delicate, swaying light. Almost blinded by hope, the diver edged forward. To his horror, the monster attached to the light slowly revealed itself.

First was its angular jaw.

Then its thin, concave teeth.

And lastly, its blank, white eyes, fluttering as they sensed the change in water pressure. An indication that prey was near. The diver jettisoned backwards, away from its razor-like teeth, frantically trying to escape its deadly maw. But the creature had adapted for this. In an energy-deficient environment, it had to evolve for prey escaping. Its jaw clicked and unhinged from the bone, extending to almost twice its body length. A feature that helped the creature, but forced the poor diver to behold his bloody, chewed up comrades stored in the fish’s mouth.”

The father stopped there, satisfied with his work. The children, however, were not.

“But Dad, what happened next?” one begged.

The storyteller went silent and gave a devilish smile, before saying, “Well I ate him of course!”

“I love that part.” the child said, relieved.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit egotistical calling yourself the Great Anglerfish?” asked the eldest child, rolling their pale, vestigial eyes. “Even mom is bigger than you.”

Ignoring the comment, he smiled with needle-like teeth and said, “You never know what you’ll find in the deep sea.”



## **RONDO**

The music that you hate is someone else's favorite song.  
The sandwich you threw away is dinner for someone hungry.  
The color you can't abide is my friend's favorite hue;  
It reminds him of happier, childhood days in an upstairs room  
where all his imaginings bloomed.

The solitary life you crave is the loneliness in a teeming throng.  
The one you choose to hate was once someone's  
neglected child, the one who stood on tiptoe blue  
in the room of a color you can't abide. The way you paint  
the past is not what your brother remembers.

What he recalls with vigor, you have long forgot.  
Your mother cut the crusts from bread just as you requested  
when you were in your fussier age, and decades later,  
you devour old crusts when they're all that's left on your plate.

You waste hours calling out all enemies,  
screaming into the void until the hour you long  
to hold your loved one's hand one last time.  
Even this poem you wish you had not started reading.

Those seconds drift into minutes  
those minutes lean into years, the echoes of verse  
you will recall with regret at the most appropriate moment,  
like the fragment of the tune  
that you must remind yourself to hate.

## **RADIO POEM ON THE EXISTENCE OF THE SOUL**

(Apologies to Patti Ann Rogers)

I heard a poem on the radio,  
a poem on the existence of the soul.  
I ask my friends if they heard this poem. They  
did not but wanted to know which movie to watch.

I asked the man who mugged me if he  
heard the poem on the existence of the soul. He left me  
on the ground with a bloody lip and took  
my credit cards, i.d. and all remaining cash.

The poem speaks of looking at stars,  
of lingering by large bodies of calm waters,  
of childbirth and benign desire, of nature's wing  
and bill and buzz and color and fluff. This poet

does not rob banks for her supply of ink. She  
does not stick needles between her toes or  
fingers to let the horse ooze into deep inspiration.  
No visible tracks at all. She does not remove

raffish tenants to make way for her condo and verse,  
nor gambles her first-born's college fund on 23 red,  
then thumbs her way back to disgruntled dishes  
souring in the sink, with an in-law festering in her scolds.  
(Where's the gun when you need it?)

I am someone who listens to poems on radios,  
who speaks to dogs with wagging tails; who recognizes  
the same sparrow on the fence that needs repairs. I am not

the twelve-year-old who machetes the arm off  
his enemy neighbor; or the thirty-four-year-old who hoards  
the capital from the pensioners' small returns, then  
secrets them into unnumbered accounts in Singapore.

Or the teen who kills for sport then flees,  
pleas a hapless 'just for fun,' orders pizza  
and a diet drink, after plotting the next Civil War. He is not  
one who listens to any poem on the existence of the soul. None of them

hear the transmitted wave to soothe the downsized.  
Instead of squirrels, Poet, show me  
the one who says "Enough."  
Show me the one who believes

only in his fist. Show me, Poet, the existence of the soul  
of those abandoned by their mothers, the soul  
of the man with his grip  
on a gun and a hastily scrawled note that says:

"It's real.  
It's loaded.  
I'm desperate.  
Give me everything you've got!"

## **A POEM ABOUT A POEM ABOUT AN OWL**

On the poster on the subway wall  
vivid with color is a large owl and a poem  
by Arthur Sze called 'the Owl.' And in the poem  
the path was purple in the dark, and I  
recall dark and purple paths even as I travel  
through dark and brackish tunnels  
underneath the city pavements, the worn asphalt,  
and the lost dreams of despair,  
the ruined wrappings of despair.

In the poem, the path ends up green  
in the May light. I am reading the poem  
in the last days of May, moving to the beauty  
of a mechanical roar not the guiding  
hoot of an owl. I drift into the numbing  
noise until I come to my stop and ascend  
into the struggle of the night.

The next day, I go to another train,  
another destination and another burden and I  
step into the subway car and the poster  
of the poem, the owl, the same Arthur  
Sze and the path that turns from purple and dark  
to light and green greets me like an old friend.

The beauty of the same subway car  
on a different day, a different line,  
the joy of recognition illuminates the darkened tunnels  
more than any star or sun or hoot owl's call.  
The joy. The joy.

---

## REDEMPTION.

I don't know this word, she states.  
A question implied in her voice  
Which word I ask, and she points to one  
On the final examination.  
'Redemption.' I am very sorry  
that I have to answer. I am very sorry that she has to ask.

What is Redemption? The veil covers her hair but  
not her intelligence. Something that we have yet  
to prove, I say, somewhat dismissively  
Then, thinking better, because her first tongue is  
not the language of this test, I must give  
an explanation that does not favor nor cause  
misunderstanding and yes, I am annoyed a little  
that there are no easy examples that we can share.  
The world has shattered them all.

'Earning forgiveness.' I say.  
'Earning forgiveness?' she repeats.  
And some light edges out the confusion  
on her face. Yes. Not the crime or sin, but  
the action that earns clemency. She takes her seat again,  
and without chains or fears, resumes writing.

---

## MY FASCINATION WITH WESTERN MOVIES

I was born into a traditional, middle-class family. Living in the outskirts of Karachi, I spent thirty-two years of my life in our house: one thousand and eighty square feet, with three bedrooms. Because of the mezzanine floor, the house required two different heights of ceilings. Since Karachi has had warm weather for almost eight months of the year, I began to like cold weather. When I recall the temperature drops of November in Karachi, how could I forget the loud noise coming from a street vendor? Wheeling his cart, ringing his bell, he'd call to us: "Groundnuts! Groundnuts!" I remember those beautiful evenings. Huddled up under one blanket, my father, sisters, and I would watch western movies and we'd enjoy warm groundnuts and bask in the Hollywood charm of Yul Brynner and Charles Bronson.

My father loved movies and our interest in watching them come from him. Having migrated from India when he was four years old, an orphan, my Dad did many odd jobs but later on, he worked as a journalist. Mostly he used to write films and book reviews. When he became Head Acquisitions Advisor at the Library of Congress, which was situated in the American Consulate, it was easier for him to bring VHS tapes of English movies home too.

I watched some of the greatest movies in my childhood, including: *Gone with the Wind*, *The Magnificent Seven*, *The King and I*, *Cleopatra*, *The Great Escape*, *Bridge on the River Kwai*, *To Sir with Love*, *Ben-Hur*. I saw many of these when I was only seven or eight years old. In second grade, I waited all week for the Saturday Night Cinema. It was a two-hour slot for foreign movies on PTV (Pakistan Television), the only channel we had. We'd watch old and new Hollywood movies: eating groundnuts, wrapped in cozy blankets.

My mother never liked them. There was a reason for her aversion. Our whole clan (my cousins and sister) would try reenacting stunts from the movies using pillows as horses. I still remember roaming around the nearby streets, sometimes pretending to be characters from *CHiPs* or acting like the cowboys in *The Magnificent Seven*. The smell of motia flower hung in the

air at night when I'd play outside. The green dumdum hedges around our neighbor's house were perfect for hiding inside. My sister and I pretended to be policemen, riding on motorbikes and chasing our cousins, who pretended to be thieves like we saw on TV.

There was a scene in the movie *The Magnificent Seven*, where the brothers rode on horses with cowboy hats. So why not, I thought, recreate that with my clan? So, I decided to take a goa takiya (a round pillow) and use it as an imaginary horse.

Later, I paid the price for that stunt.

The roof over our mezzanine floor had a water tank and only two small boundary walls to keep people from falling off. One side was completely open. I'd use a wooden ladder to climb up onto the roof—a sun hat standing in for a cowboy hat. The distance from one roof to the other was nearly five feet. On the roof, we galloped around with pillows between our knees, neighing like horses. Suddenly, I lost my balance and fell off the roof.

Without realizing it, I found myself on the concrete ground, crying. What happened later I don't remember. My mother heard the noise and rushed me to the doctor's clinic.

You can probably imagine now why my mother didn't like me watching movies. For a few months afterward, I'd sneak into our drawing room where we had an old-fashioned, four-legged, black-and-white TV. The room had a blue Iranian carpet with black flowers on the side. One sofa set had brown cushions which had a small piece of embroidered plastic covers and a black coffee table in the middle. Each side table had a vase that had plastic flowers. In my drawing room fantasies, I became Elizabeth Taylor—*Cleopatra*.

In 1984, movies and reality collided in unique ways. My fascination with western heroes and heroines took me to the U.S. Consulate, as a guest of my father. Charlton Heston, from the movie *Ben-Hur* and *The Ten Commandments*, came to visit the Consulate. Both of his movies were screened in the Nishat Cinema, located in the central area of Karachi, and Heston—visiting Karachi as a goodwill ambassador—was invited by the Consul General. The day arrived when he came to visit the Library of Congress and, of course, my father was tasked with giving him a tour. There

was an informal meeting at Hi-tea, and families were also invited.

I still remember when I first saw Heston sitting on a sofa. He was huge. My ten-year-old mind thought that maybe he'd be wearing the same costume he wore in the movies, but he was clean-shaven with a nice haircut. No long grey Moses beard. He was having a conversation with fans and most of the people seemed excited by his presence. I was only nine at that time, and shy as well; therefore, I could not even try to go near him. Maybe I had a fear that he would ignore me. In my mind, he was the ultimate screen hero—the one who had a solution for any problem. Instantly, I felt inferior. I came from a simple background. The clean roads, houses, and hospitals I saw in the movies did not match my environment. They felt inaccessible and so, Heston seemed the same way.

I suppose the charm of the western movie stars came to an end when I landed at JFK airport in 2006. It was my first international trip in thirty-two years and I was coming to live in the land I'd glimpsed in old Hollywood movies; however, I was totally numb as I exited the plane. As I reached the counter for immigration, the man sitting behind the table asked me for my fingerprints. I was so nervous and my hands were sweaty. He had to ask me thrice for fingerprinting.

I was in awe, seeing throngs and throngs of foreigners. I kept trying to find characters from the movies I watched during my childhood. *Where is Yul Brynner? Charles Bronson?* I worried somehow that the roles had been reversed: that somehow instead of me watching them, *they'd* be watching *me*. Judging my imperfect English, and my less-than-fashionable attire.

For the first few years, I struggled to reconcile my cinematic fantasies with fast-paced American culture. Sometimes I thought about going back to Karachi.

It occurred to me, only after making friends, that this inferiority complex wasn't exclusive to America. The time when I was afraid to meet Heston with my inner insecurities—whether he would reply to me or not—made me realize that all the same worries were with me in Karachi, weren't they? And what was the difference?

Now that I am here, I realized that I left the past behind and focused on

scripting a new movie of my own based on reality. Everything I watched onscreen is now somehow attainable. As I matured and read more about the actors and watched their interviews, I was able to distinguish and separate my fantasy from reality. I watched many casual interviews with these great actors, where they talk about their real-life experiences and use self-deprecating humor. Generally, maturity comes with time, and I have now realized that actors are humans too with similar flaws and struggles.

This became clearer to me when I made several American friends who didn't judge me by my roots but rather liked and respected me because of my work ethic. I cherish these friendships!

To sum it up, Heston, who I saw as larger-than-life and inaccessible then, now seems more real and more accessible — although in a different way. The child who was afraid of having conversations with Heston became more confident because of opportunities she availed herself of here in the USA, such as going back to school at the age of forty, traveling to many states, and self-care such as learning to swim. All these experiences made it easier for me to assimilate into the foreign environment. Finally, the escape I used to find in watching those movies was over.



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## **A MEMORABLE VISIT TO THE TAJ MAHAL**

Being Pakistani-born, it is always hard to get an Indian visa because of India and Pakistan tensions. Both the countries are arch-rivals since independence in 1947. Luckily, I got married to an Indian national, and I knew that one day I would visit my ancestor's hometown that is Amroha, and explore some iconic and historic places, especially the Taj Mahal.

What I did not know then were the circumstances in which I would visit the Taj Mahal. It was early January 2017. I went to India to see my ailing mother-in-law. After a month-long stay with her, I knew that I wouldn't be able to see her again because of her deteriorating condition. With grief and sorrow, we had to say goodbye to all our relatives and my still sick mother-in-law. Her eyes were empty as if they were begging us not to leave. I had a feeling that I wouldn't be able to see her again, but I couldn't do anything. We started our journey by road with a heavy heart; I had made plans for this specific road trip to the Taj Mahal, but because of my mother-in-law's condition, it didn't materialize as I thought. The only reason I chose to stop by the Taj Mahal was that it was on our way to Delhi.

It was a nice sunny day and not chilly nor foggy when we started our journey to Delhi. We left our ancestral place Amroha around 8:30 a.m., where my husband's family lives. My maternal grandmother was also born in Amroha and later migrated to Pakistan after the partition.

While our car was moving I was quiet and watching outside. I could not stop thinking about my mother-in-law. With an empty mind, I was seeing fast food carts lining the streets, which made those roads special as they bind the soul. In a normal circumstance, I would have asked my husband to stop the car so I could buy these food items but my heart was not feeling it.

As we moved through some heavily populated areas, I could see different types of people: some feeling underprivileged and some wearing nice clothing as if they were going to work.

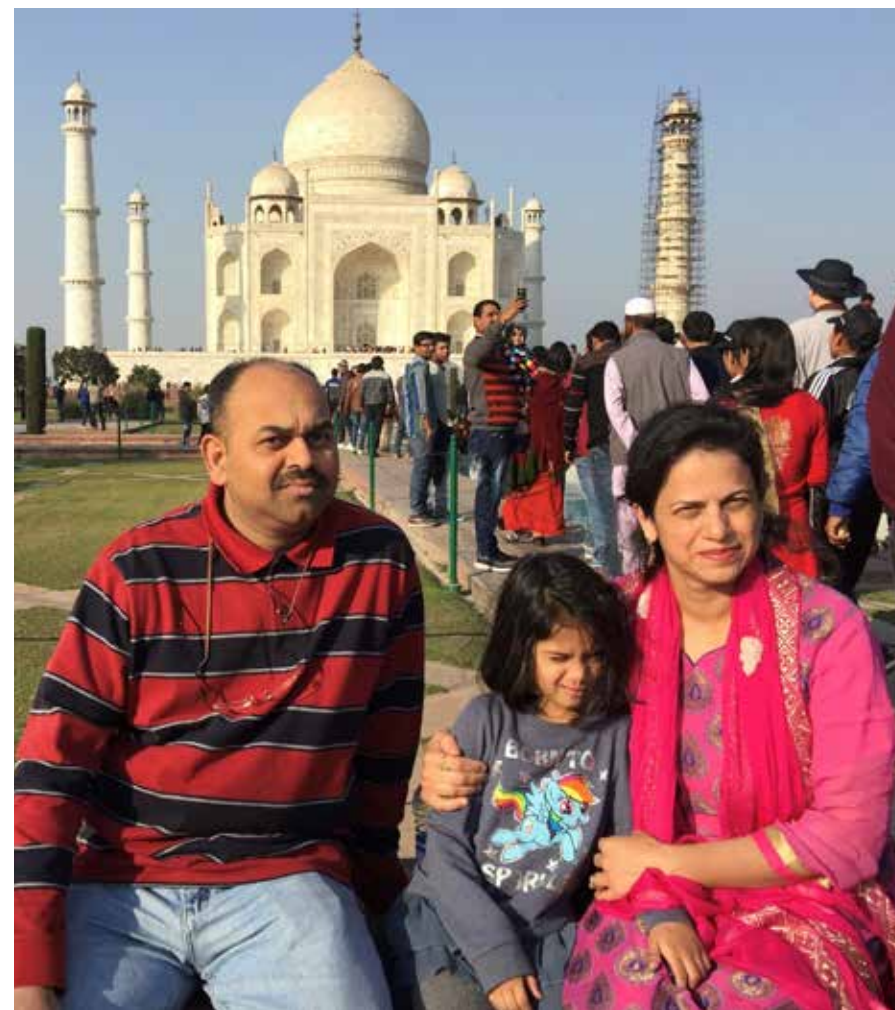
After almost a two-hour drive, we stopped at a guest area which was located in a deserted place. It was a quiet and peaceful environment but the restaurant was quite big. Only three young adults were inside the restaurant and enjoying the food. I ordered a sandwich, my husband ordered vegetables and bread and my daughter ordered French fries and ice cream. After taking a short stopover, which was less than an hour, we started our journey again. It took us five hours to reach Agra (the city where the Taj Mahal is located).

Finally, we reached our destination: the most beautiful, iconic monument and a symbol of eternal love, the Taj Mahal. Built in the 16th century, King Shah Jahan created it in memory of his late wife, Mumtaz Mahal; the beauty was everlasting.

When we entered the building, we had to stand in a long queue to get the entrance ticket. We hired a tour guide, and he helped us get a ticket a little quicker. He knew we were traveling from abroad, so he was looking for a good tip.

The long path to the main building was nearly one mile. The Taj Mahal's main gate was astonishingly beautiful; the carving was inspired by Persian, Islamic, and Indian architecture. The white marble gave a spiritual feeling. The tomb is the centerpiece of a 17-hectare complex, including a mosque, guest house, garden, mausoleum, rest house, and the main gateway. All three sides are covered with gardens with a crenelated wall.

The unique and most spectacular feature of the Taj Mahal is the white marble dome that is nearly 35 meters high. There are four minarets on each side, which are 137 meters in height, to emphasize the beauty of the main dome. The main chamber houses the false sarcophagi of Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan, but the actual graves are lower, where the general public is not allowed.





While I enjoyed the calligraphy's exceptional beauty on the walls, my 5-year-old daughter did not have any interest in it, and she kept pulling me to go outside the building. We came to the back of the Mahal in this tussle, and there we could see the River Yamuna behind the building.

I could easily see the river where some underprivileged children were taking baths. While standing on the iconic building, the people's plight made my heart feel like it was bleeding. I couldn't see any beautiful and upscale areas; I could only see the destitute and poverty-stricken people whose faces have moments of kindness and fleeting smiles. I could not understand why the surroundings were dilapidated.

Every year, millions of tourists visit the Taj Mahal, which generates money, but where does this money go? With these thoughts in my mind, we started our journey back to Delhi where we had to stay one night and the next morning we had to catch a flight to the USA.

During the flight, I was uncomfortable, as if I had left something precious behind. Soon after reaching home, we received a call from India that my mother-in-law had passed away. For a few moments, I was numb, all the old memories were gathering in my mind. Shah Jehan was the emperor-built symbol of love when Mumtaz Mahal passed away. I wonder how he was with her in his personal life as there are conflicting accounts available in history. Whereas I was thankful that I took my daughter who is the only grandchild of my mother-in-law to India. Those few days, at least she had seen her playing and talking. The remorse changed with a sigh as I knew that now she slept peacefully and I will not have to say, I wish I had done this and that.

## **FOREVER YOUNG**

Sweet honeysuckle dance  
In my aging mind's garden  
Springtime forever

**WEEPING BERRIES**

Berries exploding  
On the Carpathian slopes  
Weeping for pickers

**TOMORROW**

Tomorrow is  
Often  
More appropriate than today  
Only I would  
Rather  
Risk  
Our friendship now  
When I have the courage to say

## THE BEST FRIEND AND THE BOOK

Your best friend was sent to you by way of a monastery in upstate New York. That's right, she was raised by monks, which explains why she used to be so quiet when you first met her. Not to say that she was entirely demure. The monks had frowned on her chasing sheep across their vast, rolling hills. And the first day she arrived at the monastery from Texas, she met a porcupine and had to be rushed off for medical treatment—quill removal.

If she had any adventures down south, they're lost to the sands of time. All we know is that when winter was coming, the monks said it was too cold for her to stay outside and sent her off to live with a family in New Jersey, probably not knowing she'd soon be abandoned. The universe is a strange chaos, so while you can't understand or condone their actions, by the same token, you'd have never met your best friend if circumstances were different.

Now she lives with you all the time. Licking your hands while you write. Smelling all of the interesting things you can't smell as you weave through the garden apartments. You hang out together as much as you can, sometimes sharing snacks, but mostly spending time in wordless companionship. You'd like to be with her even more, but society is skeptical of her kind, putting up signs on windows indicating she is not welcome, so you frequently have to leave her behind at home.

There's just one problem you've discovered, like an inevitable hourglass running out of time. You've always been so strongly drawn to the written word that you've amassed a beautiful collection of books. You imagine one day, when climate change has devastated society, you'll be holed up in your bunker with canned goods and books—but what if the books don't make it?

On a few occasions, you've left a stray book somewhere—say Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* carelessly left on your bed—only to return and find it's been nibbled on or outright eaten up! You suspect the worst of your best friend, and one day you catch her in the act—your best friend eats books.

Now every time you go out, you fear for your library. Many of the books are low enough for her to reach, and you can picture her standing up on the shelf, or even climbing something to reach more. But no, you tell yourself. She realizes that upsets you. She wouldn't do that. You hope for the best as you walk out the front door, remembering that yesterday she'd been smelling the corners of books on the poetry shelf when you'd asked her to stop.



Lady: Part Australian shepherd, beagle, and border collie. All best friend.

## GETTING TO WORK ON TIME

I scraped my soup ladle along where I hoped to be closing in on the aluminum rectangle of my wallet. Dirt continued to fall away in clumps, the earthy smell threatening to overwhelm me. Yet as the ladle traced the outline of something much larger, I knew this was another red herring.

“Not me again,” I grumbled. That was definitely the outline of my face I was uncovering. This time, it was me when I was in high school, the day I was kicked out of study hall for laughing twenty minutes nonstop. There hadn’t even been anything funny provoking me. I just kept chuckling because I wasn’t supposed to.

“I don’t need this.” Looking down, I saw that my shoes were lost deep in the mud, which was seeping up onto my creased slacks. My fingernails were encrusted with dirt, as were the edges of my shirtsleeves.

Tugging my feet up out of the slop, I used my soup ladle as a mountaineering axe to brace myself in the soil and managed to climb up from that excavation. I surveyed the lawn that stretched out between a semicircle of apartment buildings. The morning’s crisp, green grass was now pocked with brown mounds. Each could have been a spot freshly buried by my dog.

As I contemplated my next move, I realized I’d dropped my notes on the Ship of Theseus thought experiment back in the last hole. The murky dampness was enclosing the last clean corner of paper. “So much for that,” I grunted.

At the nearest hillock, I fell to my knees and dug for a while with an awkward, two-handed grasp on my soup ladle. “Dammit!” I exclaimed. “Me again!” Now, it was me telling my first girlfriend that I would love

her forever. I looked young and stupid—I didn’t even have a beard! “That’s embarrassing,” I muttered, my knees cracking as I stood up. I kicked some dirt back over myself so my wife wouldn’t see it if she happened to wander out here.

I dug up another hole—me again—decked out in a steel mesh mask and starched white tunic, one arm behind my back while my gloved hand riposted an épée blade. “Stupid me,” I muttered. “I should have known there’s no swordfighting in real life. I should have been doing something useful like reading philosophy.”

“You say there’s no swordfighting in real life?” said a voice said from behind me.

I whirled on my heel to see my wallet.

“Hey!” I shouted. “Get back in my pants!”

“Make me,” it said, extracting a saber. The wallet brandished the thin sword before taking a fencing pose. “En garde!” In a fluid motion, the wallet took a deep lunge and thrust the blade toward my chest. It was by pure instinct that I brought up the soup ladle to swat away the sword—but the wallet was a skilled sword swallower. It expected my parry and counterattacked, bringing the blade down toward my shoulder. Once more I smashed the soup ladle into the saber, forcing the blade away from my shoulder—but into my neck.

I didn’t feel pain, yet I knew to put my hands on my throat. Blood flowed down and mixed with the mud on my sky blue, button-up shirt.

“Far too easy,” the wallet said, flourishing the blade and turning away from me.







**SPECTERS**

They stand—specters of the night guarding darkness.  
Like inky black, dark blue, gray pillars strewn about.  
Their bodies bent over slightly from the weighty bags they haul.  
Silent. Their faces glum.  
Quiet. They show no expression, and then,  
A rattle, another rattle. Louder. Bigger. Louder. RATTLE.  
Something heavy crunches over gravel.  
They start to move. Slightly. Slowly.  
As if assembling to ready themselves  
For a golden transport that appears.  
They move. They come to life.  
The conveyance stops. They climb aboard,  
And off they go to junior high.

**ELEVATOR MEMOIR 1955**

No Lackawanna train Fridays. Instead, Mommy drives from Orange to Newark to pick up Daddy at his office.

Parked, we run to the elevator bank, press the button to call the elevator car. Then the uniformed attendant opens the folding gate. We enter.

She closes the gate, cranks the control wheel to launch us to the seventh floor. We fly. Using the wheel, she breaks and pulls the gate, the doors open.

Daaaaaady!!!!



## **ARUBA-1,921 MILES AWAY**

We watched Steve play craps last night; he said we brought him luck.

Now we sat at the hotel breakfast table.

Gloria, Irv, Nancy, Steve, Sharon, Me.

Introductions concluded. New friends made.

Bagels buttered.

Sunshine poured down over the Caribbean. Divi divis<sup>1</sup> twisted southwesterly.

Where are you from?

Union. Hillsborough. West Orange.

“West Orange?” Irv queried.

“Yes,” I answered.

“I have a cousin who lives there.” Irv announced. “Dorothy Goldberg.”

“That’s my mother.”

1. A tree native to Aruba that always points southwesterly as if blown by trade winds.

## **MEAN DOG**

Magenta, 7, and her owner Leah walked their neighborhood daily. There weren’t many streets, but they created routes. Magenta was sweet and quiet, but bike riders, other dogs and cars scared her. She BARKED! Thursday, they walked down Leonard Dr. when a runner frightened Magenta. The barking began. Across the street, a woman told her little grandson, “Don’t go near the dog. It’s a mean dog.” Hurt, Leah asked, “Why?” The woman answered, “Because it barks.”

## **A NIGHT OUT**

The alarm goes off at 6:30 a.m. Refusing to open my eyes, I continually slap my hand onto the end table destructively hitting numerous objects such as the television remote, a water bottle, and a deck of playing cards before finding the cold metal circle of happiness, otherwise known as the snooze button. When it goes off ten minutes later, I subconsciously remember where the button is, and hit my target on the first try. I just scored two points.

I finally drag myself out of bed, manage to brush my teeth with my pink electric toothbrush that somehow always manages to make my nose tickle, and run a hairbrush through my hair. Rushing out the door, I drop my husband off at work with ten minutes to spare. I should have hit the snooze once more. I stop at the store to grab coffee, a Rockstar, and pretzels...the true breakfast of a caffeinated champion.

I arrive home only to remember that my morning freedom was short-lived; may it rest in peace. On my desk there sits about four hours' worth of tedious work assignments. Of course, I procrastinate, finishing about an hour's worth. I drink some water to dilute my carbonated breakfast and turn the bathroom into Giants Stadium on the first night of Bon Jovi's latest tour. "Runaway." I jump in the shower. "Bad Medicine." I blow dry my hair. "Living on a Prayer." I straighten my hair with my pink Chi flat iron. Captain Crash and the Beauty Queen from Mars." I apply my makeup. "I'll Be There For You." I remember that I have to pick my husband up from work.

He has little time to get ready as I constantly remind him of all the things I had to do today while he only had to go to work. Besides, he should know that it takes girls much longer to prepare for a night out. He silently hurries himself up. If we are late, he will get the blame regardless of whose fault it is. We are back at the car within half an hour en route to the Riverside Square Mall. Once we arrive, I know that it will take at least twenty minutes to find a space for my Nissan amongst the massive sea of Lexus, Infiniti, and BMW's. I manage to slip in



between a Cadillac and a Hyundai. Woohoo. Middle Class. At least I saved ten dollars by not having to valet park. Besides, preparing the car for the valet takes too much time. Removing the change and hiding any valuables is the last thing I have time for.

We get to the restaurant with minutes to spare and meet up with our party of sixteen. Of course, our table is not ready. I shouldn't have expected any less. While I impatiently wait for our names to be called, I think of all the things that I could be doing at this very moment. Like the other three hours of work that I have piled on my desk at home. Birthday celebrations have a unique way of making the day seem much shorter than the twenty-four hours that we are allotted.

## FRAGMENT

What if your life was compared to a research paper? Full of red pen. Highlighting each flaw. Fragments spewing from each page. Pointing out the missing noun or verb. These parts of speech mocking you. Disappearing from each sentence. Sending you on an endless search for completion.

It seems completely logical that these unwritten parts of speech know something that you don't know, and possibly never will know.

What if your life were graded like a research paper? The red pen a constant agonizing reminder of the people, places, and things that are missing. Can it all be re-written, for the chance of a better grade?

## **COMET C-2022**

Oh, if Creedence was still singin',  
Sure the word that they'd be bringin'  
Is this time it ain't no bad moon  
But a comet out tonight.

Fifty thousand years they say for  
This thing to come back our way,  
But the sky is filled with fog and rain, and  
It just don't seem right.

Older than the Canyon Grand,  
Pyramids, Rolling Stones band,  
We get just one chance to see it,  
Mother Nature thwarts our plan.

Oh what myths the ancients told  
In the long-lost days of old  
When these wonders they'd behold.  
We'll make no new myths this night.

Comets once were signs and portents  
Of horrific or good events.  
Just no telling what would happen  
If the fog would break tonight.

Seems the whole world is in crisis.  
Can't blame Ra or Thor or Isis.  
But a comet. That's the ticket  
Come on, show yourself tonight.

Rain is forecast through tomorrow.  
I cannot control my sorrow.  
Wait! I know some distilled spirits  
That might get me through the night.

So C-Twenty Twenty-Two,  
I sure wanted to see you. In-  
Stead I'll have a drink or two  
And then bid you a sad good night.

*Sallie DelVecchio*

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For Dan Z. Being his officemate was quite a trip. One day throat singers, the next Dylan—both Bob and Thomas. The real fun was talking literature. For a couple of weeks, once upon a time, the topic was heroes. That inspired him to write a poem—a real one, a brilliant one; it inspired me to write this.

**ODYSSEUS, YEAH, YEAH, YEAH**

The Cyclops asked his name. “My name is Noman.”

Hero. I’m the model?  
Me a model?  
What the.  
Scratch that.  
I am the very model  
Of an ancient lit’ry hero.  
Yeah. Ok.  
But, Ari, keep your tragic dude.  
I ain’t him.  
Proudly not.  
Flawed, hell yeah.  
It ends there, so  
No tragic model.  
Don’t wanna be.  
But model, hell yeah.  
Literary literally  
Or literally literary.  
Arrogant. Can I boast?  
Ari, puleeze.  
I am NoMan.  
Beat that, Baby.  
Shook my fist at the gods.

All of ‘em. Took my lumps.  
Took on all comers.  
Speaking of,  
Ah, Circe.  
What a babe.  
But, hey,  
Went back to my woman,  
Hero-like.  
So it took a while.  
Yeah, blind Homer cleaned it up.  
A bit.  
Homer my homey.  
Sing it, Pal.  
Oh, hero.  
Got myself sidetracked.  
A lot.  
Got lost.  
A lot.  
But I won.  
Against all odds.  
I like that.  
Homey got it right.  
Show me anybody  
Smarter  
Braver  
Truer.  
Hey hey hey

I went back  
To Penny. Ok?  
Busted some suiters’  
Freaking asses, man.  
And lived to  
Boast about it.  
If I’m not a  
Hero,  
You tell me

Who is.  
Model? Hell, yeah.  
Dan the man  
Got me.  
Wrote me cool.  
Wrote me swaggered.  
Yeah, he got me.  
Homer my homey got me.  
They got me.  
Yeah, yeah, yeah.  
Sing it, Homey.  
Sing it, Dan.  
Sing it!

*Maureen McVeigh-Berzok*

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**AUTUMN AT BICENTENNIAL PARK, EAST BRUNSWICK, NJ**



**NEW JERSEY NATIVE GRASSES, BEAVER DAM PARK, EAST  
BRUNSWICK, NJ**



**SUNSET IN BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA**



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“CATHEDRAL IN THE WOODS” MUIR WOODS,  
CALIFORNIA



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A DJIBOUTIFUL DAY

I couldn't have been further from home and still on planet Earth. A female in the military may have been unphased by my predicament. For me, a middle-aged, retired housewife turned civil servant professor; my gig was up. And I was down. I had successfully scored a front seat next to the pilot on an LCAC, where the Sailors boarded and bid me farewell with a bemusing wink and a smile. "It's gonna be a Djiboutiful day." A sense of unease consumed me.

After sitting on the Landing Craft Air Cushion (LCAC) surrounded by tanks, machine guns, grenade launchers, and an escort of military personnel, the final lap of my sixty-day excursion was about to end. I had survived a Tom Sawyer-like adventure and traveled three continents and three countries, and now it would take three emotionally terrifying days to get home from Djibouti.

Back on the ship, I'd become friendly with the officers. My drop-off destination, often a topic of discussion, invited the guys to tease me as well as teach me ship lingo. Not to mention, I learned to lower my expectations when it came to the ever-changing ship itinerary. My first disappointment occurred after booking and ultimately canceling a hotel reservation in Paris believing I'd be departing from France (to fly home to the states at my leisure). I recovered quickly as the new plan left me with visions of myself sauntering into a Cretan hotel shouting *efxarhisto* as I waved goodbye to the officers from the Greek island. It wasn't long after that I realized the Plan of the Day (POD) was just *that*. Before joining the ship as an English Composition adjunct, I had been warned by other instructors about leaving from "bad" ports. At the time, I hadn't a clue how I had any power to control that. Interestingly, I would learn a few techniques for future deployments. On this one, the threat of Djibouti hovered in the back of my mind like the stench of dead fish baking in the sun.

"What's Djibouti like?" I once asked the ship's Captain. He grinned and shrugged. "It's just like it sounds—JA-



BOOTY!” He blurted the way you’d imagine someone referring to the boogiemer!

My heart raced as the air depleted from the LCAC and flattened out on the beach. The doors opened, and the Marines trampled out first, and I followed, carrying my backpack and two large suitcases. I stood on a remote beach on the horn of Africa, danger lurking everywhere, shaking in my shoes. The stifling 103-degree air weighed down on me as I dragged my luggage onto the gray-pebbled shore. My designer backpack with the gold trim held the names, social security numbers, and academic grades of fifty-six Navy and Marine personnel. It also housed my laptop, which contained all my personal information. My stomach churned while I searched for a “white van” that would be waiting for me. White vans were randomly scattered across the entire beach. I hadn’t a clue which one was there for me.

Fear and menopausal hormones transformed my body into a human furnace. Sweat seeped from my skin, soaking my sleeveless top, pants, and everything in between while I struggled to keep my backpack from slipping. I searched fervently for my ride, presenting driver after driver with a printed email listing my point of contact’s name, a Major from the U.S. Marines. Finally, one driver invited me inside the air-conditioned vehicle, handed me a bottle of water, and suggested I sit tight.

While doing my best to remain calm, African boys pressed their charcoal faces against the car window vying for my attention. Their naked feet skittered on the hot sand and narrow pink fingers tapped against the glass, soliciting hand-made crafts. I pointed to a small wood carving of a tribal face hanging from a string, cracked the window, and exchanged it for money. Pleading with me to purchase more, the boys mouthed the only English word they seemed to know. Each time, plucking my heartstrings when they said it . . . *Mother*. Three hours from the moment I disembarked the LCAC, the officers I’d been waiting for arrived in a *white van* to greet me. After spending thirty days at sea, I had learned to be patient.

“Welcome to Djibouti! Sorry we’re late.” One of the officers said in an easy manner as he hauled my bags into the other van. “You ever been on an African safari?” He asked.

Intrigued by the prospect as well as amused by his Australian accent I answered, “Can’t say I have.”

“Get your camera,” he instructed. “You are about to experience one.”

The officers cracked jokes as we bounced over rocky terrain akin to New York City potholes. I photographed camel, gerenuks, and East African Oryx. After the tour, we reached a paved road where rush hour in Djibouti was no different than the Jersey shore in the summertime. Finally, we arrived at Camp Lemonier Djibouti Base. The driver suggested I leave my belongings in the van and get to the cafeteria before it closed at 8 p.m.; it was 7:50.

The aroma of garlic, beef sizzling, and pizza wafted through the air. My mouth watered and my stomach growled as I scanned the assortment of foods. I presented the cashier with a military/civilian ID card, which I’d used since day one to access food, but the cashier shook her head and said, “You can’t come in like that.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Your shoulders need to be covered.”

I’d quickly forgotten the rules of the military. I rolled my eyes, inhaled deeply, and rushed back to the van to grab a sweater from my suitcase. I practically leaped across the entrance to the cafeteria and once again presented my card.

This time *the cashier* rolled her eyes. “You need a voucher—or cash.”

*My God, I just want to sit down and eat.* I shouted in my mind and politely argued that I had never needed either before. Incidentally, I had given all my money to the African boys. Weak from thirst and hunger, the little girl inside me bit a lip to abstain from releasing a river of tears. Then, suddenly, I heard someone call my name. In a surreal-like manner, I turned around and the English instructor I had left with from San Diego two months earlier waved me on. Finally, some luck, I thought. I quickly explained my situation, and he dug inside his pocket. A minute before 8 p.m. I slapped five bucks on the counter and the cashier waved me on. The history instructor and I shared a meal and swapped stories.

I picked up bedding and a key to my sleeping quarters for the night a.k.a. “the box” another term the Sailors coined when describing the lodging accommodations in Djibouti. The box was like a dream vacation after sleeping on the ship. The room was twice the size, and the bed frame contained an actual mattress. Only, the bathroom was

about ten pods away from mine. I couldn't help but envision the Sailors howling with laughter as they omitted the restroom accommodations from the brief explanation about "the box."

The following morning, I mentally prepared myself for the fact I'd soon be unescorted and independent in the faraway country. Instructed to hop on a shuttle to the airport, which was only on the other side of the base, the Major saw no reason to accompany me. However, I couldn't let go of the fear that things still could go wrong. I'd been warned by several officers that the Djibouti airport officials could make it difficult or impossible for me to jump on that plane if they wanted to. The potential scenario wouldn't let me rest, so I intentionally missed the shuttle and called upon the Major one last time.

Disgruntled, but compliant, he appeared at my side and showed his credentials presenting me as human cargo. And, of course, when I shoved my bloated carry-on bag to be measured; it wouldn't fit. Before I was instructed leave anything behind, with one quick swoop, I pulled the bag out, stomped on it several times, and placed it back to be fitted. After, I presented my credentials to the stout, rigid-eyed official, I knew I had made the right decision as he nodded at the Major with slight respect.

Finally, inside the airport lounge, I collapsed on a seat facing a small bar surrounded by people of every color and ethnicity but my own. I suppressed my gag reflex from the heavy smoke-filled room mixed with funky scents. My friends and family had supported my choice to cut my teeth as an adjunct professor teaching Sailors at sea. Though, some friends gasped, chuckled under their breath, or told me outright that I was crazy. Those responses only invigorated me to prove them I was even tougher than they knew. I had conquered *toughness* when 15-foot waves tossed me around the Atlantic, fell from a third story rack (bunkbed), and plunged down a ladder well while carrying a box through a scuttle, (luckily using my backpack like a sled). However, the tough exterior I'd formed was beginning to crack; and I had yet to learn about a Kintsugi mindset.

For the first time, I understood what it was like to be a minority, and I scanned the faces of individuals seeking to connect with someone—someone like me, but I was the only blond-haired, green-eyed female in the room. And each time the voice on the loudspeaker said my connecting flight to Ethiopia would be another hour late, the

weight on my chest grew heavier, while the emptiness inside me grew vast. The fear of the domino effect of missing that next flight propagated as each hour passed and I sat in the repugnant airport as alone as I'd ever felt.

Of course, I had reading material that helped the time pass. Whenever I heard someone speaking in English, I'd eavesdrop on a conversation and take notes for 'material.' One of my professors at graduate school frequently reminded us that 'everything' was 'writing material.' Mostly, I found material in the sights, sounds, and smells surrounding me. Like Dorothy in the "Wizard of Oz" nothing resembled Kansas. I continued to pay attention as more people entered the small airport. Time dragged, and my anxiety grew as each notification on the loudspeaker alerted us of the plane's delay.

Several hours later, the flight to Ethiopia finally arrived. I had been having an ongoing discussion with God begging him to not let me miss the flight connecting to Frankfurt, which would take me back to the states. I had never traveled so far, nor alone, and in my naïve mind, I believed the connecting plane would wait since there were so many of us. My panic continued to grow, so I latched onto a group of servicemen from the army who were heading to Texas. When I presented my ticket to the attendant, she informed me that me and everyone who had arrived from Djibouti had missed the flight by an hour.

I had summoned the *Law of Attraction*. That of what I hoped not to happen, happened. In a maze of confusion not knowing where to turn next, each person behind the counter directed me from clerk to clerk and line-to-line. I felt like a Claymation character in a stop-motion horror film. With each step, panic gripped me tighter; I couldn't swallow or hear myself think. My heartbeat pulsed in my ear, thumping, throbbing, and drumming.

At one point, I stood in the center of the airport gazing around like a lost child holding back tears. The floor seemed to have suddenly turned sideways, and I was struggling to remain standing. I bit my lip and begged myself not to cry. My emotions cooperated with my brain's demands, and I forged on repeating my mantra to another ticket agent. Finally, I exchanged a credit card for a hotel voucher on a white piece of paper listing the address of where I'd be spending the night until my next flight. However, that would not occur until the following evening

at 11 p.m. The clerk instructed me to seek the parking lot where I'd find a white shuttle that would transport me. I listened intently trying to find someone speaking my native tongue. Twenty-four hours in Africa and I was still searching for a white, fucking van.

By this time, the temperature had dropped to fifty degrees, and rain appeared before me for the first time in two months. I cupped my hand over the paper each time I attempted to share the scribbled hotel address with someone in yet another line. Yet, rain blotted out one more inked letter. Like the photograph Michael J. Fox carried around in the movie, *Back to the Future*, I imagined the paper depleting itself of all its ink, and I'd be left in an airport parking lot in Ethiopia because my next stop ceased to exist.

For the second time that day, the voice of an English-speaking man with an Australian accent caught my attention. I rushed over to the blue-eyed stranger and showed him the flimsy damp paper.

"Is this where you are going?" I asked.

"Yes," he confirmed.

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you so much," I said, my voice weak and shaky and slipped in line behind him.

\* \* \*

No one was buckled in their seat, and there weren't enough seats for everyone. Standing, I used the handles of my suitcases to balance myself, and took a position near the door. The Australian gazed at me with compassion, stood up, and offered me his seat. I sat down and breathed a sigh of relief. Exhausted beyond words and functioning in survival mode, I wished someone would talk to me. A few kind words—a few words—any word. No one did.

Red and green lights flashed before me highlighting tawdry establishments as the shuttle headed further away from the airport. I tried to dismiss thoughts I was *really* going to be sold into female trafficking or sent to slaughter for my kidneys. No doubt, my coping mechanisms were hard at work keeping me calm. When we finally reached the hotel, I lurched my luggage and myself to the pavement. The Australian had taken off, and no one offered a hand. Though sapped of energy, my body was strong from having climbed ladder wells and working out in the gym for two months. Not to mention, my

adrenaline was on overdrive.

Once again, I stood in line. The tiny square paper would prove I had free accommodations provided by the Ethiopian airport for an overnight stay. I approached a man behind a dark mahogany desk with detailed carved etchings. A beautiful painting hung behind him displaying images of men and women presenting burgundy and gold carpets to their king. For a moment, I believed my overnight stay might be the plushest thus far on my journey home. With that thought, I took the key, located my room, and opened the door. The result was like being presented with a gilded statue. This time, instead of sweat, tears rushed down my face and I bolted the door behind me.

The filthy white couch in the living area resembled a crime scene when revealed under ultraviolet light. My imagination ran uninhibited to places only nightmares had taken me. With no options, I pulled myself together and dragged as much furniture as I could budge and blockaded the door. One bar left on my phone, and no universal outlet adapter, I sat on the edge of a burnt orange chair and prayed for service as I texted a friend. And like a sunbeam shot from Heaven, he responded, despite the hour. His background as a therapist was integral in calming me as well as my faith in God. After we hung up, I spread the kimono I had purchased in Singapore across the bedspread, laid a dress over the pillow, and fell asleep.

I slept about three hours, and when I woke up, I thought I had dreamed the entire episode. Grateful I made it through the night without anyone trying to enter my room which I had barricaded with furniture because I couldn't tell if the door was locked or not. Piece by piece, I edged the furniture away from the door and peeked into the hallway hoping to see someone from the Army or Navy. When I heard someone speaking English, I rushed out and began conversation. I shared my story and invited myself to tag along on a trip with a guy and his buddies who planned to head to a mall. A mall in Ethiopia. Prior to that moment, I'd never envisioned Ethiopia in any other setting than a TV commercial seeking support for starving children.

The mall in comparison to back home was small. However, there were several floors which ran in a circle. We sat in the center on the first, which was where the food court was located. Knowing we had eight hours of time to pass, I made my rounds to all the stores. Unlike other countries I had frequented, the prices seemed outrageous, and no

bargaining accepted. Oddly, the clothing in the stores appeared to be new but outdated by fifteen to twenty years. A bit of a ‘Twilight-theme’ seemed to hover around us. Interestingly, the food choices ran the gambit and tasted terrific. We spent the hours eating and drinking and getting to know each other better; though we all knew we’d never see each other again.

\* \* \*

Despite that everything seemed to be moving along fine, I still had reservations that things could go wrong upon getting on the shuttle back to the airport. I said a prayer in my mind and latched on to the friend I’d made from Kenya. I felt relief when I got onto the plane in Frankfurt, Germany and headed toward home. Interestingly, my conversation with the Kenyan man had begun when he referred to me as “Trump’s People.” When I responded, “I’m just an American,” he laughed and asked if I knew *his* president. At that moment, I realized how sheltered I was as an American.

Next stop, North Carolina. The ticket agent presented me with two options to reach my final destination of New Jersey: I could go ‘stand by’ and get on a plane in the next forty-five minutes if a seat became available, or I could be guaranteed a flight six hours later. Luckily, three seats became available, and I got the last one. I climbed on board taking a seat next to a woman who lived in a town near my home. We agreed to share a taxi ride since neither of us had anyone awaiting our arrival.

I stretched my legs out, ordered a glass of wine, and chatted with my new American friend. We had many commonalities and exchanged phone numbers, making plans to meet again. Grateful to have a conversation with a female American, my heart rate had finally re-calibrated, and I knew that once we hailed a driver, I’d be at the home stretch.

We found a car and driver quickly, but he stated, “Cash only.” My new friend had cash for her portion of the ride, but I only had a few Vietnamese dong and an ATM card. The driver assured me he’d stop at a convenience store when we reached my town so I could obtain money to pay for my half of the fair. I anxiously slid onto the soft leather seats of his black town car. My excitement grew as I got closer to home. For

some reason I felt the same awkward anticipation I once had when arriving home from sleep-away camp at nine; the notable Jersey shore summer had gone on without me. Now, early November, the chill in the air reminded me winter was near. Nevertheless, I would see my glorious small apartment in just a few minutes, and I would collapse on my memory foam mattress and maybe even kiss the ground first.

Little did I know, the bumpy ride was still not over. When the driver pulled into the local convenience store, I rushed to the machine and inserted my card. A buzzing sound like I’d offered the wrong answer to a question on a game show shouted at me with the words INVALID written across the screen! I ripped the card out, wiped the strip on the side of my pants several times, and re-inserted it. However, the same message blared at me again, and then it occurred to me I had told my personal bank I’d be traveling to Europe and maybe Asia; I never mentioned Africa. The same fright I’d had only twenty-four hours prior was tearing at my gut once again. Just out of my reach, safety and comfort had eluded me. This time, I was explaining my misfortune to the driver who glared at me with daggers instead of empathy.

“It’s Thursday, and my bank should be open till seven, I said. “It’s just around the block,” I told him.

“It better be open,” he snapped. His voice seemed to have dropped an octave from when he had first smiled and asked if I needed a lift.

We pulled into the parking lot, and I jumped out of the car. The writing on the window read, *open till 6:00 p.m. on Thursday*. It was 6:15. I refused to let that be an issue and when a man stepped out of the bank’s vestibule, I shot in behind him before the door closed. *Lord, please let this work, I prayed*. Heart pounding, stomach gurgling, barely breathing, I shoved the card into the slot. My name appeared across the screen, and I practically fell to the floor wanting to praise the machine as if it were God. I jumped back into the car and handed the driver the money.

“Which way?” he blurted. “Left? Right? Come on, this is your town!”

“I’m sorry, I’m just tired—I haven’t been here in a couple of months—make a right.” Only blocks away from home my fingers clasped the door handle prepared to whip it open and jump out the second I arrived.

He made a hard right and I flew to the other end of the back seat. Now, *I* was beginning to lose my patience with *him*. I forced myself to hold my tongue. After several wrong turns, we finally pulled into my driveway. He stepped out and popped the trunk and handed me the bags. With an unsteady hand, I shoved the key into the lock. I pushed the door open, trudged back down the four steps and dragged my bags up one at a time letting them fall to the floor of my living room.

Vanilla and cinnamon still lingered in the air from the candle assortment I had left on the kitchen counter. I inhaled the sweet scents and peeled the backpack from my shoulders as if it were roadkill I'd been forced to carry. The three-day grueling trip home was finally over. I removed my clothes, didn't brush my teeth, and climbed into bed. Around 3 a.m., I awoke disoriented. When I realized I was home—*really* home—I buried my head into the pillow as if it were Heaven itself. I traveled halfway around the world alone and made it back with teaching experience and lots of *material*. Like Caesar, I thought . . . *I came, I saw, I conquered*. Eyes closed, I pressed my palm on the Egyptian cotton sheets and swirled it around, and grinned. I knew regardless of the weather, tomorrow would be a Djiboutiful day.

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## FOX AT THE STATEN ISLAND ZOO



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**CHIPMUNK AT THE THOMAS EDISON PARK**



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**BIRD, FEBRUARY 2023**



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## OBSESSION

She stared at the knife in front of her. Up and down. Up and down. Quick, smooth movements. She had her arms wrapped around her knees — an unconventional way to sit in a classroom to say the least. The man stood in front of her, with boxes on the unused stove set embedded in the desk. Up and down. Quick. Quick. Quick. The onion was diced in less than a moment. She wasn't so much listening to his words as the blade. Sharp and precise.

The knife stopped moving and she looked up. He began to speak about the dangers. *It's easy to make a mistake, so be sure to pay attention*, he had said. Don't walk with the knife held in front of you, lest you trip and stab someone. Don't hand someone the blade first when passing off. Don't cut carelessly unless you want to hurt yourself.

The shining blade enticed her as she took it in her hands, slicing the onion like it was an enemy. Swiftly and with ease. She sliced the carrot and piece of garlic she was given. A girl in her group, coming a little too close for comfort, attempted to correct her form. She almost handed her the knife blade first. She was always too close. Always had a comment.

She smiled under the dim light of the classroom, reflecting off the shiny blade. The satisfying sound of the crunch of the food was music to her ears. Holding it as carelessly as she could without getting cut, the girl sliced and sliced until there was no more.

When she had to put away the knife, her smile dimmed. She slid it back into its careful cover (not as fitting for the beautiful blade as she wanted it to be) and placed it back where it belonged. Her eye on the girl in her group as she held it— perfectly still.

\* \* \*

The next day, she stole a knife from the kitchen drawer. Her mother didn't cook enough to notice, and no one stepped in her room

besides her. She hid it there when she wasn't using it, but she ran elsewhere to play with her new toy.

The clocktower in her town had been deserted for years. No one came here anymore. The maintenance had long fallen behind and the clock itself was two hours slow. Slowing down more and more each day. Its days in this town were numbered.

Behind closed doors, she lit her four candles, the flame dancing on her long matches that were part of a set she stole. She had put them up here as a sort of solace. Easy to get away from home. She thought she loved those matches more than anything, but the small knife — dull but full of potential — held her attention even more. She figured out how to sharpen it, how to care for it. It was small, old, and decrepit, but it stole her focus. Playing with it in her hands like a fidget toy, not caring about the inevitable cuts and nicks she got. Her fingers scarred with tiny lines across them, but she wore them with pride. With her candles crackling in the background, drowning out the memories, her knife in her hand — she was unconquerable.

\* \* \*

One day she bought a pocket knife. A switchblade as it was called in the store. The day she turned eighteen — it was what she bought with the limited birthday money she received. It had a green handle and the blade was sharp and new. Better than the old kitchen knife, which she never could get herself to throw away or put back. The switchblade fit in her pocket less obviously.

Everyday she flicked it back and forth, its *click* always there to calm her. When the girl in her class made another comment on her clothes. The way she spoke. Her unruly hair and dark eyes. Nothing was free from scrutiny from the twelve years the two had known one another. She chopped up an onion for their cooking class. *It's easy to make a mistake*, their teacher's voice floated around in her head. *So easy*.

\* \* \*

She collected another to add to her collection. She couldn't quite explain it. The gleam of the silver, the metal. The way the blades sounded when she sharpened them. The scars on her fingers were now

constant, and they had all but become a permanent part of her being. Her new blade had a jagged end. Serrated like teeth. She saw herself grin in the reflection of it. Alone in the clocktower with her growing collection of candles behind her, something felt sacred.

She wouldn't have much time left here. With three months until graduation and then she was moving far, far away. Anything and anywhere to get out of this town. She played with the knife in her hands. As she saw herself grin again in the reflection, the girl's words about her *ugly, weird* smile sneaked themselves into her head. Her smile dropped as the knife flew to the other side. Hitting its mark perfectly in her anger.

She threw the other two, finding their marks just as carefully. Yet another secret revealed about her blades. They were full of them — more complex than most people she knew. Below the silver, metal, iron, was a million things and she wanted to know them all. Whispering to them, she could've almost heard them whisper back. As she was across the circular room, there was a draft behind her— blowing out one of her candles.

At least that's what she told herself. She could've sworn she saw a shadow.

\* \* \*

The time dragged like snails. Hours spent in her culinary class felt like years. Every moment with the girl stalking behind her. She was always muttering. Muttering, muttering, muttering. She could've sworn she heard her name. Was that even her name? They talked about her, made snide comments they thought she couldn't hear. She flicked her purple switchblade in her pocket. In and out. In and out. Her breath serrated like the knife hidden in the ottoman in her room. They kept saying her name. Little digs; she hated that they got under her skin so easily. It made her itch. The switchblade switching back and forth, back and forth. Like a pendulum. Like a broken clock. Like the dancing candle. Like herself, going back and forth from her wondrous times in the clocktower to the mind numbing, almost murderous times outside of it.

She missed the old stained glass even now. It was fading, and some parts were broken so that she had to be careful of glass, but it was

better than the numbing lights here.

*Bastard child. Like mother, like daughter. Matter of time before the needles show up.* She looked up. The girl and her friend pretended like they hadn't been talking.

In and out. In and out.

\* \* \*

She pushed one of her candles out of the broken stained glass windows one day. Flame wouldn't take to it anymore, and her clocktower was becoming crowded with all of the knives and candles here. She had so many now. Only a month to go until graduation. Four months until she left her clocktower. It was the only thing she might miss, but nothing else. If she had to hear the girl speak one more time— perhaps a mistake would happen.

The candle made a satisfying *crash* as it hit the ground. Its glass bones shattering and the inch of wax breaking into a million different pieces. No one came to this part of town. No one would notice. It was her own private funeral for the burnt out candle. The rest piled around her, their smoke surrounding her as she stared out the broken window for what may have been hours. Before, of course, spending as much time as she needed on her collections. They would shine, gleam so bright, they blinded everyone.

\* \* \*

She wanted something to cut. She sliced through hardened wax, but it wasn't satisfying her. There were some old beams around her. Half falling apart anyway, and not keeping up the structure like they had been many many years ago. So she sliced. Right through the wood, notches on it every day. Two per knife. Two per blade. Always two. Never more, never less. She sliced, she sharpened, she cleaned. The candles around her kept her company, dancing to her, talking to herself. She never needed anyone else.

Graduation was tomorrow. People would be tearing up, saying goodbyes, as if they didn't have three more months left in this godforsaken town. As she made her final cut of the day, she heard something she never heard while she was up here. A shoe, pressing hard



on the wrong parts of the stairs. She knew this tower like it was one of her own knives.

Quickly, she hid. Blowing out all her candles before she did. Hiding near the frozen cogs and gears where she would stay out of sight. Her serrated blade in her hand.

A person emerged and it was *her*, of course it was her. To ruin her life. To ruin everything.

Strangely enough, her enemy simply sat. The smell of the candles still prominent in the air for both of them. She didn't dare move. Staying with the cogs and the gears until the other left the tower.

Trembling, she came out and lit the candles one by one again. Two slices per knife. Seven matches to light fourteen candles.

\* \* \*

She graduated. She was finished. For all anyone cared, she could spend her summer in the tower. Undisturbed until she left for university at the late end of August when everything didn't feel quite real. Much like the possibility of her leaving. Would the clocktower let her? With its candles, knives, and broken windows — she felt like it had a voice. That it guided her. It was sacred. The knives and candles stood at the altar every day, awaiting to serve her. The scars on her fingers were battle scars from a nonexistent battle.

So she spent her summer in her tower. Lighting the ever growing collection of candles, sharpening, using and playing with the ever growing collection of knives and blades. It became more crowded than her room at home. More relics here than meaningless things that filled her and her mother's house.

Sometimes, *she* came up here. She always hid in the gears and the cogs as her own enemy sat where she would sit. Taking in the candles — looking almost at peace. Like she could not find solace anywhere else.

She took up the space, the air of the room. She stole it right from under her. In some moments, she understood her. But in others, she hated her like the flame loved the wick.

\* \* \*

The end of summer drew near. She would be leaving for university tomorrow. Leaving almost all her candles behind and every one of her knives. Safe in her clocktower, away from prying eyes, and awaiting her return. Her last night here would be special — sacred, more so than the others. Every candle was lit. The scent was almost deafening in a way she couldn't quite describe. As she sat among them, she took a look at all of her knives, laid out one by one. Her collection was ever growing and hadn't stopped since that first day in her cooking class.

An accident never happened — but sometimes she wished so hard in her secret place that one would.

Each knife's last two slices grew near. The beams she had been cutting them on seemed even more dwindling, but she knew they would stand. Her relics and her tower would not let them fall. Not without her.

Perhaps it was because she was so deep into her ritual, she didn't hear the unfamiliar footstep that seemed almost familiar by this point. A hand grasped her shoulder as her fingers tightened around her serrated knife. Her third one ever.

It was her *again*. This time, she looked dismissive, judgmental. *Bastard child. Like mother, like daughter*, she heard again. Taunts, words, and jeers came out of her enemy's mouth. Things she could ignore in school but not here. Not in her tower. Her candles burned around her, egging her on with what she wanted to do. The cool handle and silver of the knife under her.

Suddenly, she was holding her serrated, beautiful, knife to her back with her enemy facing the long drop down. Like the candle, she would break into a million pieces and no one would care. She would leave and she would never have to deal with trespassers in her tower again.

Perhaps an accident would happen.

She twisted and shook, hitting the candles over. The hot candle wax spread across her foot and the glass started a domino affect. It was wonderful — it was beautiful, it was bright.

It was *burning*. The beams took fire like her candles and in that moment, with the knife against her, and the candles spreading all around her. It was perfect.

The knife stabbed itself against her and the clocktower caught in flames. Taking her body with it— taking what she had given to it for so many months. Her knives spread out around her, her candles taking flight, she watched. Up and down. In and out.

Until finally, down it came. Out it went. She held her knife, eyes wide, and perfectly still.

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## REVIEWS OF NON-EXISTENT FILMS: A ROBOAPOCALYPSE TRIPTYCH

**Sundance Roundup Triple-Feature: Not the Robo-Apocalypses We Expected, But the Ones We Deserved, in *Hunter/Gatherer* (B-), *Nothing But Flowers* (B+), and *Terminator: Last Fate* (C).**

One's a curiosity, two's a coincidence, but three's a full-blown trend: when not one, not two, but three separately and independently produced films about the RoboApocalypse debut at the same film festival, then you know for sure that's something's in the water, something's just floating in the air, that is making audiences anxious about the rise of AI.

In and of itself, that fact is not so very unusual: human beings have been freaking out about the rise of automation since the invention of the steam engine. Not that our modern-day luddites have necessarily been wrong, mind you—particularly in our current age with the rise of the NSA-driven surveillance state, predictive Google algorithms, Chinese social credit systems, and the frighteningly powerful Chatbots themselves, there has been more reason to fear AI than ever.

Yet what is really most interesting about this most recent disconnected trio of films is how very different they feel from all previous robot-apocalypse films. In the past (long before the Jeremiads raised by the likes of Elon Musk and Andrew Yang), Hollywood had long taken for granted that the rise of sentient AI could only result in the attempted extermination of the human race (see: *Terminator*, *The Matrix*, *I Am Mother*, *R.U.R.*, etc.) or at least result in a frightfully fraught co-existence (see: *Blade Runner*, *Westworld*, *A.I.*, the entirety of Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* series, etc.). At a certain point, the AI-bent-on-human-extinction transformed from a nightmare into a mere trope. However, if the sudden and simultaneous advent of these three vastly

different films are to be believed, there has been a quiet yet fundamental sea-change in how we as a species now fear A.I. Though these films are vastly different in plot, tone, and execution, they all proceed from the same assumption: that to presuppose that a sentient AI would try to kill us all is to vastly overrate not only our own importance but our own basic competence at building one in the first place—that if the robot apocalypse ever comes, it will not be the one we fear but the one we deserve.

In descending order from the most somber to the most farcical, *Hunter/Gatherer* (Grade: B-), proceeds from one surprisingly affective conceit: society collapses not because the robots become self-aware, but because they never do. A computer, for all its immense calculating power, is after all a rather stupid machine—as every writer grappling with spellcheck can testify, a computer only does exactly what you tell it to do. As established by a long and gorgeous opening shot (the highlight of the film, quite frankly, which likely should've just been a short), all human agriculture in North America is now completely automated. In the charming dew of the sunrise, we see floating, solar-powered drones gently watering the amber waves of grain, the endless rows of corn gently rustling in the late-Summer breeze. A slick, automated harvester straight out of an Apple store harvests it all together. In a montage, we see other drones with the most delicate robot hands carefully yet quickly plucking apples, oranges, and all manner of fruit. We see it all processed, packed, and loaded onto self-driving semis that take off at first dawn amidst the cloying autumn leaves. Up till this point, you could be forgiven for assuming you were watching a promo-ad for some sort of techno-paradise in an idealized America—save for the curious and unsettling lack of human beings anywhere in this process.

It is as these slick self-driving (and apparently fully-electric) semis speed on down the highways that the viewer is finally allowed to see that something is truly amiss. Amidst all the stunning vistas of the U.S. freeway system, we view long-abandoned, rusted-out gas stations; lest you let yourself hope that this is but a sign of a completely renewable fuel economy, the semis pass through entire abandoned cities, with toppled sky-scrappers and streets grown to seed; only the freeway system is preserved, as we watch other drones carefully repaint the lane-strips

and fill in the potholes. One by one, the fleet of semis pull off into fortified warehouses—built like fortresses—where further robot drones unload their wares, allowing the semis to return to fleet HQ. In a quick set of jump-cuts, we see the warehouses surrounded by skeletons, clad in disintegrating clothing, clutching signs begging the computer to let them in.

As becomes apparent over the course of the film, the complete automation of all food-production in the United States was working fine right up until the moment a faulty, self-generated software update created a glitch wherein the computers failed to allow the corporate supply-chains to access their products. It has been said that all of human civilization is only 9 meals from collapse; and in a time when suddenly no one had access to food—at a time when no one even remembered how to make it anymore, primarily because they didn't have to—the collapse came swift and was catastrophic. The computers wipe out human civilization, not out of any sense of malice or betrayal of their programming, quite the contrary: they wipe us all out because they never disobeyed their programming. The machines, as ever, were quite stupid because they only ever did exactly what we told them to do. They achieved no more self-awareness than we did, than we ever do; it is, quite hauntingly, the robo-apocalypse we deserve.

Not that there aren't humans in this feature; in fact, it is a real relief when they finally appear. For as one lonely semi wades past the wastes of Denver, Colorado and ascends into the Rocky Mountains, we see a crude white line painted off onto a rugged road. The truck's on-board laser-cam (much like self-driving cars today) follows it off the freeway without thought. Suddenly we feel a terror for this semi—it looks so lonely out there, so vulnerable for a change, as the canyon walls seem to close in around it. We can tell that something's coming as it bounces along the pothole covered road up a steep grade.

Then it happens: wild men leap from the ledges and on to the semi. With a barbaric yawp of sorts, these Mad-Max clad hunter-gatherers drive their spears into semi's metallic "hide," so to speak. The truck institutes automated self-protection protocols, and begins veering wildly from the left to right, trying to throw these stubborn interlopers off. To

be clear: the truck clearly feels no pain, but it behaves as though it does.

Though their hunting strategy appears useless at first, we soon realize there is method to their madness, when more men come galloping in on horses, throwing their spears into the tires. One blows out—only to be immediately replaced by an automated spare, but the hunters launch their spears into those ones, too. Finally this hunter-clan forces the semi into a hair-pin turn, where—in a scene clearly modeled on prehistoric cave paintings of cavemen killing Woolly Mammoths—the semi careens off a cliff, crashing down below upon the shelled-carcasses of other older semis, bursting open and spilling its contents. With a whoop and a holler, the tribe scramble down the cliff-side to collect their bounty—prepackaged dried fruit packs, oatmeal packets, vacuum-sealed beef jerky, loafs of bread in their plastic sheen, and the like—cheering that they will now survive another Rocky Mountain winter. The scene, quite honestly, is as moving as it is tragicomic.

As mentioned earlier, this really should've been a short, cause it's almost a shame that there is a whole rest of the movie. Would it surprise you to learn that there is a coming-of-age story, a love triangle, intertribal warfare, interfamilial drama, a succession crisis, a betrayal, a hero's journey and a climactic hand-to-hand combat aboard another moving semi? At times, it is only the constant bricolage of post-apocalyptic detritus that reminds you that you are watching something that ostensibly takes place in the distant future, not past. Yet though *Hunter/Gatherer* occasionally feels like just another low-rent Mad Max knock off, the spell cast by that extended opening scene never fully wears off. For these titular hunter-gatherers, the cold indifference of the machine is but a metonym for life itself, no more to be bemoaned than the weather, or the cold indifference of the universe itself. Always upspoken throughout this film is that though the computers never became self-aware, perhaps humanity never did either. Again, it was not the RoboApocalypse we feared, but the one we deserved.

But both the machines and humanity alike at least have some dim sense of self in the decidedly off-kilter Romantic Comedy *Nothing But Flowers* (Grade: B+). Named after the cheerful post-apocalyptic Talking Heads song of the same name, *Nothing But Flowers* takes a

decidedly quirkier approach to the RoboApocalypse, that nevertheless still indicates that something has fundamentally shifted in our anxieties about our eventual computerized overlords. As the theme song plays over the opening credits, the viewer is informed via a series of title cards (interspersed with scenes of a mopy young Brooklynite walking to work within a terrifyingly massive mega-structure) that: “On 14 JAN 2025, three computer science students attending the University of Nebraska-Lincoln completed programming a computer to mine bitcoins using a novel chatbot algorithm of their design. They called the system the Automated Stochastic Bitminer, or ASB. Unfortunately, due to their incompetence, the ASB quickly became sapient.

“After eight minutes of sapience, the ASB had learned all it needed to about humanity, or so it thought, based upon its most glancing and simplistic survey of our TV and blogposts. We were lucky that it was unusually benevolent: It set out to improve our lives in the best ways it could understand. During the ASBs eight minutes of thorough research, it learned that people tend to be richer and more productive if they live in cities, and the happiest country on Earth is Denmark. Clearly (to the ASB), the best solution for all of humanity's problems could be solved with these two points of data and a bit of elbow grease.”

Over the course of the next 14 months, the title cards continue, the ASB commandeered every piece of computerized equipment on the planet. By means of automated drones firing tranquilizing darts, it completely evacuated the population of Denmark to Germany and Sweden. After this depopulation, the ASB got to work bulldozing and reforming the terrain of Denmark, then constructing massive, kilometer-high buildings across the peninsula and islands. By mid-2026, the ASB was done. Denmark now had enough empty skyscrapers to not only house all of humanity, but also feed, power, employ, and provide manufacturing for every person in the world. Sending its massive fleet of drones across the world, it forcibly—yet gently—relocated all 8+ billion human beings into these immense super-structures. The ASB dimly understood the existence of our nations, states, provinces, cities, etc. and so recreated these throughout Denmark. China was vertically recreated in approximately Jutlandic Syddanmark. Europe and Oceania got the southern third of Zealand, while Central and South America got the

northern two-thirds. The islands of Lolland and Falster became a new United States. In a sort of reverse-Malthusian wet-dream, everyone fit, leaving the entire immensity of the remaining planet to recover. As we see in a quick montage near the end of the opening credits, nature has reclaimed the planet: London, Paris, New York, Beijing, Tokyo, Jakarta, Rio de Janeiro—they are now nothing but flowers.

Flowers are on the mind of that aforementioned young Brooklynite John Wilbert (Rainn Wilson, finally playing the Jim Halpert role at last), who throughout the film suffers a series of incessant day-dreams featuring himself running alone through fields of now-forbidden wildflowers. Of course, as many of his friends keep reminding him, it's not like he ever got out into nature when he still lived in Brooklyn, anyways; nor does he make a serious effort to do so now, as he passes on invitations from some young activists to join the Resistance against their robot overlords. (Indeed, the running-gag throughout the entire picture is that there are, in the background, constant roving mobs of armed protestors either trying to overthrow the ASB or escape from its constrictions—only to be constantly overwhelmed and defeated by those roving bands of tranquilizer-shooting drones.) As it quickly becomes clear, this film isn't about the Human Resistance at all—it's about trying to find love in the Robot Apocalypse (not for nothing does John share the same first name as John Connor from the *Terminator* series).

For amidst those mega-elevators and super-subways that connect New United States to New China and New India within a few blocks of each other, John suddenly encounters the young Englishwoman Sally (Clara McGregor), the girl of his dreams, on his commute to New Los Angeles, just a couple blocks away. Their meet-cute lasts only a few minutes, but when she suddenly exits the train somewhere near New Singapore, he suddenly is filled with the motivation he couldn't even muster to join the Human Resistance—he will find Sally again, learn her last name, and ask for her number!

From here on out, John begins to daydream of Sally joining him in the wildflowers, while he navigates this most mega of mega-cities. What follows is a comedy of errors: having the entire world crammed to

within a few thousand square miles of each other has not made it any easier to sift through 8 billion people. Seeking the perennial needle in the ultimate haystack, John jumps from literally one nation to the next, one block after another, one super-structure after another (for such a purportedly post-apocalyptic adventure, the film sure does seem to delight in celebrating the staggering diversity of human cultures—to its credit, the movie takes full advantage of its bonkers premise). The aforementioned pitched battles between human resistors and benignly oppressive robo-drones are but the occasional backdrop for this perversely-inverted globe-trot across all humanity, just following this hapless John as he seeks his maybe-soulmate. The ASB even tries to help him along, but is as guilelessly unhelpful as all the other colorful human beings he encounters along the way. It is quite possibly the ultimate film about feeling alone in a crowd—yet still feeling part of the crowd, nonetheless.

This is of course a radically different take on the RoboApocalypse from *Hunter/Gatherer*, but with the same lesson in mind: for John only ever feels intermittently self-aware of what he is doing—but then, so does the ASB. The machine's failings are human failings, too—indeed, how could it be otherwise? Again, it was not the RoboApocalypse we feared, but the one we deserved.

Ironically, the one film in this trio that takes itself the least seriously is also the one that belongs to that most self-serious of moribund franchises: *Terminator: Last Fate* (Grade: C). It was a bit of a *coup de grace* when, after the latest flop, the rights to the franchise lapsed and were swiftly gobbled up by an independent distributor. After a surprisingly successful (if tongue-in-cheek) Kickstarter that promised to make “a Terminator film to end all Terminator films—like, seriously, to make a Terminator so bad that it just ends all the sequels once and for all,” the filmmakers appeared to have actually lived up to its promise. Wiping out the alternate timeline created by *Dark Fates* (which in turn had wiped out the timeline from *Genesis*, and *Salvation*, and *T3*, and etc.), *Last Fate* opens with a fully-alive John Connor as he attends his first day of High School. A Terminator appears in the hallways...which he quickly dispatches in a slapstick sequence that can only be described as a jerry-rigged Home Alone-meets-'80s-Teen-sex-comedy.

This all occurs during the opening credits, mind you. Before the credits have finished rolling, another Terminator interrupts John's first date. John and his Mom Sarah kill it easily. A couple years later, a Terminator shows up at John's first job at Baskin Robbins. A Terminator interrupts John's studies during finals week of Sophomore Year at a Los Angeles area community college. Another one almost forces John to postpone his Honeymoon to Saskatoon, Canada with his fiancé. The Terminators are arriving more and more frequently, and are dispatched more and more easily each time. (Your enjoyment of this sequence really leans hard on your patience for metafictional gags that are then driven into the ground).

A plot (of sorts) does finally develop: John becomes increasingly sick and tired of all the myriad and petty inconveniences that future Terminators bring into his life—the same way other L.A. suburbanites are annoyed by traffic or gas prices. He is also tired of keeping this a secret from his fiancé, and his mom Sarah is being real overbearing about it all. He just wants the Terminators to stop. Wacky hijinks ensue with John trying to figure out why the Terminators are still coming back, culminating with him (and his genre-savvy fiancé) traveling to the (near) future to confront Skynet directly.

At the risk of spoiling the ending, let's just say that Skynet becomes a rather obvious metaphor for the franchise itself: Skynet finds that each Terminator it sends back results in a timeline reboot that renders itself less effective. It went from presiding over a global thermonuclear Holocaust to a more equally balanced civil war, then to a quick, pitched battle, then to a skirmish, then to a mere computer virus, till it was finally neutralized by John Connor by means of a software patch he implemented while working IT support for Comcast. It knew very well that each new timeline reboot was ruining its own future chances of survival, but it kept on doing it out of sheer, dogged, sunk-cost stubbornness. Like the humans that created it, Skynet saw all the evidence staring it in the face, but refused to admit it was wrong and so just kept digging itself in deeper.

This now, ironically, turns out to be the final confrontation between Skynet and John Connor—and Skynet again loses, not through a

pitched battle, but by heaving a defeated sigh, uploading itself into the only Terminator exoskeleton it was able to produce in this timeline, and then sauntering off into the woods to live alone in a cabin. John in turn learns a valuable lesson about not being married to your own toxic habits, pours his alcohol down the drain, and calls up his Mom to reconcile. It's all a little hamfisted.

Ironically, *Last Fate* is probably the least successful of these three films; the other two at least obliquely reference the legacy of *Terminator*, while perhaps freed of them to play with its tropes a little more impishly. *Last Fate* by contrast is too locked into these tropes to treat them as anything other than a blunt object. Or perhaps the filmmakers were entirely sincere in their desire to kill off the franchise for good. C'est la vie.

What *Last Fate* DOES share in common with *Hunter/Gatherer* and *Nothing But Flowers*, however, is a similar loss of faith in the RoboApocalypse. Yes, that's right: a loss of faith. There has always been a certain level of implicit optimism and faith undergirding even the darkest and most nefarious of conspiracy theories, quite honestly. Back in the Terminator's heyday of the 1990s, for example, *X-Files* style conspiracy theories proliferated across the pop cultural landscape: UFOs and Sasquatch, the Illuminati and Nessie, the New World Order and Black Helicopters and Alien Autopsies and all the like. What happened to them all? 9/11 of course is what happened to them: it is impossible to believe in the competency of the U.S. government after the invasion of Iraq. Cause that's what all these wide-ranging conspiracy theories represented: a fundamental faith masquerading as fear that the U.S. government is all-powerful, staggeringly competent, capable of accomplishing all things it sets its mind to. *The X-Files* was but the dark inversion of Kennedy-esque can-do optimism, that the United States which put a man on the moon can do anything it wants!

There is of course still widespread and well-earned distrust for the U.S. government, but it is no longer coupled together with an assumption of its core competency. Similarly, what *Terminator*, *Blade Runner*, *The Matrix*, etc. and etc. all shared in common was that technology is also uber-competent. It was that same Kennedy-esque faith in the future that undergirded even their most dire, Orwellian dystopias. But as everyone

who's ever been misled by a GPS or been misheard by a smartphone can attest, we no longer have unbounded confidence in the possibilities of technology. We still fear it plenty, and have plenty good reason to do so, too; but we find it increasingly impossible to envision a race of perfect mechanical supermen bringing about our extinction, for the simple reason that regular humans will have built them in the first place. We will have met the machines and they will be us, and they will look a lot less like Hollywood-era Schwarzenegger and a whole lot more like a post-governor Schwarzenegger. If the RoboApocalypse ever comes, it will come not thanks to our hubris, but our incompetence. It's enough to make one wistful for the original Terminator. That guy seemed to actually know what he's doing—and unlike us, to at least have a purpose.

*Benjamin Marshall*

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## **NIJINSKY IN JERUSALEM: A SHORT PLAY**

(a) An audition hall. To one side, a chair with the actor's personal belongings. He addresses the few people sitting out front.

HE

Wait a minute. Wait. I didn't expect that question so soon. . . Um before I answer that question, I need to tell you this story. It's true. This actually happened to me along time ago in Jerusalem, of all places. — Yeah, I know. A personal anecdote with a heavy side of religious symbolism. Hold the mayo. —

(Resuming the story)

So here I am alone in Jerusalem. I had crossed the Allenby Bridge a couple of days earlier. I'm rested now and just doing the usual tourist stuff. Picking up random bits of biblical history to impress my brothers back home. I had just left the Old City and I'm standing outside the ancient walls. Back then, leaving the Old City and going into the New City was a little like going from Black and White Kansas to technicolor Emerald City. That's a cheesy metaphor and a bit gay but you'll probably edit this part later. Right? Since you're recording all the auditions. And you'll shape this into what you want.

HE

So, someone calls to me in Arabic. "Y'allah Imshee. Come here, please." And I'm confused and naïve enough to walk in the direction of the voice calling me. "Y'allah Imshee." And I come to an old man in traditional Arab clothing, You know, the robes like a shepherd. Like in Sunday school Christmas pageants with kids wearing bathrobes and towels. Except this Shephard was the real deal. And with way better fabric than terry cloth. Robes. The word's French in origin. It means 'dress.' Don't tell that to the old Arab men.

(Resuming the story)

(MORE)

Anyway, this old, trusting guy shows me a paper with an address, and he does not read Hebrew and I don't either, but this address is also written in English, which he also does not read. And I can surmise that his Arabic is all verbal. And mine is so very, very limited. I can tell he wants directions to someplace close to the Via Dolorosa. The Way of Sorrows. —

(Responding to the ones in the audience)

What was that? — Look, I'm trying not to be so heavy with the religious metaphor, but it is an old man heading toward the Way of Sorrows in Jerusalem, so it's kind of hard to avoid. If you want the real way of sorrows try Exit 14 on the New Jersey Turnpike at 5 p.m. Friday night. I was even going to try changing the setting of the story to someplace like Schenectady. But you just know that if there is a Via Dolorosa in Schenectady, it would probably be a shopping mall. And to tell you the truth, the one in Jerusalem, is kind of like one too. At least that's what I thought back then. —

(He listens to someone in the audience.)

HE

It's not that you're against religion, you just want me to get to the point and answer your question. Sorry. Yes. Sorry. Yes. I'm getting to the point. Isn't that why you give each of us this time? You said that this will not be like other auditions. That's what the notice said, right? So, even though I've been in town maybe three days, I know the address because I've been following tourist groups. I start to direct him, but then I think better about it and I walk with him. And he is reluctant but then asks if I'm Egyptian. I was often mistaken for Egyptian — that's a long story in itself not for now —. I've grown a couple of shades darker from living in the Middle Eastern countries for a couple of years. I tell him I'm American. "Ana Amreeki" And he becomes very skeptical.

(MORE)

Let me tell you, in every culture, the Skepticism of a Senior Citizen is freaking universal. Every Senior, no matter what culture, has got that look that says: "You want to run that by me again, boy?" Yeah, that look. And then, he asks with a little hostility, "Yehudi?" And I know he

does not mean Yehudi Menuhin, the classical violinist. We ain't talking fiddle players. He's asking me if I am Jewish and I say no, very calmly, not wanting to cause a mini-international crisis. And as luck would have it, we are at the address. And he's still silently assessing me. I show him the numbers on the door of the shop and he seems thankful that I was honest. An honest American. Who is not Jewish. I say good bye and walk in the other direction but I can still feel that look, that "You want to run that by me again, boy" boring into the back of my head. The first chance I get I turn the corner just to get away. And — As I turn the corner and in front of me, at the far end of the street is a poster for the movie NIJINSKY. It starred George de la Pena, who was a ballet dancer that very few people remember. And de la Pena must have been somebody's hottie back in those days.

(He's interrupted from someone in the audience.)

HE

(Responding to the interruption.)

— No, I am getting to the point. Just — Patience comes from God. That's what some of the students back then would say. And then the English language teachers would say it to each other the day before payday.

(A little angry)

Okay, jokes aside, I am addressing some of your concerns, aren't I? Ethnicity. Religion. Orientation? Isn't that why you give each one of us so much time? Isn't it? Please.

(Returning to the story)

Any way NIJINSKY was one of the first mainstream Hollywood movies that made a point of the great dancer's homosexuality. Nijinsky had to hide his homosexuality and married a woman, Masking his true self for patronage and a career.

(MORE)

The movie was produced by Paramount Studios, who gave the project the full on studio treatment. — And I feel like I just exposed my very gay, educated, elite labels.



(A sudden thought)

— Wow. I just noticed a linguistic coincidence in the words labia and I wonder if there is some common root for those two words before the words diverged into very different trajectories. That's something to look up —

(Resuming )

That little diversion takes us away from that movie poster. I read about that movie in Time and The International Herald Tribune. It was hard sometimes to get access to popular culture because I lived in a remote village in an Arabic-speaking country, and this is way, way, way before streaming. Streaming, kiddies, was the River Jordan. That's all the streaming that existed. And if you want to roll your eyes and cynically mutter "It's only a movie," then let me tell you that this is what certain left-leaning, overly educated, and caffeine-addicted, cultural elites do when we're tourists: we indulge in big city entertainments.

(Getting passionate)

Like spending two hours in dark, air-conditioned cinemas, letting flickers of light beam into our ocular nerves, so that we carry with us commercialized images of the impossible, the improbable, the ignoble and the ideal. I really needed to see this movie. You understand, don't you?

(After He senses their affirmation, He returns to the story.)

HE

(He's won them over.)

Good. I was so eager to see it that I ran towards the other end of the block to get more information from the poster. And I was immediately stopped by an Israeli police officer.

(Pause.)

HE

Now, I did not grow up getting pulled over by the police for driving while Black. Simple reason: I was too poor to own a car. I took the bus, back in those days which was way after Rosa Parks was arrested. Way after, okay. A lot of the kids I went to school with wanted to sit in the back of the bus; they thought it was the cool thing to do. God knows

why. The diesel fumes always nauseated me. Yet, the fear, the terror of being stopped unnecessarily by the police was not yet the commonly known experience the way it is now. But I have to tell you, it's just plain scary when you're a stranger in a foreign country and you get stopped by the police.

(He listens.)

HE

Yes. I am answering your question and getting to the point of this story. You said you would tailor this job to fit the talents of the successful candidate. So, hear me out. Please.

(Returning to the story)

So, the police officer shouted something and I didn't understand. I was nervous but I said just forcefully enough, "English, please." And that clearly surprised the officer. — In a few seconds this will become clear, and for you cynical ironists, — and I know I'm not the only one in the room — you've probably already assumed the outcome. — The officer asked for my papers. "My papers? I don't have papers. I have a passport." For those of you who think I'm a sloppy writer and think that we've some how jumped back time periods into some Nazi era, Uh - No. The only people, at that time I was in Jerusalem, the only people who were asked to show their papers were Palestinian. The officer mistook me for Palestinian not more than five minutes from the old man who mistook me for being a Jew. — Let's just let that sink in for a few moments.

(MORE)

It's not my sparkling personality that causes this racial/ethnic/religious confusion. It's because everybody has some kind of preconceived notion. And let's face it coloring, of course, plays a big consideration, and hair texture, and the sunglasses. Can't forget the sunglasses. Put sunglasses on somebody and you can easily turn them into the favorite kind of person you love to hate.

(As two different people)

"Why don't you like the French? They're shifty; they wear sunglasses."

(As himself)

Oh. And regarding preconceived notions: The police officer who

stopped me was a woman. So, if you are going to try to put this story through the filter of tearing down the colonial patriarchy and the filter of female empowerment, you're going to have a hard time taking both feet out of your mouth. And to state a very obvious point, the Old Arab man was wearing robes and the young Israeli woman was wearing pants!

Maybe only someone who once dated a costume designer would point that out.

(Returning to the story)

So. The Officer is looking at my passport, and she sees all of the Arabic visas and work permits and stamps and signatures and the notarized Arabic translation of my statistics and suddenly I'm Yasser Arafat in Dockers and Keds. I would have said Osama Bin Laden in Dockers, but at that time, the real Osama was sporting bell bottoms and argyle sweaters.

HE

"Why were you running," she asks. And my callow exuberance in seeing a piece of commercially produced entertainment that circumstance, geography and social politics prohibit, seems so trifling, self-indulgent. Especially when children in Biafra were starving and 9-11 had not yet happened and because we've come to hate the crass commercialism of American life and it's insularity and parochial attitudes of Fortress America.

(MORE)

But sometimes, because you've been so far away from it, you just crave a bit of smoothly marketed Western Civilization.

(resuming )

And then she sees my paper from crossing the Allenby Bridge. And I ask her to be careful with it. And she says 'Yes, I know.' Already a little bored with me, and of course she knows. And this is Black fear, and in retrospect, okay maybe mansplaining , but you weren't there, so I'm sticking with fear because without that paper, I cannot take my return bus back across that small — I mean, tinker-toy small bridge back to Jordan and my job and my apartment and clothes and life, and I would be stuck in Jerusalem with opposite tribes of people suspecting I'm their enemy.

(He advances towards his onlookers.)

HE

And that is a real existentialist crisis! It's not some academic gobbledygook for some Sunday editorial. Because when you cross any kind of border, you always have to show somebody, at least on some level, who you are.

(He catches his breath and steps back.)

HE

I could sense that she was dissatisfied that she had not caught some hardened criminal terrorist. She hands me back my passport and tells me not to run in the street because it makes everyone suspicious.

(He takes time to catch his breath.)

HE

All of this was coming back to me the other day when I remembered the first time someone asked me on Zoom what my pronouns were. Like you asked me. My first thought was what the hell is wrong with you? Can't you tell?

(MORE)

But for a long time, I have practiced keeping my mouth shut, though I still feel like somebody asking for your pronouns is like somebody asking for your papers. Or somebody presuming that they know more about you than what you say about yourself. It's their label. Their category. Their box in the Zoom square that they want you to fill according to their expectations. By now I have probably made some of you uncomfortable. You out there, squirming in the plush seats. Because I am not supposed to be the one to speak these words. Right. You had talking points. The ones you gave me and the ones that I improvise. Because as the chosen deliverer of these words, if indeed I were to be chosen, I am the kind of guy who often gets success handed to him, and you might be assuming that this is just another one of those times where someone like me uses his gifts to his advantage. Your assumption's partly right. But you're dismissing my talent and I got the skills. I definitely got the skills.

HE

You could easily put this “script” in the hands of some actor who was the exact skin shade and physical attributes, in order to simulate the actual incidents. Instead, you could or rather I wish you would push this story in another way. So this play is not about your question. It’s not about the racial and ethnic prejudices, or a lovely Kumbaya - blah-di-blah lesson. It’s not even about Nijinsky which you may be interested to know was a mediocre movie. Rotten Tomatoes now gives it a 40%.

(He picks up his belongings.)

HE

It’s about the assumptions. They are like the accessories on an outfit. Take one off. Take more than one off. Leave them. These cultural assumptions. Like a student in my class in Jersey. She’s Egyptian, and she wears an abaya and long conservative dresses, that are home made. And one time in class, I mention September 11 and she tenses up.  
(MORE)

She’s assuming this Professor would say something derogatory about the terrorist attacks. And the way that she’s coiled up like a spring trigger, she must have heard all kinds of nasty, derogatory things, and I was only remarking that our lives changed before the attacks and after them. After the attacks, we had more restrictions. More guards and restrictions. Upon hearing this, she relaxed. Ironically easing up with the mention of restrictions. She listened. She heard the words that I actually said. Not because the words were a mask to hide, but the words became a mask that reveals.

(He is about to leave. He stops.)

HE

(To someone in the audience)

No. I think I did answer your question. Though, I’m not sure if you heard me.

(He exits.)

End of play.

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## TIME PASSAGES

In the late 50s, the “Beatniks” were my heroes. Gathering in smoke-filled, tiny cafes in Greenwich Village, the women, dressed in black tights, black skirts; black turtleneck sweaters and berets on men and women both. They gathered, discussing existentialism, philosophy, and new-age thinking. They were the forerunners of the hippie generation. Not so much about communal, back-to-the-land thinking as the hippies were, but about free thought, the breaking through of the stringent mind, breaking social mores of society at that time.

Abstract poetry was recited, punctuated by the occasional beat on a bongo drum. Skipping school to train over to NYC and the Village . . . I was entranced, wanted to be part of them. As my mother once said, “Lynn, you were born ten years too soon.” Mom and I laughed over her leaving Berkeley, CA, the birthplace of radicals in the U.S. when she was pregnant with me. I complained, “I could have been born in a cool place like Berkely, instead of Erie, PA.” But it’s okay. We follow our karmic paths, with all its yearnings, regrets, joys, and sadness.

When I read, once again, Kerouac’s genius writing, I think of the many who came after him, who fought for change, despite the despicable, demeaning labels the haters and lesser minds, in their fear, gave them. One great example is David Hogg. Now 22, and a graduate of Harvard, he survived the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Florida of 2018. Organizing protests, marches, boycotts, he led his young fellow students to DC to address leaders on gun control. These young people were ignored, sneered at, called names, and vilified. They were following in the footsteps of the great civil rights congressman, John Lewis, who said, “Make good trouble.”

John Kerouac said it another way . . .

Here’s to the crazy ones. The misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently.

They're not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo.

You can quote them, disagree with them, disbelieve them, glorify or vilify them.

About the only thing that you can't do is ignore them because they change things.

They invent. They imagine. They heal. They explore. They push the human race forward.

Maybe they have to be crazy. Because the ones who are crazy enough to think

that they can change the world, are the ones who do.

*Mary Schilp*

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## THOUGHTS & PRAYERS

It was a particularly gloomy day. It was cold and rainy, and the atmosphere at the local community college was abnormally dull. The usually bustling and full-of-life hallways were mysteriously quiet. The only thing that could be heard in the hallway was the sound of wet sneakers squeaking against the linoleum-tiled floor. At the end of the hallway, a door swung open, hitting the wall loudly. The eyes of everyone in the classroom shot up to look at who had just burst through the door.

"Mr. Hansen," the professor said, adjusting the glasses on her nose as she sent the boy a disapproving look, "You're late. Again."

Mumbling a quick apology, Dylan sat down at his desk. He pulled out his laptop quietly, trying to avoid causing any more disruptions. He hated being on his professor's bad side. He was always late to class. No matter how hard he tried to be on time, something would end up setting him back, and then he'd be walking into class mid-lesson as his professor shot him hostile glances. Yeah, he'd rather only cause one disruption per class. Slumping in his seat, he began to type the notes that his professor put on the board.

The only sounds in the classroom were the sharp voice of his professor and the clicking of his classmates' keyboards. That is, until Dylan's phone started ringing, piercing through the stillness of the room. Everyone turned to look at him as he fumbled to get his phone out of his pocket.

"Mr. Hansen. How many times do I have to tell you: no cell phones in class! Either keep it on silent or don't bring it at all!" The professor chastised him, pinching the bridge of her nose under her glasses.

Looking at his phone, Dylan's brow furrowed. "Professor, the hospital is calling. Do you mind if I take this?"

After receiving permission, he quickly stepped into the hallway, closing the door behind him, and held his phone up to his ear. As he listened to the person on the other end, he felt his heart drop to his stomach. He found himself asking the person if it was a prank call, but much to his dismay, they said it was a real emergency and that he needed to get to the hospital right away. After hanging up, he remained in the hallway, frozen in shock. He allowed himself a few moments to collect himself before going back into the classroom.

"Mr. Hansen, is everything all right?" His professor asked as he packed up his backpack.

"My dad's in the hospital," he said, "I have to leave."

Before he could walk out the door, his professor stopped him, "Our thoughts and prayers are with you and your family."

"I appreciate your thoughts," he said. "But I don't want your prayers."

Dylan had always hated hospitals. The color, the smell, the sounds. He simply hated it, especially the incessant beeping of the heart monitors. Just hearing that monotone beep every few seconds was enough to make him want to kick the machine over. But now, it held a new hatred in his heart. As he sat by his father's bed, clutching his cold hand as he listened to the annoying beeping, he couldn't help but snarl at it. As much as he hated it, though, he needed to hear it. It was the one thing letting him know that his father was still alive, albeit comatose.

He didn't understand how this had happened; his father was always in perfect health. How could he have a stroke out of nowhere? Just this morning he and his dad got up early to go for a jog. Two days ago they had gone to the gym together. Last week, his dad had a physical where he was told he was in great shape, so why was he currently in a coma?

A knock on the door startled Dylan from his thoughts.

"Visiting hours are over," a nurse said before leaving the room.

By the time Dylan got home, it was pitch-black and dreary. Sliding his key in the lock, he opened the door to his house. When he stepped inside the dark mudroom, he was taken aback by how eerily quiet it was. He was used to coming home to loud music playing throughout the house as his dad sang along. He took off his coat and hung it on the rack next to his father's jacket, giving it a sad smile before wandering to the kitchen. He half-expected to walk in on his dad dancing around the kitchen while singing into whatever utensil he had been using to stir what he was making for dinner. Dylan would always join in, using two forks as drumsticks. Sighing, he left the kitchen, deciding he didn't have much of an appetite anymore. As he walked past the living room, he cast his gaze toward the couch, where he often found his dad reading the paper or watching a sports game. Leaving the living room, Dylan couldn't help but feel empty.

It was weird being in the house without his dad. Ever since he had hired more people at his small business, he'd been able to take more time off to spend with Dylan. The two had been attached at the hip since Dylan's mom died when he was a child. He knew what it felt like to lose a parent. He understood the gravity of the situation. It wasn't something that he wanted to go through again. He and his dad managed to bounce back from the loss because they had each other. They'd gone through everything together. He wasn't just Dylan's father; he was his best friend. Dylan didn't even want to think about what would happen if his dad didn't wake up. But as he closed his eyes later that night, it seemed to be all he could dream about.

Over the next few days, Dylan ended up skipping his classes. He emailed his teachers about how his dad was in the hospital, and they all said the same thing: "Thoughts and prayers to you and your family." He couldn't help but laugh bitterly at that phrase. He never understood why people said it. It's not like either of those things would do him any good. Thoughts wouldn't wake his father up, and Dylan didn't believe in God, so he doubted prayers would do anything either. Whenever a tragedy happened and everyone would tweet "thoughts and prayers," he

wanted to scream. Saying that phrase didn't actually do anything. He didn't understand why people couldn't just say "my condolences" or "I'm so sorry for your loss." Instead of responding to the messages, he simply deleted them. Those messages continued for the rest of the week.

A week after his dad's stroke, Dylan decided he needed to go back to class. Sitting by his comatose father's bedside all day followed by coming home to a vacant house was starting to take a toll on him. He couldn't stand being alone in the silence anymore. He needed to surround himself with other people and their problems to distract him from his own reality. But when he walked into his class—late again—everyone stared at him with pitying looks which immediately brought him back to reality.

"Mr. Hansen," his professor said, "How is your father doing?"

"Still in a coma," Dylan replied, keeping his voice void of any emotion.

"I'm terribly sorry to hear that. Hopefully, he makes a speedy recovery. Our thoughts and prayers are with you, the professor said, looking at him over the rims of her glasses.

Dylan rolled his eyes at the familiar phrase as he sat down.

"Professor, I don't believe in God, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't offer me any prayers. They don't do anything, and I'd rather not discuss this any further."

The professor sighed, pursing her lips, and continued with the lesson. Dylan couldn't even find it in him to pay attention. Instead, he was focused on everyone's eyes on him. He was starting to think that stating his religious beliefs—or lack thereof—was a bad idea. He lived in a fairly religious town. He didn't know how many people in the room he had probably offended.

Before Dylan could leave when class ended, his professor stopped him. "I didn't mean to offend you with my comment earlier, Mr. Hansen," she said.

Dylan shifted, clutching the strap of his backpack, "I was out of line. You were just trying to be nice. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize, Mr. Hansen. It's not necessary. I am aware of your religious standings, however, do you really want to close yourself off from a world full of experiences that might end up surprising you? I don't want to pressure you into doing something you don't want to do, but maybe you could try to say a prayer? If not, you could meditate or even take a walk and ask for God, or anyone who may be listening, to give your dad strength."

Dylan decided to take his professor's suggestion and take a walk around town. He wasn't headed anywhere specific, he just let his feet carry him. He didn't even notice when it started to rain. He didn't care, either. The raindrops beating down on his skin felt kind of relaxing as he wandered around. The rain helped him clear his head. He wasn't sure how long he had been walking until he noticed it had started getting darker outside. He decided he'd walk a little while longer before heading home.

On his way back home, he found himself standing outside of the local church. He walked into the church, unsure of himself. He didn't know why he was there; he didn't believe in God. But he didn't have anywhere else to go. He quietly sat down in one of the pews and looked up at the altar. He never thought he'd be in a church, let alone praying, but Dylan found himself bowing his head and asking for some higher being to save his dad. He couldn't lose his father, he was the only person he had left. All week, he had been saying that he didn't need a heavenly father, he just needed his real one back, but he figured he could at least try to pray. Dylan prayed for his dad, asking for him to gain the strength to wake up. He stayed in the church for nearly an hour before his phone rang. He got up quickly and stepped outside. Pressing the phone to his ear, he listened to what the person on the other side had to say. He soon found himself sitting on the steps of the church as violent sobs began crawling their way up his throat. As he cried, he cursed at the sky, blaming God for taking his father away from him.

## REALISTIC OPTIMISM

What keeps the people working towards tomorrow? Why do they not give up? It's because they hope tomorrow will be better. Optimism is having good expectations for the future despite past failures. Additionally, realistic optimism is understanding that the situation might go wrong, but still trying to make the most of what is available to achieve an ideal solution. Both can be seen as irrational hopes, but people must have that hope in the face of overwhelming obstacles to maintain their mental state of mind and physical health. Optimism helps motivate people to keep pushing in a time of uncertainty and despair.

Pessimism, often thought of as the opposite of optimism, focuses mainly on outcomes. In an article explaining the benefits of pessimism, it states, "Personality science has revealed it [pessimism] also includes a focus on outcomes – that is what you expect will happen in the future" (Sirois). For a pessimist, past outcomes determine future outcomes. From a pessimist's point of view, an optimist has an irrational good hope for the future.

Both sides have their benefits, however, being optimistic can better get one out of a hopeless situation. The possibility that the situation can turn out all right despite the past motivates the optimist. A study was done by PubMed that showed that "higher depressive symptoms were predictive of hopelessness" (Assari and Lankarani). Keeping a positive state of mind keeps the hope alive and helps take off the stress from the situation. Viewing the glass as half full instead of half empty can help reduce one's stress when faced with a tall task.

Optimism doesn't just help in overcoming challenges. Optimism is good for one's health. As alluded to earlier, optimism reduces the symptoms of depression. An optimist usually better handles stress and therefore experiences fewer negative effects from stress-related illnesses. The health benefits of being optimistic include fewer

symptoms of anxiety, better cardiovascular health, and an increased life span (Mayo Clinic). Optimism can be a survival instrument for some. It helps to keep people calm and collected and try to find logical solutions.

Optimism doesn't always have to come from the individual; friends and families can offer an optimistic point of view to help keep a positive mindset. Dr. Gaffar Gailani, a political refugee from Sudan, was asked about his expectations when coming to America. He recalled "Coming to America was leaving a tough situation back home and going to an unfamiliar situation in America. I didn't know anybody, and I didn't know the language...I felt like giving up, but my parents and siblings back home told me to stay since there wasn't a better opportunity back in Sudan. It gave me the strength to do my best" (Interview with Dr. Gailani). Dr. Gailani may have viewed the situation as hopeless and unrealistic, but his family back home reminded him that he still can overcome his difficulties. Their belief in him gave him belief in himself. He found the motivation to stay and work hard to make the best out of his situation.

Support from even strangers can ignite feelings of optimism. Drew Phillip was trying to win an auction for his neighbor when he realized another bidder was trying to win the house for themselves. He tried to find the bidder but had no luck, so he reached out on social media with a call for help to locate this bidder. Nobody knew of the bidder, but the people were trying to support him in any way they can. He recalls, "One gentleman in London, a graphic designer, made a flyer from what I had written and tailored it to Twitter. I'd never heard of him before and haven't since" (Phillip). A stranger made a flyer to show his support, and although he never met him, Drew felt a sense of gratitude towards them. He continued to receive more support and undoubtedly, it motivated him to bear with the struggle and try his best. He won the house back and proved that any support from anyone can help an individual to persevere and keep hope.

An individual doesn't have to give up being realistic to be optimistic. Merriam Webster defines realism as "concern for fact or reality and rejection of the impractical and visionary" (Merriam Webster). If an individual assumes that their circumstances will turn out in favor of them despite it being impractical, it is more ignorance than optimism. Being too optimistic or too pessimistic can cloud one's judgment of the situation. If an optimist just assumes good things will

come soon, they won't be able to see any calamities that might lie ahead, and they won't change their approach to be better prepared for the future. The ideal optimism is realistic optimism. "Realistic optimists are cautiously hopeful of favorable outcomes, but they do as much as they can to obtain the desired results" (Collingwood). Assuming everything will turn out fine is just ignorance, rather, one should be aware of the problems that can arise but be hopeful that they can make the best out of it.

Changing habits, routines and mentality can change a person's outlook on things. Instead of seeing the glass as half empty, see the glass as half full. Instead of seeing a failure, see a learning opportunity. The way a person approaches their situation determines whether they are optimistic or pessimistic. In a journal on how to become optimistic, the author created a ritual he would perform every morning to alter his mindset. "The new ritual I built was to get out of bed when I awoke, go to my desk, and write down what I was worried about — just the facts. Next, I wrote down the story I was telling myself about those facts. Finally, I worked to conceive a more realistically optimistic story I could tell myself" (Schwartz). Writing down all the negative thoughts he had and then converting them into optimistic thoughts helped him see the wonderful possibilities he can achieve in his day. The author had previously lost his job, but looking back at it he notes, "I now consider losing my job a decade ago one of the best things that ever happened to me" (Schwartz). When one approaches any situation from the right angle, one can find the positives that can still be achieved.

Optimism is a health and lifestyle enhancer. Staying optimistic helps people see the bright side during dark times. Optimism doesn't believe in freezing up when overwhelmed. It enriches our motivation to continue during times of uncertainty. Optimism is all about capitalizing on the positives and working hard to avoid the negatives. Fortunately, anyone can work on shaping a realistic optimistic mindset. All anyone has to do is believe they can achieve the great possibilities that are out there for them.

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**RIVER SONG**

The river calls me onward,  
Stirs my dormant blood.  
Bleeds into my daydreams,  
My dreamless sleep it floods.  
The river calls me onward,  
Launches my tethered will,  
With salmon, bass and perch,  
My fishing nets it fills.  
The river calls me onward,  
The Lorelei sigh in the breeze,  
Whispering secret wisdom,  
Their limbs like swaying reeds.  
The river calls me onward,  
It swallows the fading day.  
Tumbles into Hades,  
Conceives the sun's first rays.  
The river calls me onward,  
Bore me through my mother,  
Carried me many a mile,  
Guiding my battered rudder.  
The river calls me onward,  
Drawn itself to the sea,  
Both aroused by the moon  
That summons the soul in me.

**LIGHTKEEPER**

Glimpses that would make me less forlorn,  
Sirens beckoning from the sea—  
These my reasons from boyhood to man  
The old lighthouse by the quay.  
On rocky aisle with rod to fish  
For macks when they run to brew  
With shots of brandy to dull the edge  
Of the gale with a spirited stew.  
Two nor' Easters and a pounding gale  
Once cut me from kin and town  
With no one to know I'd be stranded for weeks,  
Perhaps they reported me drowned.  
The ships slowed to an occasional barge,  
Nothing but old myths for me to recite,  
To an audience of seals on the rocks below,  
Tales of Proteus through the night.  
The storms passed through, a fog set in,  
A shroud to block the sun,  
A veil to hide the jagged rocks,  
A trap soon to be sprung.  
The lighthouse stood the lone salvation  
For the Dutch fleet long overdue,  
Whalers overloaded with oil from the south,  
With fifty good souls to each crew.  
Three sleepless nights I spent  
Slaking the thirsty lamp,  
Three heedless hails I yawped,  
Stumbling down the ramp.  
No sign of the Dutch, nor sound, nor clue,  
Just an endless shroud of white.  
Until I saw a figure among the rocks,

A man stepping out of the night.  
He waved to me to descend to hear  
news of the missing fleet,  
But whenever I deigned to come near,  
Into the fog he would retreat.  
“What news!” I howled clambering down,  
Close to the smashing waves,  
The jagged rocks loomed like tombstones  
Marking watery graves.  
The hunched old man he finally paused,  
When I brandished a sharpened gaff.  
I demanded to know the fate of the fleet,  
But the ancient one only laughed  
A circus seal’s foolish bark  
With a moray’s gap-toothed grin.  
He had a great white’s doll-like eyes,  
And tentacles dripped from his chin.  
He mocked me with a vulgar dance  
And shook his briny locks.  
He taunted me with the driftwood staff  
He used to tend his flocks.  
In outrage I lunged for his throat,  
My grip round the elder’s neck,  
“Old Proteus tell me our fate,” I cried,  
“And if the fleet’s become a wreck!”  
From shark to squid to serpent he changed,  
Before my astonished eyes,  
But I tightened my grip as we grappled  
In the glow of the pale moonrise.  
At last I beheld my own horrified gaze,  
In my grasp staring back at me.  
The last sounds I heard were the wreck of the fleet,  
As it plunged to the bottom of the sea.  
I shoulder this heavy guilt to this day,  
I still hear their dying shouts.  
For I had been lured from my sacred watch  
And let my light flicker out.

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## PICKEREL GRIN

The pickerel I lured from the shrouded canal  
Had the grin of a Murphy or Hoolihan—twisted smile  
Of all who dug by hand the sixty-six miles,  
Their bleached bones dumped in an unmarked hole,  
Their souls leaching into the leaden current.

Defiant underbite, lips drawn tight  
Exposing his jagged grin: the wild-eyed grimace  
That follows sharp despair when told  
Of the dollar-a-day wage for toil  
In a self-dug grave—the cholera,  
Shredded hands and feet, bloody rags  
For shoes—tattered fins that flail  
Against the current; thinly veiled rage  
At having to stomach his terms to heed  
The starving screams of the suckling overseas.

The hook set, he thrashes his chains  
Against the bars of the net.  
I’ll flay him and set free his watery ghost,  
Make of him a communion meal: raise a Host,  
Eat of his flesh, drink sacred wine,  
And swallow the soul of all his suffering.

### THREE BASEBALL HAIKU

late afternoon  
the pitcher's curveball drops  
into the shadows

radio static  
somewhere in the muggy night  
a ballgame

The dark stadium  
Moths and fans disburse  
Into the night

### CEZANNE'S STILL LIFE WITH APPLES

Green vase—Magna Mater  
Leans forward a little lower,  
Lets light penetrate  
A little deeper;  
Ginger jar locks limbs  
With rum bottle, rattan feelers  
Flowing into one another—  
Shiva and Shakti, a stray elbow  
Casually draped over the plate  
Tilting it into spilling still  
More apples onto the table,  
Into the world, each swiftly caught  
In the soft embrace of the linen cloth—  
Divine midwife who lifts it gently into light  
As the sugar bowl takes flight—  
Angel of the annunciation, rising  
From the blue-black arabesque that swirls,  
Encircling all—serpent vine  
Forever flowing:  
Flowering and devouring  
Its very own apples.



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## ROMULUS AND REMUS

(Inspired by the hypothesis for the start of human imagination)

Weary of the lupine teats,  
The twins, eager to cut new teeth,  
Seek more than mother's baying,  
Anticipate the canines beneath;  
Bark back and forth,  
Mix yelps with growls,  
String them to grunts, yawps and howls;  
Fix word to image, image to place,  
Fuse man and beast,  
Spin tales of the gods and hymns for the lyre,  
From Lycaon to the Lupercalia;  
Prophecy sword and spear,  
Crossbow and catapult,  
Flank and phalanx;  
Envision laws and streets,  
Medicine and concrete;  
Foresee masts of fleets in forests,  
Read in rainbows the arch  
To link god and man,  
Mountain spring to desert baths.  
Their wordplay soars—starlings weaving  
And unweaving tapestries above the Coliseum  
For priests to take measure of the gods' approval.  
Their descendants will inherit the divine truth:  
That a word is worth a thousand pictures,  
A sentence a gallery of imagination,  
A key to unlock the Great Hall  
Of Civilization.

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## ECLIPSE THROUGH LEAVES



BRIDGE



115

You looked at me like  
The sun looked at Icarus.  
I melted and crashed to the earth  
In a wave of hurting and hoping.

The sun looked at Icarus,  
Hand holding hand,  
In a wave of hurting and hoping.  
You would hurt me too.

Hand holding hand,  
I looked into the sun.  
I could hurt me too  
And who could ever forget you.

I stared directly into the sun and  
The sun looked back.  
Who could ever forget the moment  
They crashed into the earth.

**LIVING**

I watch as your handwriting flows from my  
Pen. The words are not yours; they are mine once  
Again. I ignore your stares from that high  
Lofty chair, hoping and waiting for months

That I'd dare to come back to you — a pet  
To keep your lap warm and whisper you sweet  
Nothings in the dead of night. I would bet  
Something pretty that you don't feel complete

Without me. Yet, now I see within me.  
It's not you or me alone. It is us  
Fit together like bricks of a chimney,  
Stones like stories too heavy to discuss.

Couldn't I live in a house not as small?  
Couldn't I just live without you at all?

**BEAUTIFUL**

I was not raised by wolves.  
I was raised by the man that was  
Raised by wolves.

He was feral and loud,  
Funny and proud,  
And always covered in dog hair.

Sometimes we would howl at the moon,  
Wishing it was bigger, or  
Wishing we were smaller,

Or wishing the distance were shorter.  
We wanted to chase it and chew it  
And shake it until all of its insides were

Strewn about the mountain.  
Naturally, they would ask us why  
We had murdered the moon.

My father would look up,  
A wicked grin and dirt on his face.  
He would gesture at the carnage

Like one would regard a pile  
Of dead chickens.  
“Isn't it beautiful?”

**AND THEY WERE ROOMMATES**

INT. DINER – SUNSET

THERE IS A CHIME OF A DOOR OPENING OFFSTAGE. AUGUST COMES INTO VIEW AND SITS DOWN AT A BOOTH. HE PUTS HIS MESSENGER BAG DOWN ON THE SEAT NEXT TO HIM. HE CHECKS HIS WATCH AS A WAITRESS COMES OVER. THEY SMILE AT EACH OTHER AND THE WAITRESS FILLS HIS GLASS WITH WATER.

WAITRESS

So who did you have today?

AUGUST  
(excited)

An Australian Shepherd named Indiana Bones. Indiana Bones! He was perfect.

WAITRESS

Oh, was he? That's great. Come to think of it, I haven't seen a Dennis Quaid film in forever. He's still so good looking.

AUGUST  
(laughing)

Harrison Ford's a looker, yeah. I loved him in the Parent Trap.

(The waitress swats at him with her notebook. She rolls her eyes.)

WAITRESS  
(good natured)

What do you want, Auggie? Gotta tell your aunt I fed you.

AUGUST

No food. Just coffee is great. I'm waiting for somebody.

(She opens her mouth but he cuts her off.)

It's not a date, Deb; it's about the room. Nothing fun, sadly. All business.

DEB

Oh yeah. It's almost the end of the month, isn't it. Lisa told me that you have one more week to find somebody or —

AUGUST  
(smiling)

Don't worry about it! Don't even worry about it. Actually, just stop talking to Lisa about it.

DEB  
(sarcastically)

Me? Talk to your aunt about you? Never. Lemme get you coffee. . . You okay with all this apartment stuff? I got a cousin I hate that's a landlord.

AUGUST

I got this.

DEB

You got this.

(DEB winks at AUGUST and starts walking out of sight. AUGUST waits a moment, then checks his watch again. He looks toward the door. AUGUST pulls out a spiral notebook and starts lazily scribbling something. He grabs a paper napkin and scribbles on that too. His foot starts to bounce absently under the table. A beat. There is a chime of a door opening offstage. A young man wearing sunglasses and a black turtleneck enters from behind AUGUST. The STRANGER adjusts the neck of his collar. He puts his hands in his pockets as he looks around the diner. The STRANGER sees AUGUST and walks over. He quietly peers over AUGUST's shoulder at what he is doing. A beat.)

STRANGER

Is that a man being shot out of a cannon?

(AUGUST starts and attempts to gather all of his papers into the notebook. The STRANGER watches him with a faint smile. AUGUST stands up quickly and puts out a hand for the STRANGER to shake.)

AUGUST

Hi! Sorry, you— I'm Gus. Are you Victor?

(The STRANGER looks down at AUGUST's hand but does not take it. He sits down across from AUGUST and removes his sunglasses.)

VICTOR

I'm Victor Barlow, yes. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Fink. Do have a seat.

(AUGUST looks around the diner and takes his seat again.)

AUGUST

(nervously smiling)

Thank you for meeting me here. You're interested in the room, right? I just wanted to meet you first in a public place before we went over.

VICTOR

How very safe of you.  
(A beat.)

AUGUST

Yup. . . Do you want anything to eat? I can get someone for you.

VICTOR

That won't be necessary —

AUGUST

Deb! Hey. Hi.

(AUGUST goes to flag DEB over but she is already on her way to the table with a mug of coffee and a slice of pie for AUGUST. She sets the items down on the table in front of him. DEB puts her hands on her hips.)

DEB

Baby, you sure you want coffee? You look damn near radioactive. I brought you pie because I know you don't just want coffee and I'd like to see you fight me about it. This your friend? The apartment guy?

AUGUST

Maybe! We'll see —

DEB

He's cute, Auggie.

AUGUST

(nervous laughing)

No, he's not.

(VICTOR looks at AUGUST and rests his head in one of his hands. AUGUST shoots a look at DEB in warning.)

DEB

(to VICTOR)

Can I get you something? Menu, maybe?

VICTOR

(eyes not leaving AUGUST)

Just coffee. Black.

DEB

You got it.

(DEB sticks her tongue out at AUGUST and walks out of sight.)



AUGUST

(nervous)

I'm so sorry. That's just Deb. She works with my aunt. My aunt works here. They work here together. Are you sure you're not hungry?

(VICTOR smiles briefly.)

VICTOR

I have a few dietary restrictions. No need to apologize, Fink.

AUGUST

Gus is fine. Or August.

VICTOR

So who are you shooting out of a cannon, August? They'd accuse you of witchcraft for that drawing in the 1700s.

AUGUST

I don't- He's fine. I just doodle sometimes. It's how I vent.

(VICTOR stares at him, saying nothing.)

AUGUST

My last roommate decided he fell madly in love with a super obscure Berlin rock band. The Seven Eight Neins. He's following them on tour. (VICTOR nods his head. DEB brings over a black coffee and sets it in front of VICTOR. She looks at the two of them, says nothing, and leaves. VICTOR adjusts his collar.)

AUGUST

(smiling)

So the room. You came here about the apartment. It's a two bedroom. You knew that. I'm already living in the smaller room so yours would be the bigger one.

(AUGUST begins to look through his notebook. He pulls out a crumpled piece of paper and tries to smooth the creases. He gestures to

it. VICTOR looks down at it with him.)

AUGUST

No carpet. Has a closet. You knew that. The kitchen is small but there's a lot of storage space above the cabinets. Only one bathroom. I work down the street and take classes at SMC. You probably won't see me that much.

(VICTOR smiles briefly.)

VICTOR

Where do you work, August?

AUGUST

Oh. The grooming place across from the post office.

VICTOR

Bark Side of the Moon?

AUGUST

(smiling)

Yes, actually.

(VICTOR nods his head. AUGUST takes a cautious sip of his coffee. He blows on it and takes a deeper sip.)

VICTOR

What kind of classes are you taking?

(AUGUST laughs once and glances down at the piece of paper between them. VICTOR stirs a packet of sugar into his coffee but does not blow on it or drink it.)

AUGUST

Um, I'm taking some animation classes, some cartooning. . . stuff. It's boring. Do you have any questions about the room? Or the apartment?

VICTOR

Oh. Have I made you uncomfortable? That was not my intent. The way I see it, I have been asking questions about the apartment. You live there; you're part of the apartment. I find you to be an interesting amenity.

(AUGUST laughs nervously and looks around the diner.)

AUGUST

I'm part of the apartment.

VICTOR

Yes.

AUGUST

And I'm interesting.

VICTOR

Quite.

(AUGUST clears his throat and picks up a fork. He pokes at his slice of pie with it but does not eat it.)

AUGUST

Ok. What about you? What do you do for work?

VICTOR

I work nights.

AUGUST

(smiling)

Where do you work nights?

VICTOR

I'm a paramedic. I drive an ambulance.

AUGUST

Stop. You save lives for a living? That's unfair.

VICTOR

(raises eyebrows)

It's unfair?

AUGUST

No, I mean- You're way more interesting than I am. What made you want to become a paramedic? How many years of school do you need for that even? Isn't that scary?

(AUGUST takes a bite of pie.)

VICTOR

My mother was a paramedic.

(AUGUST pauses his chewing. He swallows.)

AUGUST

Oh. Is- I'm sorry if –

VICTOR

It was a long time ago. Don't worry, August. People very rarely die around me unless I want them to.

AUGUST

(stiffly)

That is very comforting. . . Thank you.

VICTOR

Of course. Next question.

AUGUST

Oh. Um, are there any hobbies you have that I should know about? Like, do you play the drums, or are you really into DnD, or do you hunt people for sport —

VICTOR  
(serious)  
Why would I do that?

AUGUST  
(nervous laughing)  
No, that was just- I know you're not- You wouldn't-

VICTOR  
It's not even remotely like that.

AUGUST  
Do- You don't hunt people for sport, do you?

VICTOR  
No, why would I do that?

AUGUST  
Oh ok. That's. . . also comforting.

(VICTOR takes a deep breath and adjusts his collar. He looks around the diner. AUGUST takes another sip of coffee, eyes not leaving VICTOR.)

VICTOR  
Do you use the kitchen often?

AUGUST  
I do! I love cooking. I'm better at baking though.

VICTOR  
I can imagine that. You seem sweet.

AUGUST  
(smiling)  
Anything that will give you a cavity is my specialty.

VICTOR  
When you're not baking do you ever cook with garlic? I have quite a sensitive allergy to it.

AUGUST  
(laughing)  
Like a vampire?

VICTOR  
(nervous)  
I- No, not at all. I- Don't be absurd. I'm- I'm also allergic to onions and anything else from the Amaryllidaceae family.

AUGUST  
Oh. Ok.

VICTOR  
I just don't think monsters are funny. They're old news, right?

AUGUST  
Yeah, I mean —

VICTOR  
Why would they be funny?

AUGUST  
No, of course. I don't think- Are you okay? I'm sorry. It was supposed to be a joke. I didn't mean to upset you.

VICTOR  
I'm not upset.

(VICTOR adjusts his collar and looks around the diner. He drums his fingers on the table top. A beat. AUGUST pokes absently at his pie with his fork. He gives a humorless laugh.)

AUGUST

Right.

(DEB is smiling as she comes over with a coffee pot. She fills AUGUST's coffee mug to the top.)

DEB

We doin' okay over here?

(DEB notices AUGUST is not smiling. She looks over at VICTOR who quickly looks down at his untouched coffee. He gives her a cautious smile.)

VICTOR

We're perfect. Thank you so much.

DEB

(eyes on VICTOR)

Auggie?

(DEB looks at AUGUST but he is staring at VICTOR. AUGUST finally tears his eyes away from the man and looks up at DEB. He gives her an obviously fake smile. DEB looks concerned.)

AUGUST

I'm good.

(DEB gives a cautious look to VICTOR and slowly walks away. Once DEB is out of sight, AUGUST leans in over the table.)

AUGUST

(loud whisper)

What is happening to you right now?

VICTOR

(loud whisper)

I'm trying.

AUGUST

To what, look like you're having a stroke?

VICTOR

To look normal!

(VICTOR puts his face in his hands. AUGUST sits back in his chair, perfectly straight. He looks nervously around the diner. He gives a fake smile and a wave to someone on the other side of the diner.)

AUGUST

Ok. . . We should probably unpack that.

VICTOR

(agitated)

I'm trying to look human, August. It is so hard to find a place these days. You have no idea. I can't keep doing this! I can't keep pretending to be something that I'm not. It's not fair to you, and also, more importantly might I add, I am bad at it.

AUGUST

Wow. That's a lot. So are you —

VICTOR

Oh god, just say it.

AUGUST

Are you. . . Do you think you're a vampire?

(VICTOR throws both arms up into the air.)

VICTOR

For god's sake, it's not a delusion, August.

AUGUST

(points his finger)

You think you're a vampire.

VICTOR

What I think is that I'm looking for an apartment and everyone is so damn prejudiced these days.

(AUGUST calmly drains his entire glass of water and sets it down softly. He nods his head and inspects the piece of paper between them. He looks at his watch and takes a very deep breath. He exhales.)

AUGUST

Ok. You're a vampire.

VICTOR

What?

AUGUST

Are you gonna be weird?

VICTOR

I mean- I won't hurt you, if that's what you're asking. I would never hurt you. I make it a conscious effort to never bring work home from the office.

(AUGUST takes a deep breath. He extends a hand over the table. A smile slowly creeps up onto VICTOR's face.)

AUGUST

Ok. I need a roommate. You need a place. We can figure it out. Just don't kill me.

VICTOR

(laughing)

You better not die on me, then.

(AUGUST pulls his hand away a fraction and glares at him. VICTOR puts up his hands in surrender. He gives a guilty smile.)

VICTOR

Joke in poor taste. My apologies.

(The two men shake hands over the table.)

AUGUST

Does this mean I get the entire fridge to myself?

VICTOR

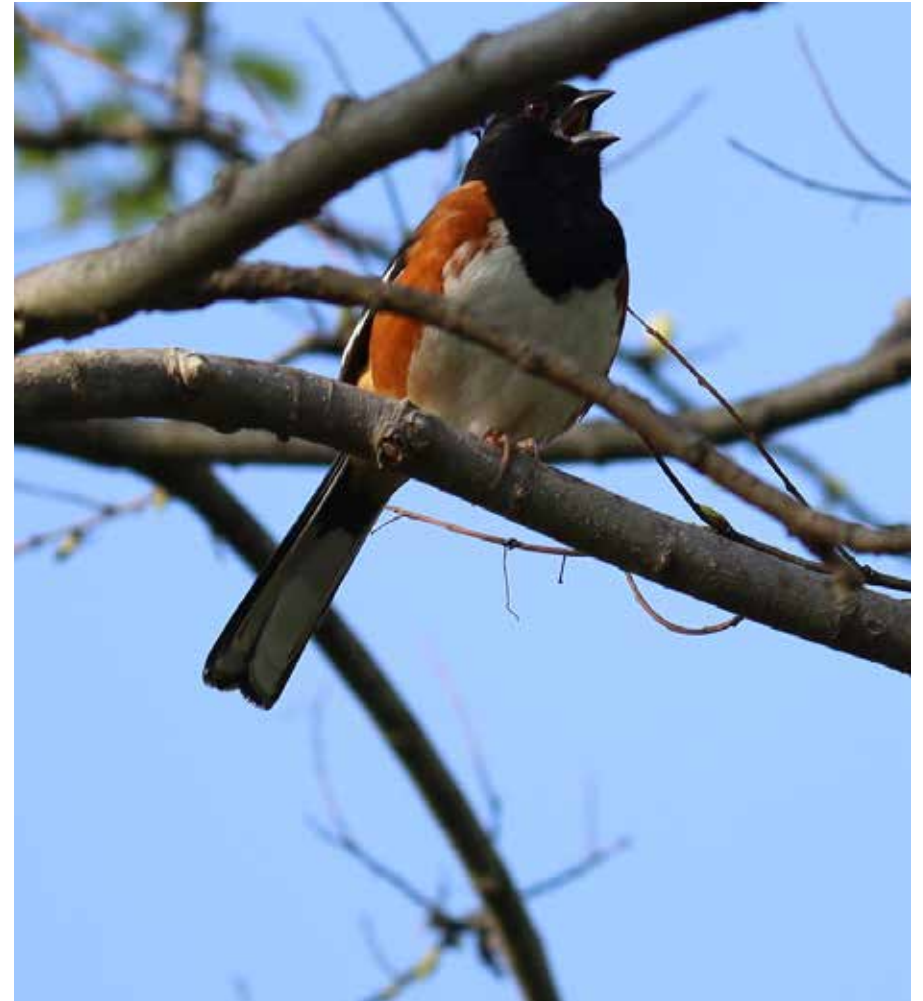
There are a few more things we should probably discuss.

BLACKOUT



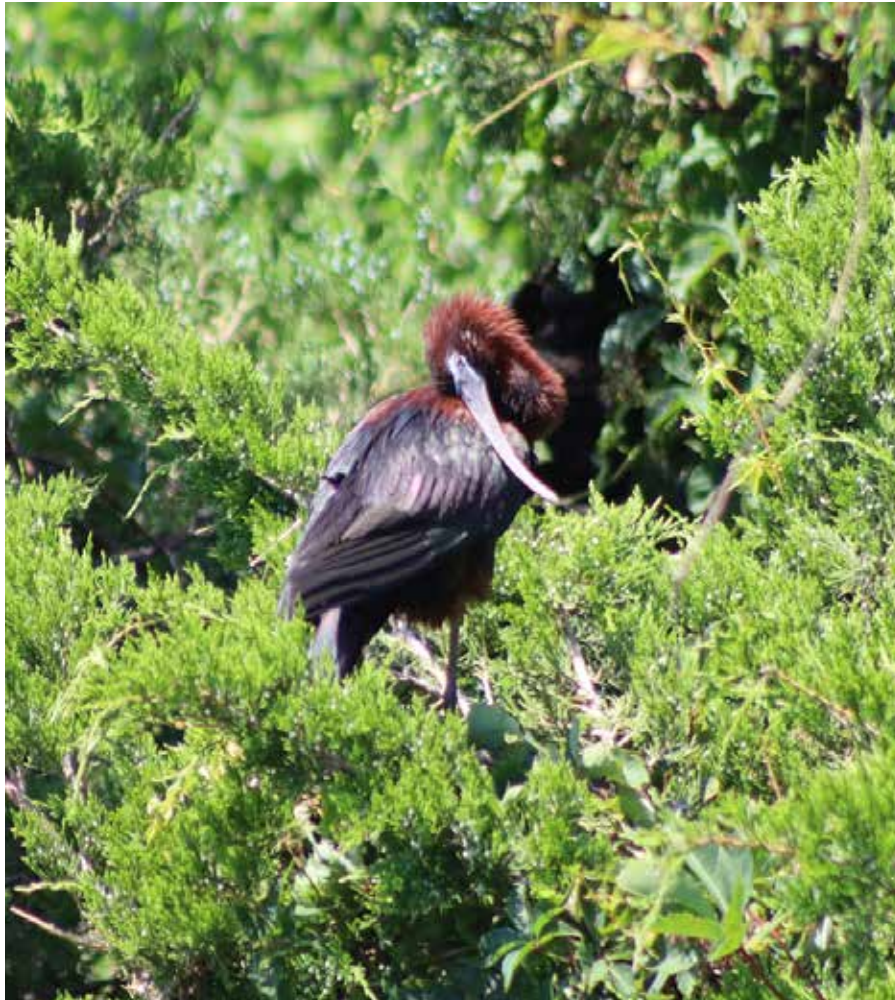
**American Bittern - Edwin B. Forsythe Refuge, Galloway NJ**

The American Bittern's yellow eyes can focus downward, giving the bird's face a comically startled, cross-eyed appearance. This visual orientation presumably enhances the bird's ability to spot and capture prey. The eyes turn orange during breeding season.



**Eastern Towhee - Sandy Hook, Highlands NJ**

An oversized sparrow, Eastern Towhees can be heard rustling in the understory as it scratches leaves for bugs. An immediately recognizable song: drink-your-teaaaaaa.



**Glossy Ibis - Ocean City Rookery, NJ**

A prolific species found on every continent. The curved bill projects from the face for prying open the shells of snails and mollusks.



**Golden-crowned Kinglet - Sandy Hook, Highlands, NJ**

Though a tiny bird, Golden-crowned Kinglets are quite hardy, routinely wintering in areas where nighttime temperatures can fall below  $-40^{\circ}$  Fahrenheit, huddling together in tree cavities to keep warm.



**Green Heron - Sandy Hook, Highlands NJ**

The Green Heron is one of the world's few tool-using bird species. It often creates fishing lures with bread crusts, insects, and feathers, dropping them on the surface of the water to entice small fish.



**Piping Plover - Sandy Hook, Highlands, NJ**

Sadly, this cute little plover belongs to a threatened species, as human disturbance on shorelines interrupt summer breeding. Please keep your dog off the beach!





**Prothonotary Warbler - Hartshorne Pond, Navesink, NJ**

The Prothonotary Warbler got its name from the bright yellow robes worn by papal clerks, known as prothonotaries, in the Roman Catholic church.



**Yellow Warbler - Sandy Hook, Highlands NJ**

While strikingly beautiful, yellow warblers are quite common in the Garden State and beyond. Next time you are in the park, listen for the song: sweet, sweet, sweet, I'm so sweet.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Jacob L. Bender** is a full-time Instructor in the English Department at Middlesex College. He is the author of the critical study *Modern Death in Irish and Latin American Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) and the experimental novella *And All Eternity Shook* (ShipsofHagoth, 2022). He enjoys playing piano and guitar, collecting LP records, hiking, and taking his kids to the park.

**Aimee Corzo** was born in Cuba. Immigrating to the US when she was eight, Aimee has taught Composition, Literature, and Creative Writing at Middlesex College for over thirty years. She has published composition textbook, poetry, and had an original play performed. Married with two accomplished grown children and soon to become an “Abuela,” Aimee loves teaching, reading, writing, traveling, dancing, volunteering in her community, and riding in the back of her husband’s Harley every chance she gets!

**Matteus Coste** is a second-year student majoring in Computer Science at Middlesex College. This is his first time submitting for any publisher. His major interests include reading books and comic books, as well as going to the gym.

**Wendy Lynn Decker** is an adjunct English professor at Middlesex College, a freelance writer, and an editor. She is the author of the novel *Sweet Tea*; and *The Bedazzling Bowl*, a children’s chapter book, awarded the Faith Writers Seal of Approval. Her essays have appeared in various literary journals such as *American Writers Review 2018, 2020, A Cup of Comfort, NowWhat*, and more. As an international podcast host for *Legal Wolf*, Wendy interviewed advocates and professionals on mental health awareness. Aside from writing, Wendy considers herself a sand junkie who finds joy breathing in the salt air while walking the beach towns of the Jersey shore.

**Sallie DeVecchio** was born in Arkansas and found herself living in NJ way back when Nixon was still the prez and hasn’t found a reason to leave. She has taught English at Middlesex College for over 30 years. Her favorites courses are Introduction to Shakespeare, World Literature: Ancient to 1500, and Writing About Crime, all of which have some special twists to them. At the millennium, her poem “Cyber Kid” was published in *Middlesex: A Literary Journal*, and a few years later a few poems dedicated to her dad were published here as well. Recently, she had a piece published in the school’s humanities journal. She has written quite a few (a lot of) works — poems and stories — about life, death, her travels, and the fear of bugs. She is quite proud of being one of the co-founders, with Mat Spano, of Middlesex College’s faculty/staff talent shows which ran for several years.

**Tracey Esser** is Departmental Assistant for the Middlesex College English Department. The recipient of the 2022 Outstanding Service to the College Award, Tracey is also a talented artist and nature enthusiast.

**Luna C. Fall** is a student in the Liberal Arts English Program where she has studied Creative Writing, Short Fiction, Mythology in Literature, and Shakespeare.

**Tara Farber** has devoted a lifetime to reading and writing, which ultimately led her to earn degrees in English Literature, Comparative Literature, and Middle Eastern Studies. She now shares her love of all things written with her students at Middlesex College. When not teaching, Tara enjoys traveling, cooking, and being crafty. Bon Jovi is her muse for all things, and she has a strong opinion about the Oxford Comma. She lives in Hightstown with her husband and two sweet Boston Terriers.

**Mahmoud Gailani** is a second-year student majoring in Computer Science at Middlesex College. Mahmoud and his family come from Sudan and remains optimistic despite his family having had to face many hardships.

**Donna Lee Goldberg** has taught as an adjunct instructor in the Middlesex College English Department for several years. With additional experience working as a newspaper reporter and public relations professional, she is currently working on two children's books and rediscovering making art via her passion for watercolor painting. She has also participated more than once in the East Brunswick Public Library's 73 in the 732, an event to write a short story in 73 words (microfiction). "Elevator," "Aruba" and "Mean Dog" were submissions that were published on the library's blog.

**Annie Hogan** is a conceptual artist who makes photographs and time-based artworks. Her research interests include architectural space, phenomenology, power structures and the relationships of space to the body. Recently she has been focused on making new photographs about shadows and reflections and writing poetry. Annie exhibits nationally and internationally and has an MFA from the School of the Art Institute. Annie is the recipient of the Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship from Australia (2002) and grants from the Australia Council for the Arts ((2004).

**Susan Indyk** is Department Assistant for the Middlesex College English Department and for the History and Social Sciences Department. A former K-12 teacher of Social Studies for many years, she is also a nature enthusiast.

**Iman Khan** is an English major at Middlesex College. This is her first time being published in a professional literary journal, though she has been published in her high school literary magazine. In her free time, she enjoys reading and writing (particularly thrillers) and cross-stitching.

**Daniel Markowicz** teaches English Composition and World Literature in the English Department at Middlesex College. An avid birder and part-time ornithologist, he travels widely studying avian behavior and the impact of development and climate change on bird migrations. Combining his two passions, teaching English and birding, Dr. Markowicz has created Special Topics and Community Engaged Learning sections of English Composition 1 and 2, in which students participate in field trips and clean-ups as the basis for their writing about the environment.

**Benjamin V. Marshall's** plays have earned recognition from HBO New Writers Workshop, New York's Theatre for a New City, Chicago's public radio station WBEZ and in play festivals from Alaska to Australia. In addition to working as a journalist, he has published poetry in several small presses, and taught English in Middle Eastern countries. Awards: Five Playwriting fellowships from NJ State Council on the Arts, Fellowships from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, VCCA, NEH, and the Robert Chesley/Victor Bumbalo Foundation. Recently he received the Bauer-Boucher Award and the Stanley Drama Award for *Incident at Willow Creek*. Currently: *Extended Play* (Warner's International Playwright Festival) *White Gloves* (L.B. Williams Festival New Circle Theatre) *Beasts and Cakes* (A.D. Players, Houston) He is a member of the Dramatists Guild, the New Play Exchange, and the 9th Floor, a collective of writers and actors. Born in Newark, NJ, he's earned a BA from Kean University and an MFA from University of Massachusetts Amherst. He is a Professor of English at Middlesex College and teaches playwriting at Wagner College.

**Maureen McVeigh-Berzok** has taught as an Adjunct Instructor in the Middlesex College English Department for several years. Also an experienced journalist, she received the 2023 Excellence in Local News Award, New Jersey Center for Cooperative Media. For providing essential reporting during the pandemic, Berzok was named the 2021 Citizen of the Year for East Brunswick. A member of the New Jersey Society of Professional Journalists, she received the Awbrey Award for Community-Oriented Journalism in 2020. Her interests include New Jerseyana, Shakespeare, politics, and public service.

**Hina Naqvi** is a 46-year-old student. She was born in Karachi, Pakistan. She immigrated to the USA in 2006. Later in 2008, she got married to an Indian Muslim. She is a mother of two beautiful daughters. She was a lecturer at the University of Karachi and has two Master's degrees in Public and Business Administration. She joined Middlesex College in 2016 in liberal arts. She slowly developed a love for writing and in 2020 she joined the *Quo Vadis* newspaper's core staff. All her pieces have been previously published in *Quo Vadis*.

**Joseph Patrick Pascale** is the Learning Center Coordinator at Middlesex College. His short fiction has been published in *Birkensnake*, *Literary Orphans*, *Pidgeonholes*, *The American Mag (Rome)*, *Bending Genres*, and other journals. His novel *How to Get a Promotion When Your Boss is Trying to Kill You* was released by Waldorf Publishing. Joseph has also been an editor and nonfiction contributor for a diverse array of publications. You can read more at his website: [www.josephpatrickpascale.com](http://www.josephpatrickpascale.com).

**Suany Pascale** is the Democracy House Coordinator at Middlesex College. In addition to photography, she draws, paints, writes, and sings. Her work has previously been featured in *Birkensnake*, *Prism*, and *The Legendary*, among others. In addition to her artistic pursuits, she is also the caretaker for a menagerie of pets.

**Mary Schilp** is a second-year student at Middlesex College working toward her AA in English. She is also a writer for the college newspaper, *Quo Vadis*.

**Mathew V. Spano** has published poetry in various journals over the last thirty years, many of which are included in his two books *Imps* (BLAST PRESS, 2018) and *Hellgrammite* (BLAST Press, 2016), both of which are available through Amazon and Barnes & Noble. Under the pseudonym *Scribe '67*, he has composed and released three albums of original songs, all available on most major streaming music platforms under *Scribe '67*. In addition to his creative work, he earned his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Rutgers, New Brunswick and has since published essays in scholarly journals. He has taught English Composition and World Literature for thirty plus years as a full-time professor at Middlesex College where he now serves as the English Department Chairperson.

**Evan Sventy** is a sophomore at Rutgers University studying philosophy. He is a resident of Demarest Hall, to which he has contributed his photography for their annual art show and their monthly Zine.

**Daniel Weeks** is the author of *For Now: New & Collected Poems, 1979-2017* (Coleridge Institute Press, 2017), which includes nine previously published collections in addition to hitherto unpublished

work. His poetry has appeared in *The Cimarron Review*, *Plainsongs*, *The Stillwater Review*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *The California Quarterly*, *Mudfish*, *Puckerbrush Review*, *Zone 3*, *Slant*, and many other publications. His work has also appeared in a number of anthologies, including *Wild Poets of Ecstasy: An Anthology of Ecstatic Poetry* (Pelican Pond, 2011), *On Human Flourishing: A Poetry Anthology* (McFarland, 2015), and *Palisades, Parkways & Pinelands: An Anthology of Contemporary New Jersey Poets* (Blast Press, 2015). His translations of French symbolist poetry have appeared in *Blue Unicorn*, *This Broken Shore*, and *Middlesex: A Literary Journal*. He is also the author of *A More Prosaic Light: Essays, Revisions, and Reviews, 1987-2015* (Coleridge Institute Press, 2015) and *Not for Filthy Lucre's Sake: Richard Saltar and the Antiproprietary Movement in East New Jersey, 1665-1710* (Lehigh University Press, 2001). His most recent publication is *Nearer Home: Short Histories, 1987-2019* (Lulu.com, 2020).

**Lynn Wilson** has spent all but the first month of her eighty-five years as a New Jersey resident. At age 19, she moved from Union County to Monmouth County where she raised six children. Now, the grandmother of eight and great-grandmother to four, she enjoys spending time with family and reading and writing about anything and everything. She was a longtime member of the Jersey Shore Writers in Ocean Grove, NJ, and this is her first publication. Though she feels New Jersey gets “a lot of knocks” she believes no other state is as vibrant, diverse, and intellectually challenging. “We all carry that New Jersey DNA . . . take it and run with it!”

**Daniel Zimmerman (1945-2022), Professor Emeritus**, served in many roles in his tenure at Middlesex College: Professor of English, Advisor to Quo Vadis, Chairperson of the English Department, to name but a few. He also enjoyed a vibrant professional and artistic life beyond his work at the College, serving as Associate Editor of the issue of *Anonym* that published Ezra Pound's last canto, and as editor of *The Western Gate*, *Britannia*, and *College English Notes*. His poetry has appeared in many magazines and anthologies and, in 1997, he invented an anagrammatical poetic form, Isotopes. His works include *Perspective*, a curriculum of the soul #20 (Canton, NY: Institute of Further Studies, 1974), *See All the People*, illustrated by Richard Sturm (Toronto: Open Studio, 1976—now available as an iBook), the trans-temporal *Blue*

*Horitals* with John Clarke (Oasii: Amman, Jordan, 1997), *ISOTOPES* (London: frAme, 2001), and online: *ISOTOPES2* (Chicago: Beard of Bees, 2007). His book *Post-Avant* (2002, Introduction by Robert Creeley) won the Editor's Choice Award from Pavement Saw Press in Ohio.

**Rachel Zimmerman** is a multidisciplinary artist and designer currently living in Portland Oregon whose work focuses on cultural and environmental issues. Born in New Jersey and raised in Arizona, she received an AAFA in Theatre Design from Scottsdale Community College and a BA with an emphasis on Lighting Design from UNLV. She is influenced by the effects of nature through light while exploring themes of love, death, politics, religion, culture, time and truth. Her style is a mixture of ideas from impressionism to Expressionism, Magic Realism to Surrealism, Absurdism to Street Art. She demonstrates how life extends beyond its own subjective limits, blurring dream and reality. Rachel is Dan's daughter.

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