

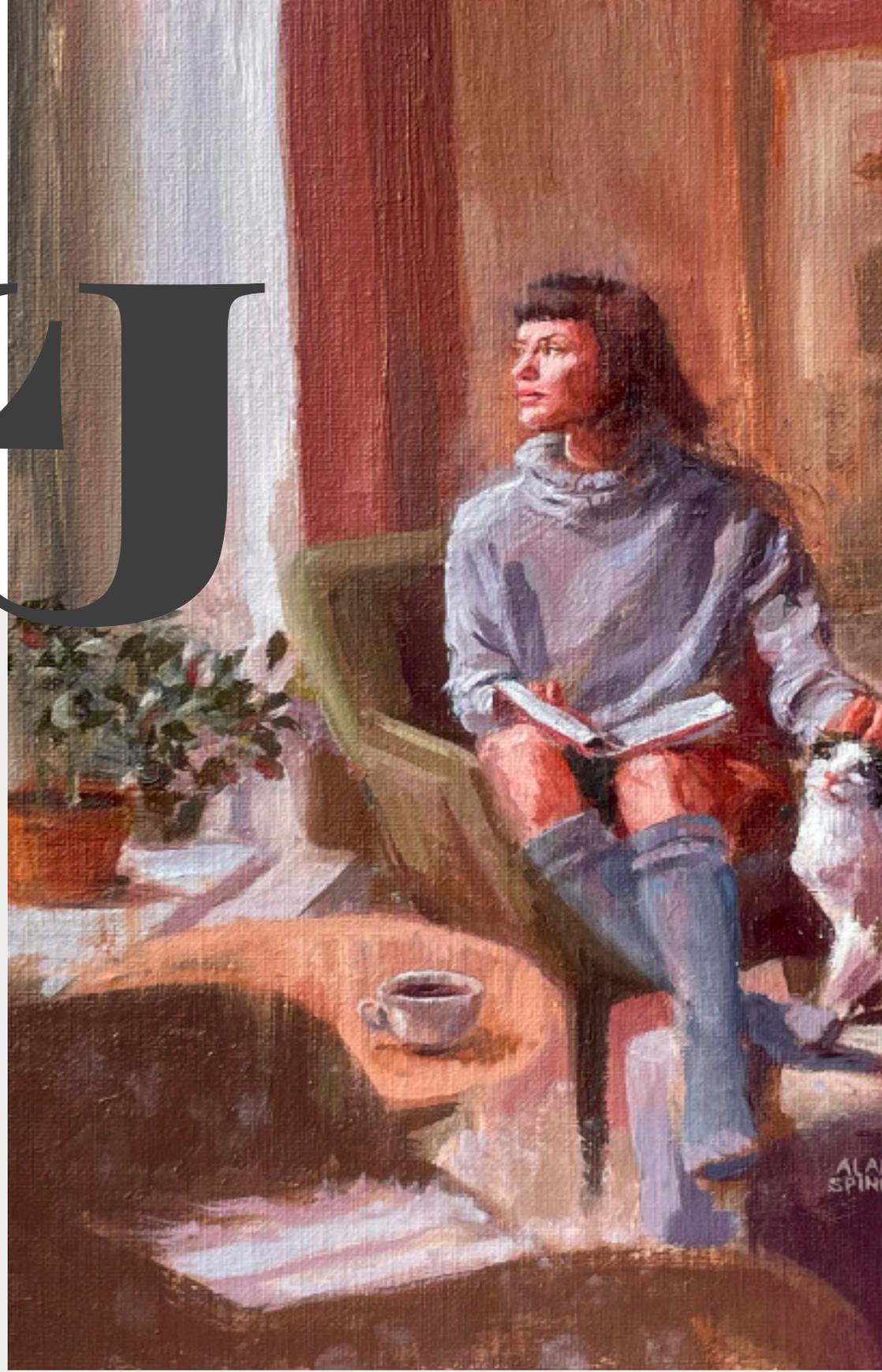
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Music for Tarot

César Mora Moreau

White

Yael Zam



Literature Undressed

Featured Artists

Alan Spinney

Erik Cheung

Justin Mezzapelli

Trang Ta



Contents

Story 13 **8**

Music for Tarot **16**

**Grandmother Blue. Cream
Cake. Red Shoes. Mermaid
Magic** **22**

The Last Day **26**

**A Letter To The Teacher That
Changed Me** **30**

White **32**

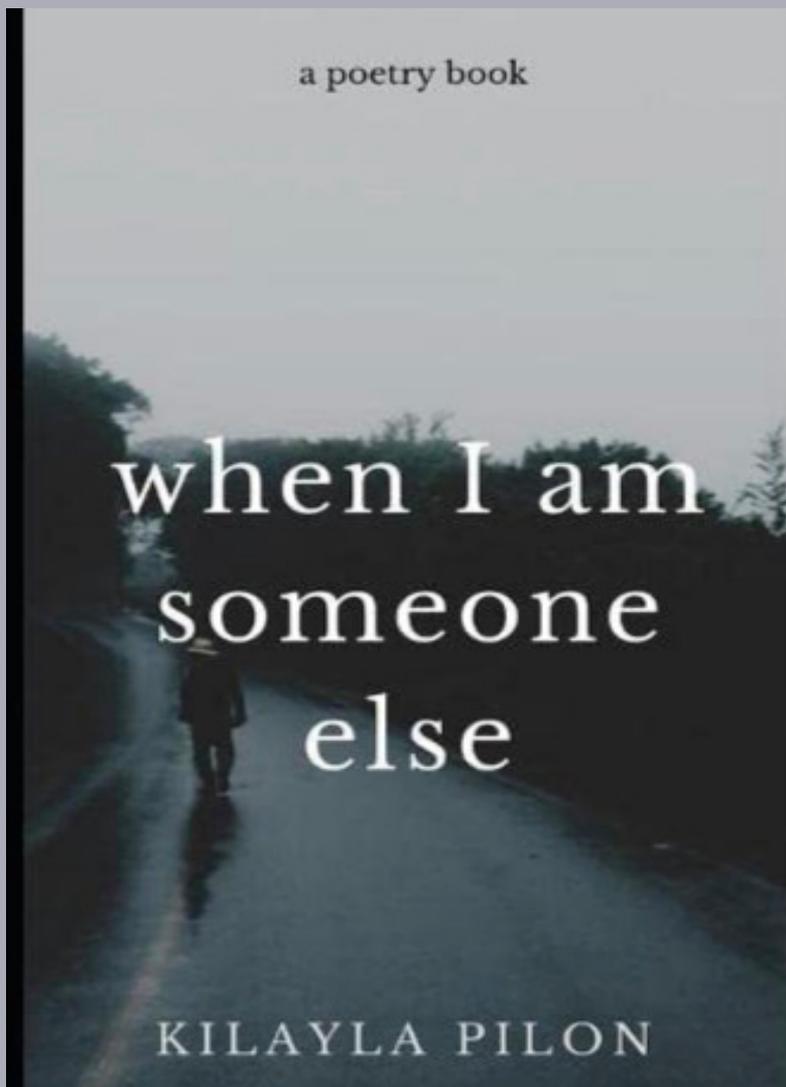
When I am someone e

Kilayla Pilon

When I Am Someone Else, a poetry collection known to ravage hearts and pull ones deepest emotions to the surface. Thumb through this chapbook and find poems that tell of pain and grief, friendships lost and addictions blossomed. See what life is like on the other side of the green grass. These poems detail life with severe, persistent mental illness such as persistent depressive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder as well as a life battling addiction.

The precursor to Kilayla Pilon's 2022 release, SCARLET CLOCK.

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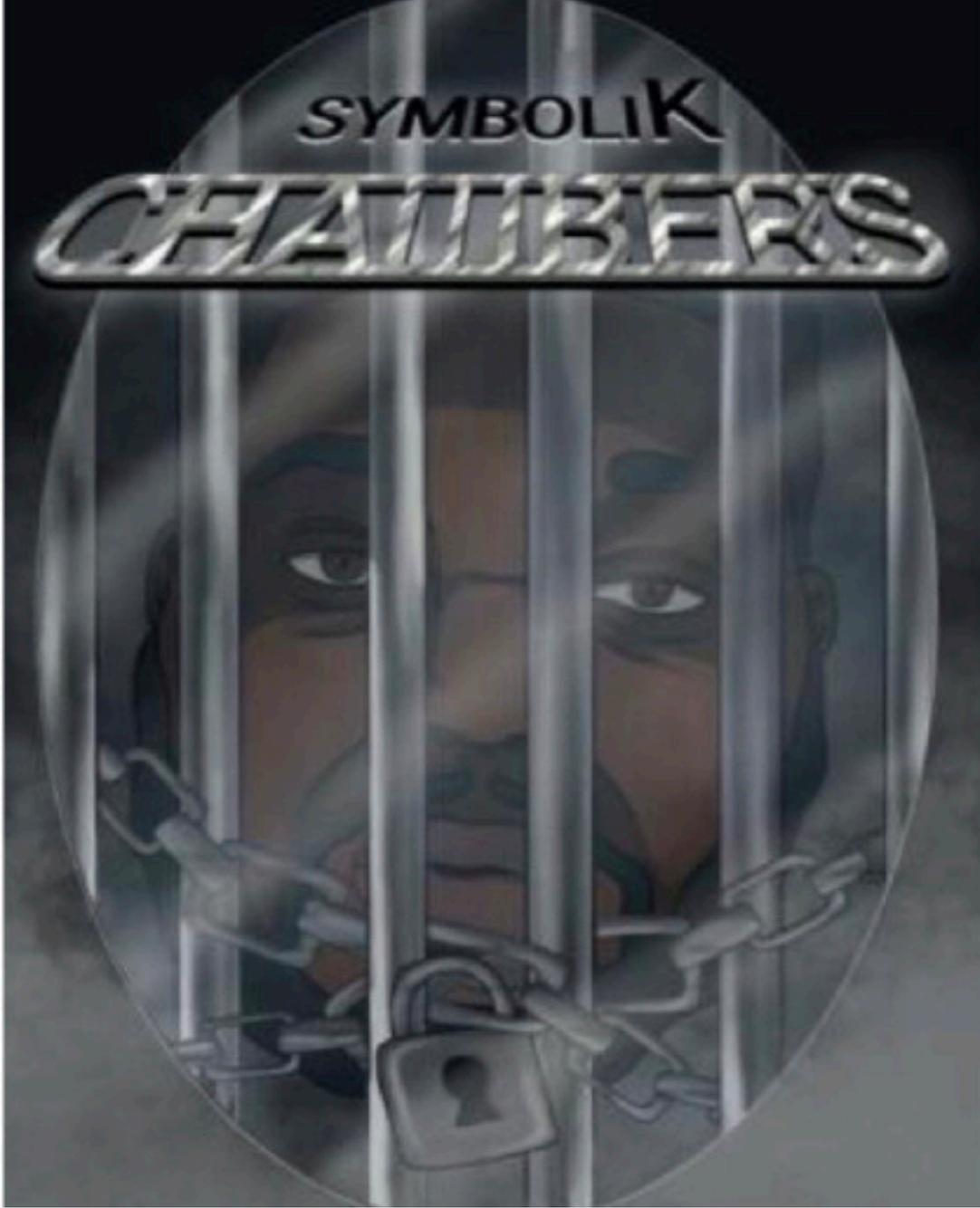


Find Kilayla Pilon's *When I Am someone else* on Amazon for 7.99

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Symbolik Chambers

Symbolik Knight



Symbolik Knight

Symbolik Chambers

Symbolik Chambers

by Symbolik Knight

As melanin darkens our skin tone, something clouds and convolutes our minds, our hearts, and the very soul of black folk. That something is trauma, the very codex written on the DNA of the complex term African-American. Kyle Whittle, in his debut book attacks how it is embedded in our lives and experiences. Chambers is a unique tale of the twists and turns of a young black male coping with what he has been through and what he has put others through, there's no perfect pathway or GPS for the black experience in America and Chambers exhibits said roadway through the contemporary poetry of Symbolik Knight.

Symbolik Knight's debut book *Symbolik Chambers* can be found through Barnes and Noble.

Instagram [symbolik_knight](#)

Story 13

Kerry Jo Bell

Friday, February 13, 2015

The winter sunrise is picturesque, yet impractical. It's minus thirteen degrees. The Hudson shimmers beneath the breath of the cotton-candy sky, while snow flurries blow feather-like in the wind, creating an oil painting I can almost touch.

Maxwell and I used to watch the sunrise together. But that was before he broke up with me. He left me for her, the woman he'd been cheating with for the latter part of our relationship, the colossal turd. Two years of my life and elaborate dreams of a family wasted on him. Just like that, I'm in my mid-thirties and single.

A freezing gust of wind navigates my bones. I head back inside, my lips hooked up into a sarcastic smirk, thinking about all the slack I get for leaving my balcony door unlocked. Well, I've thought about it. The ingenious fire escape system is indoors. I live on the fourteenth floor — thirteenth technically. Either way, no one is getting up this high. Not unless they are Batman, Superman, Spiderman or some sort of Superhero Man who can scale walls or climb tall buildings. In which case, I would gladly welcome him into my home with his superhero rock hard body and whatever else might be rock hard.

Back when I came to view my apartment, I was told that the German architect who designed this building was superstitious. So there's no thirteenth floor or suites ending in thirteen. I've felt right at home ever since. I wouldn't self-describe as superstitious exactly, but let's just say I've always had a tug-of-war with the number thirteen, and usually, I'm the one who ends up face down in the mud. It may have something to do with the fact that I was born on Friday the thirteenth. Now, if you follow Chinese zodiac, 1981 was the year of Darth Vader, obviously. A full moon sat comfortably in the winter sky witnessing the mistake I'd made with the date of my arrival. Thirty four years later, I'm surprisingly still around. It's my birthday today. Whoop-ti-doo! Or not. I stopped celebrating birthdays once I hit the big three zero. What would be the point? Hey, look at me, one year closer to grey hair and wrinkles. Also, society tends to forget about women once they pass thirty. Nothing more for you now, your life as you know it is over, so sorry, good luck, take care.

The proverbial clock of my life was ticking fast and always seemed to strike a hard 13:00 when it mattered most. Case in point, I'm having a morning!

The cold February air greets me, along with a thousand sloth-like humans making their way along the sidewalk. I meander past them, half-walking half-running towards the subway station.

Suddenly my phone rings. It's the dental office informing me that my appointment for this evening has to be rescheduled.

"Dr. Rhubani is in Bora Bora at the moment. Her flight yesterday got grounded due to bad weather — no flights could come into JFK, or anywhere. So, she's making the best of the situation and extending her holiday." Sarah, the receptionist informs me.

"I'm truly happy for her. But, I'd like it very much if I didn't have to drink my food."

A vision of Dr. Rhubini appears: a bikini on her perfectly toned body, lounging on a beach chair, toes in the sand, hot husband by her side and a fruity cocktail in hand, sipping. I hope the bitch gets sunburned.

"When's she back?"

"The soonest appointment is February 27th."

The clenching of my jaw triples the pain. "Two weeks from now?"

"I could refer you to an emergency dentist but they charge. Remember, Dr. Rhubini is doing this as a favour to you ... being a long time client ... because, you've used up all your dental allotment for the year."

I roll several of my eyes at her. "Thanks for reminding me, Sarah. Please confirm me for the 27th."

"Oh, okay, great. Soft foods till then. And Happy Valentines' Day."

Gah!

I had forgotten Valentine's Day. It is after all a day intended to be enjoyed by happy people in love. Not everyone has a Valentine. Doesn't Sarah and the other 'Happy Valentine's Day' wishing fools know that?

I picture Cupid, perched in a tree, staring at me, no bow or arrow in sight, shrugging his cherubic shoulders with an insincere I'm so sorry look on his face, before flying away. That chubby little fucker.

I snake my way down the crowded stairs, to the sea of people standing on the subway platform. Absolutely no one is driving this morning; or landing any planes either, apparently. I tip to see the service monitor alert screen. Delayed. Fuck this day. I will get to the meeting late, Kathy will behead me, and as a bonus, I get to stay down in this God forsaken hell of a wet garbage truck that much longer. An announcement crackles over the PA system. The transit worker informs us — the people of hell — that the delay we are experiencing was caused by an investigation into an incident at track level. Which is New York Speak for someone jumped. What else would they be doing down there? Oh don't mind me, just looking to make new friends with the mice ... busy naming said mice. Remy and I are having a moment.

I arrive to a stack of contracts with a post-it note from my nausea-inducing boss, Kathy. Stuck to my computer screen it reads, 'NEEDS TO BE FILLED BY EXP. DATE !!!!!'

"Only five exclamation marks? You're losing your touch, Kath," I say, feeling as if I've burnt a hundred calories reading that. And I'm on a liquid diet. "Also, I'm the filler here," I grumble. "by vendor name is the sensible way, Ms I know Jackall. And that's that." I grab the post-it and toss it in the bin. "And there's only one L in file, by the way," I say to Kathy's imaginary hologram sitting atop my computer.

I fan her off, unlocking it, opening an email from her with the subject line: Communications Supervisor Position. My heartbeat quickens. I cross my fingers, and take a deep breath. I exhale slowly after reading it and sink into my chair. She'd like to thank me for my application but has decided to go with someone completely new from outside the organization. My eyes brim. This was the fifth time I'd applied for a promotion. Kathy always finds an excuse not to give it to me. Sometimes, like this morning, she didn't even bother to find a good one.

I swirl in my chair. Her closed office door reads: Kathy Dingleberry. Oh no wait. Kathy Dillinger, Operations Manager. There we go. I flip it the bird. I glare at the stock-pile of contracts. Growing up my mother had a saying for all difficult things she couldn't be bothered dealing with, 'We're puttin this one in file thirteen.'

Gah!

I never really grasped what she was saying until I became a card carrying adult. Once I did, I started writing about the forgotten files — depression, ageing, childlessness, loneliness, the horrors of online dating. And occasionally, xenophobia, homophobia and racism. I write part-time for an online magazine, and have had op-ed columns in The New York Times. My dream is to be a full-time writer, exploring the topics often considered taboo in today's society. People are inanely scared of the truth. But me, I make a b-line towards it.

I glare at the stock pile of contracts. "Even by vendor name, this will take me the entire day," I shove them aside. "I'd much rather be home working on my article and drinking dinner," I murder to my computer.

"Pardon me?" A stern voice assaults the air. I swing my chair around to find Kathy standing behind me, a hand firmly curved around her hip. How long have you been standing there, I don't ask.

"Oh, hey Kathy. Mad subway delays."

"I heard. But that's the very reason cabs exist. I'll be writing you up for your tardiness. Now, meeting? Board Room? Any of those words mean anything to you?" She stomps off down the corridor, pausing to chat with Liana from Social Media. Liana, who is just walking in. Liana who is also late. Liana, who she tells not to worry about it.

"Zoë Thompson, are we having this meeting without you?" Kathy barks over her shoulder.

"No. Yes. Coming." I grab my laptop, notebook, pens and proposals from my desk drawer, and try my hardest not to cry.

Safely home, I slam the door shut. With it disappears this treacherous day. I lean against it, wondering if I had a bad habit of killing kittens in a past life. Or perhaps I murdered someone who reincarnated as Kathy. Or Maxwell, even.

I need to find a new job. I know there are garden variety Kathies at every organisation, but ... something's gotta give. Both my work life and love life can't be shit.

The boys — for they were not men— I dated before Maxwell only ever had lukewarm feelings for me. I'm hard to warm up to. Turns out I'm a big weirdo, an acquired taste. So I tried online dating — for there are plenty of odd balls there. But my first 'date' I got catfished, and that left a raw taste in my mouth. Plus, I realised I meet enough bots and fake people in real life. The men at the office are slim pickings too; married, gay, in a relationship, all of the above. The last two months being single has felt more like two years. And unless a magical man flies into my life all chevalier on his unicorn, I'm shit outta luck. I'll become an old-maid. What am I talking about? I'm already there.

For a socially-anxious neurotic superstitious single thirty-something with more issues than People Magazine, I think my life is going really well. Obviously.

I saunter into the kitchen, grabbing a bottle of heavy Red and do an angry pour, before heading into the bathroom where I soak in a lavender bubble bath. Pity party playlist on full blast, wine and cheesecake polished off, candles all around, incense burning. This is what rock bottom looks like.

I study my bedroom ceiling. There's a watermark I hadn't noticed before; a heart, complete with cupid's arrow, if you look at it right. Maybe I'm seeing things. This is after all my second — or is it fifth — glass of wine.

The playlist blares through my AirPods. There's a weird drum beat, suddenly. It takes me a minute to realise there's someone knocking at my door. I would wager good money that it's Mrs. Martinelli borrowing some form of cooking ingredient. Or, it might be Rebecca, borrowing spices she never returns. I might as well be the neighbourhood's friendly convenience store. I consider ignoring whoever it is, but they know my routine by now. They know I'm nowhere but home. This is as hopping as it gets for me on any given Friday night. I force my face into what I hope is a pleasant smile as I look through the peep hole. I have altogether drank too much wine. There's a beautiful man standing outside my door. I open it and our eyes lock. Steady, sure, gentle. A blonde coif, perfectly sculpted. A subtle goatee, perfectly groomed, accentuates a chiselled jawline.

My heart skips.

"Hi," says turquoise eyes.

"H, h-h-hi...?"

His cheeks flush.

"Hallo, yes. Ahm ..." His voice is husky yet soft; a German accent pronounces itself. "I'm Johan, and I recently moved in. I'm in 1412. ..." Strawberry ice-cream crawls up his cheeks. "Diana right here," he points to my neighbour, "told me that you're the person to go to, to borrow some brown sugar? Apparently you're the only one on this floor who has any ...I want to bake a cake and ..." there's a sweet pause before he starts talking again. "Anyway, I really don't want to go out in that." He gestures towards my floor-to-ceiling windows. Outside is teeming with snow.

"Sure, ahm, yeah. Give me a sec."

"Danke," he says.

I make my way into the kitchen, wondering if he's an apparition. I pray that he didn't notice any of my facial gymnastics, or my crossed fingers.

I hand him a cup of brown sugar, and our fingers touch. A bolt of lightning strikes between us.

"Would you like to come in for ... something to drink? Hot chocolate? Coffee? Wine?"

"Thank you. Yes. Any of the above." He comes in and sits. The man's eyes are the same colour as my sofa.

"Some cake?" I offer, putting the kettle on.

"Lovely. Thank you. Now I won't have to bake one."

“I have double chocolate and also cheesecake. Which would you like?”

“A slice of each?”

“Oh, you on that type two diabetes diet, huh?”

His laugh is a music box. “That sounds like something my mother would say.”

“Oh, is she German?”

“No, Germans don’t have a sense of humour.”

It’s my turn to laugh.

“You are Zoë, yes?”

“Oh, yeah, I didn’t even introduce myself. Yeah, last time I checked. And you are, Johan, you said?”
He nods. “And you’re German?”

He explains that his mother was American, his father German. After his parents divorced he went to live with his father in Germany, visiting his mother here on holidays.

“So, you live in this concrete jungle now ...?”

“I do. Tragic subway system and all ...”

“Tell me about it. Today was a nightmare on every street.”

He chuckles. “Usually I don’t go out on this day. It’s Friday the thirteenth and I’m superstitious.”
He hangs his head, blushing crimson this time, fiddling with his fingers.

Goosebumps rise in a tickle up my neck. The kettle whistles. But I sit transfixed.

“I suppose the kettle is ready,” he says.

Once in the kitchen I say over my shoulder. “You know ... it’s actually my birthday today.”

“Really?” he says, an incredible smile on his face. “Happy birthday. I guess that explains all the cake.”

“No ... not really ... not celebrating ... cake is all I can handle ... wisdom tooth growing in.”

“Why aren’t you celebrating?”

“Would you, if you were born on such a retched day?” I’m not telling this man my age.

“Well, I think I have you beat. My birthday is on Halloween.” I put the kettle back down and peak out the kitchen at him. “Hmm,” is all I say.

I hand him coffee and some cake. Our fingers touch again. A spark of electricity arch between us. This time, he holds my gaze, producing a flirty smile. “Did you notice that this building doesn’t have a thirteenth floor, or suites ending in 13?” He asks.

“Yup. That’s why I picked it. I’m a weirdo like that.”

His eyes dance. “You’re not a weirdo. Having a black cat you named Lucky is being a weirdo.”

“No?”

“Yes, and she tries to steal all my sweet treats, the rascal. It’s been just me and her since my mom passed.”

“Sorry,” I offer.

“It’s alright. She’d been ill for awhile. I came here to take care of her and stayed.”

This man done walked out of a fairytale book.

“Anyway, let’s talk about more pleasant things, shall we?”

“So not New York or birthdays then?”

“You know,” he says, lifting his coffee cup, “seeing that it’s your birthday, we should be drinking wine instead.”

“I’ve drank enough wine for the both of us already, so...”

He laughs, throwing his head back and revealing perfectly white teeth.

Before I know what I’m doing, I’m telling him about my awful day and my epic breakup and everything in between. By the fifth – or is it eighth – glass of wine, it feels suspiciously like a date. A really good date.

“Well,” Johan says, finishing his wine, “it was nice meeting you, neighbour.” He holds up the cup of brown sugar like a trophy. “Thanks for this. I might not need it tonight, but, I’ll need it.”

“Bittershon,” I try out the little german I know.

He hesitates by the archway. “Ahm ... so, I don’t know ... but, would you like to have dinner with me sometime?” He asks.

I stare transfixed at him. Except he’s a beautiful whirl. I steady my gaze.

“Sure, ahm, that would be nice.”

“Tomorrow’s supposed to be better weather,” he says, turquoise eyes twinkling.

“Tomorrow’s Valentine’s Day,” I hear myself slur.

“Yes,” he says, managing to make it sound like a question. There’s that damn smile again.

“I can’t chew a damn thing,” I say, shaking my head.

“Then I’ll make soup.”

“Wait? You’re cooking?”

“I could. I love to cook. It’s my dream to own a restaurant one day. Right now I’m a sous chef, but ... things are looking up. If you prefer, though, we can go to any restaurant that serves soup. Or cake.” He’s smirking.

“Dunno. How come you look like that and can cook. And bake and, stuff,” I hear a drunk girl ask.

“It was a way of bonding with my mother. Cooking, baking, properly learning English. All come in handy when you’re a young food blogger navigating New York City.”

“You can’t possibly do that for a living ...”

“What? Create great food everyday and then write about it? Sure I can.”

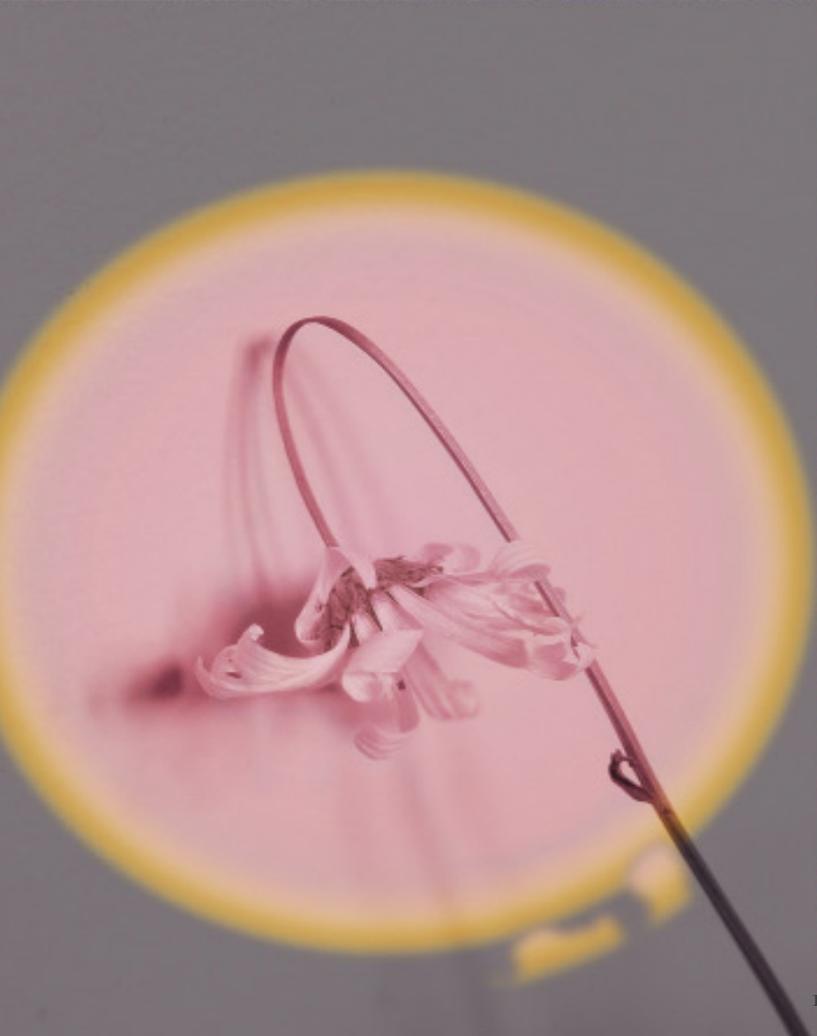
“My dream is to start an online magazine and write about the things you’re not supposed to, so, no judgement here,” I confess.

“Hm. Maybe we should put our skills together and create something,” he says.

“Maybe.”

We stand, smiling goofily at each other, knowing that the atmosphere around us is magically mystical. Our lives have collided and it's a sweet concussion.

It's been four years since Johan showed up at my door. We've been married for three of those years and are expecting our second child next month. His restaurant is going strong and so is my online magazine, both aptly called, Storey 13.



Music for Tarot

César Mora Moreau

As the witch shuffled the cards, the colors of the world faded. My face couldn't hide the fear as the white-toothed woman spoke to me about the future. I saw her curly hair peeking out of the turban, her eyes as black as two oil wells, and her open palms invited my hand to come closer.

“Choose three cards,” she said.

“Any cards?”

“Any.”

I didn't know why I was trembling. I didn't believe in any of those things, despite the city being littered with voodoo shops, supernatural tours of cemeteries invaded by ghosts and women capable of changing your luck.

“What do we have here?”

This is bullshit, I thought, looking at the other "witches" in their esoteric outdoor tents, looking to attract any dumb tourist walking outside the Saint-Louis cathedral. When I say "dumb tourists" I include myself. I was a fool for approaching the woman staring at me, claiming to be able to see my destiny. I was a fool because at the end of this little act, I would pay ten dollars that I could well have used to buy a beer in the middle of that hot afternoon. The umbrella that was above us protected us from the sun, but not from the furnace-like heat that was felt throughout the square.

“I don't see love.”

That was the woman's conclusion as she reviewed the cards. According to her, the Priestess, the Hermit and the Empress could only mean one thing: loneliness. My present actions were guided by good judgment and wisdom, but that would not do me any good because I was alone.

“Alone,” I repeated, without showing my fear for that word.

“That's right.” The witch gathered her cards and took my hand. For a moment I thought she might read my palm.

“Don't be afraid”.

Of course I was afraid. A charlatan, which I didn't even know, was condemning me to a life without love. Well, she hadn't used those exact words, but the message was the same. I couldn't help but think of B and how much I loved him, though he didn't know it.

“We can still summon the voodoo queen for advice, if you're willing to pay the price.”

I was tempted to say yes, but I figured that was just a part of her scam. I left with a friendly smile and a few less dollars in my wallet, calculating how much money was left in my account for the remainder of the trip.

That's the funny thing about love, I thought, as I walked through streets where people photographed themselves in such a way that the balconies with hanging plants and gringo flags were within the frame. It doesn't matter how strong your feelings are, if they are not reciprocated, everything is in vain. B must have been sleeping with his boyfriend at the time, and I kept imagining what could have been if I had just told him how I felt... Every five steps I had to stop so as not to interfere with the photos of happy couples. Damn them!

The city was magic. And I'm not referring to the phony witches on the street corners, but to the mystical energy that the musician invoked every time he played his trumpet and encouraged people to sing —and also leave a few notes in the case of his instrument—. It seemed to me that I was the only one who did not watch him through the screen of my cell phone.

I was fascinated by the beauty of his face, the droplets of sweat that beaded his forehead, the muscles in his arms, and the ease of his body as he moved. From the musician's lips, I heard the word NOLA for the first time. I wasn't sure what he meant when upon finishing his song, he welcomed me to NOLA.

“NOLA?”

I figured I didn't recognize the word in English, or that I was having trouble understanding its pronunciation, but he quickly explained to me that that was the diminutive of New Orleans: NOLA. I liked the word so much that I decided to use it as many times as possible, and I repeated it, several hours later, when I told my date that I would be leaving the next day.

“That can't be,” he said with a sad face. I held his hand.

To think, just an hour ago the table wouldn't stop moving and the vase wobbled as if it was about to fall. I looked everywhere for an earthquake, but it was my leg that caused the tremors. I couldn't stay calm knowing that J was going to be here any minute.

“What if I don't like him?” Well, if I don't like him, I'll be nice to him for the duration of the date and then delete his number. Done. “Oh, I hope he doesn't come. What will we talk about?”

I looked at his photos to convince myself. Of course, I wanted to go out with the boy riding his motorcycle like a rebel, with those square glasses making him look all cute.

“I have to calm down. One, two, one, two. Inhale Exhale. Inhale Exhale. Shit, he's here!”

In person he looked a little different. He was gigantic. I recognized his face when I saw him enter, and I waved to him to let him know where I was.

“J?” I asked, not quite knowing what to do.

A kiss on the cheek? A handshake? He nodded and took the initiative. My fingers sensed his nervousness, and I smiled to let him know that everything was fine. J smiled back at me, and I ventured to ask him what he wanted to drink.

“How long will you be staying?” He asked me, as we went for our third beer.

“Tomorrow I leave NOLA.”

“That can't be!”

J looked at my fingers laced within his own and squeezed my hand gently. It felt good. Closed

palms, indecipherable future. What did the witch know about my destiny?

Despite his height, and the hairs that grew on his cheeks and surrounded his lips, his face was like that of a child. A child I wanted to kiss and who stunned me every time he listed his favorite series. I hadn't seen not even one of them.

"I think we might be incompatible," I said, jokingly.

"You think?" The eyes looking at me were deep green or very light blue, I wasn't sure.

"No," I wanted to say. Instead I asked him if I could kiss him when my lips were already halfway to his face.

"Of course."

We both closed our eyes, following the craze of not looking at each other during kisses. My hands went over his neck, his stomach, the lump between his legs. J pulled away trying to catch his breath, looking around to make sure that no one could see us.

"Let's get out of here," he suggested.

Now we are in his car. He caresses my cheek, my lips, and I kiss the tips of his fingers. I think I could lie on him all night. We haven't had sex. All the hotels are full, and I can't bring him back to my hostel.

"We could do it here," Was my suggestion when we parked up in a dark alley. I wanted my kisses to cloud his judgment, to awaken all his desire. But the fear of being arrested was greater. Every time a car's lights lit up the street, J froze, trembling.

"I can't do it." The lights and shadows flashed across his dim face. He seemed as though he might cry.

"Don't worry," I said to him and he put his huge arms around me.

We've been lying here for at least two hours without saying a word. The radio is playing a song by Jacob Collier. I can hear the sounds of birds, cymbals, crystals and a drum. Why do birds suddenly appear? Every time you are near. Just like me, they long to be, close to you. I repeat that last sentence, which I suppose is the title of the song, and I sit on J to kiss him from that position. He slides his hands down my back, and I seek to unbutton his pants. NOLA, NOLA. I repeat it as if it were a love spell, a verbal caress. NOLA. His tongue runs down my neck. NOLA. My mouth stops at his nipples. NOLA ...

It's almost to dawn when we get out of the car. I have to finish packing, but I'm not telling him because I want him to stay by my side, holding my hand, and talking about his work as a light designer in a musical. We walk down St. Charles Avenue. J kisses me every so often, and I remember the words of the stupid witch. I also think of B, but I can't quite remember his full name.

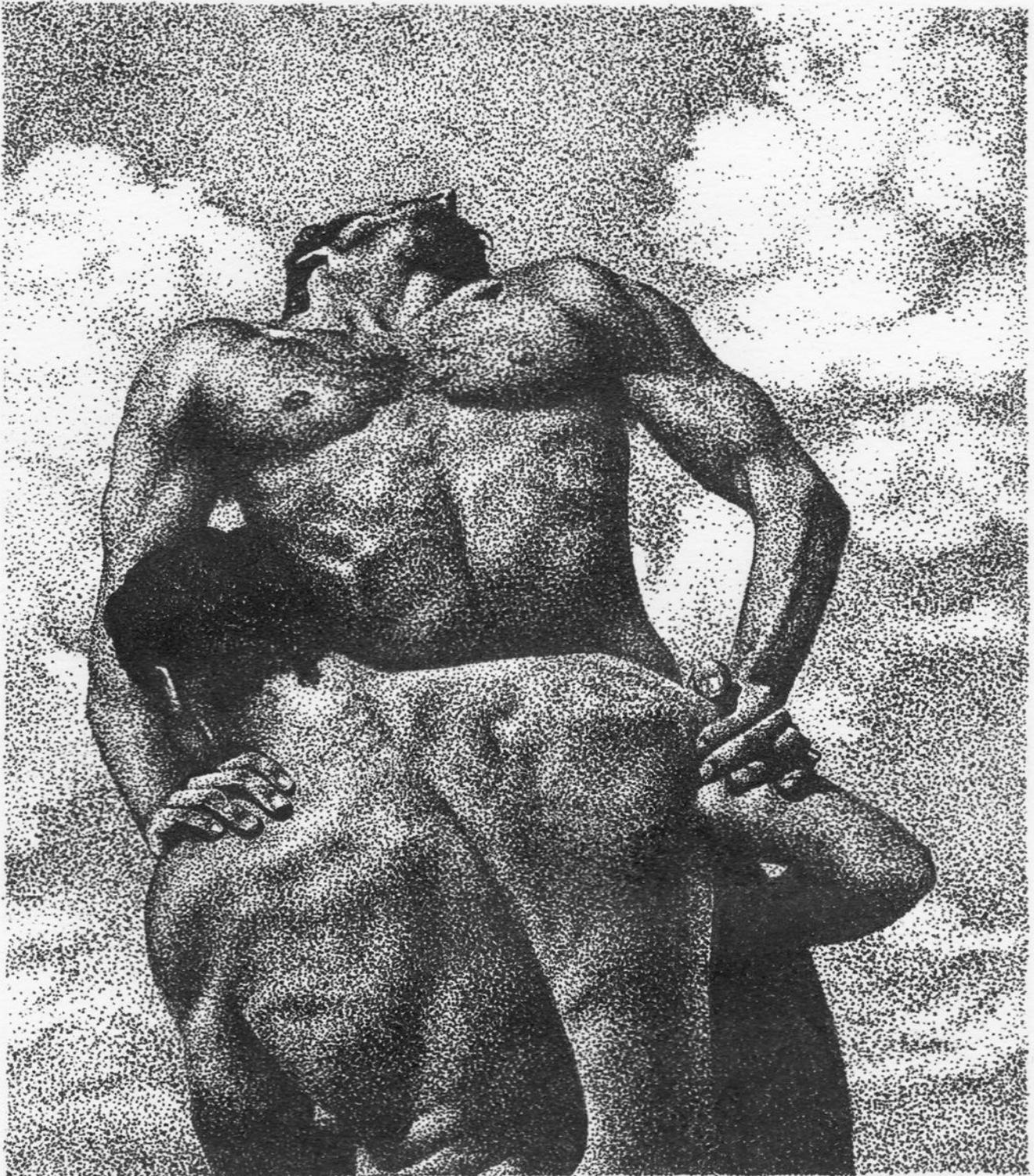
In the corner, a lone musician plays his saxophone and begins to move his feet when he sees us go by. We watch him for a while. I don't recognize the song, but I feel like dancing. If we were in a musical, I would start by moving slowly, imitating the man's steps, and then I would tell J to dance. He would refuse at first, I would insist, and then, a little embarrassed, he would spin me around, keeping up with me.

Contemplating the musician, the awakening city, J, I feel like I'm flying and all I see are images

of a childhood dream. A sticky sweat and the feeling of embarrassment run through my body. I don't want to stop moving as my imagination swings like a pendulum. Somewhere the witch shuffles her cards, but the colors of the world do not fade, quite the contrary: they become more intense when looking into Joshua's eyes during our farewell —they are blue— and I give him a kiss that I hope won't be our last. —It will be—.

I enter the hostel, he walks to his car. The musician remains there on the street.





Justin Mezzapelli



Justin Mezzapelli is a multi-media artist interested in domesticity, multiplicity and queerness. As an illustrator, writer, and filmmaker, much of his practice magnifies the ordinary. Currently working with pointillist ink illustration, his images depict activity of everyday life, suggest an attention to time, and reference media of the public domain. He seeks to reframe identity within the ever-present mundane. Justin holds a BFA from OCAD University in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Grandmother Blue. Cream Cake. Red Shoes. Mermaid Magic.

Katie Ness

Tell me something good”

“Well... When I was little my favourite outfit was my glittery boots and bumble bee tights!”

“Bumblebee bee tights?”

“Black and Yellow stripes!”

“Oh dear god!”

“Didn’t you ever love anything that much?”

“Yes...Yes I did.”

-Me before you; Jojo Moyes

I was a whimsical little girl, a day dreamer, Persephone sweetness, delicate like a rose bud, timid like a deer. I was 4 and the year was 1989, my sister was 1 and my parents were going through a separation.

I have few good memories from when I was small. Like that summer daddy picked an apple for me from our back garden and peeled the skin off like a coiling shiny red snake. Or eating Strawberries and cream for breakfast! Or when nanna bought me red buckled shoes, I pointed and said “I got my shoes on!” I remember wanting red shoes so much. I still love the colour red. Red shoes, red lipstick, red dresses, red flowers in my hair!

Mostly, I remember the fighting but I also don’t remember the fighting. It’s all a blur like the sound of angry forests in a windstorm. I remember things smashing, the smell of cigarettes and alcohol, vile words and ruptured harsh voices. My early experience of life was drenched in verbal warfare. Home was a battle ground. I do not have many good memories that made me feel steady as I navigated my early childhood.

I was sent a lot to my grandmother's. For my mum it was great for her because I was no longer her burden. For me it was respite from an unstable world, a temporary calm in the storm.

Nanna Monica was cosy love incarnate. A large cuddly lady who smelled of peppermints and had a gentle Irish accent. I always saw her in soft blue, sad eyes and a tender smile.

She was big. She was blue. She was beautiful.

Under the television there was a velvet oblong box that held treasures belonging to me. She kept them safe for when I returned. Asking me to go pick out what I wanted, she'd pull up two sofas and place me on their joined arm rests so that I may view the treasure better in her hands.

My treasure was story books. I didn't care much for toys (Other than my mermaid doll and purple horse). Moments hearing her soft voice reading tales to me soothed me. Taught me patience, gentleness and kindness when my world was turbulent.

So while the rest of my family were hating each other, my nanna and I read books and ate cream cakes together. My days with her were filled with joy, hope, imagination and feeling safe.

We had a ritual. We'd nibble on slices of cheddar cheese together before devouring chocolate cream eclairs as we created our snug and safe haven.

The books she read to me were *The Little Mermaid*, *Alexander Kitten*, *Mrs Tiggy-Winkle* and *Sleeping Beauty*. Those were my favourites! I always wore my red shoes around nanna and would click the heels together like Dorothy from 'The Wizard of Oz' to begin the magic!

The Little Mermaid taught me adventure and to go after dreams I really wanted, against all odds. *Alexander Kitten* taught curiosity, kindness and understanding, *Mrs Tiggy-Winkle* connected me to the magic of nature and *Sleeping Beauty* taught me that love is possible and worth fighting for.

Nanna would read to me for every visit. Sometimes with cake, other times with Cadbury's flake. Always with a hug. She instilled a sense of wonder, visual journeying and imagination within me that I carried into my adult life.

I'm actually a diagnosed dyslexic, although you wouldn't believe it. I struggle to read application forms, road maps, transport timetables, spreadsheets, my short term memory is poor and I had delayed speech in my younger years.

Reading with her stripped all the chaos away, gave me clarity and room to breathe. All the hurt fell away and I could concentrate on the moment, her voice and the love I felt. Every smile, every turn of the page, every picture. A moment of stillness in my otherwise turbulent world.

One day I had a dream, (I'm only 4 years old remember). I'm standing on a platform and I see my nanna waiting for a train. My mother behind me is crying and I'm trying to understand. The train arrives and as my nanna starts to walk on, I say "You forgot your suitcases!", she replies "Where I'm going I don't need my things poppet, but I'll always be with you." She then steps on the train and the train leaves.

I wake up, confused and upset and I run to my mum saying "Nanna is leaving us". But I'm told to stop being silly because I'm going to see her in the afternoon.

About two months later she died. My whole world falls apart and I lose the one person in my life who showed me unconditional love, kindness and provided me stability. She was only 58 years old.

I clutch my books to my chest, barely able to hold them all in my little hands and my heart shatters. I was never going to hear stories read aloud by my nanna again. I believe I was mute for a while, I know that at kindergarten teachers told my mum I had become more withdrawn and shy, I wouldn't speak or play with the other children. I'd sit alone and flip through pages of the Little

Mermaid hoping to find pieces of my nanna in the illustrations or maybe she's hiding behind a sentence?

As I grew up I felt her spirit in every book I read or in every piece of writing I made. I remained a rather quiet student in school, hardworking with high grades and the only criticism teachers gave on my report card was "she's too quiet". My voice closed down but my heart was wide open.

My nana's death broke me open to feel so much, understanding the magnitude of loss at such a tender age pushed me to go on a quest to find her again, like the Little Mermaid in the ocean of life, to find my happy place within the stories and the pictures.

Grandmother became immortalized in every book I read and every poem I wrote. In every book I carry, she ventures with me, whether that is to the next town or country. Sands, seas, mountains and forests. A book is placed in my satchel as though her spirit walks with me.

I eventually excelled in literature and in art. I wrote my first poem at 12, it was about death as eternal dreaming. At 13 I began to write diaries, throughout my teens I created short stories, in my 20's I made art journals and by my late 20's I began publishing wellness articles. I am now in my 30's and I've become a published memoirist in a book and a poet in anthologies.

In December 2020 I survived an ectopic pregnancy. During my recovery I wished my grandmother was with me, I imagined her gentle presence sitting by my bedside reading to me. I felt inspired to create, to transform my pain into beauty.

I now perform my poetry and teach poetry healing workshops with yoga, sharing circles and cacao ceremonies. I create those cosy spaces for women and teen girls the same way my nanna did for me. To recreate that safe haven of love, gentleness and serenity in a chaotic world. Her timeless love that knows no boundaries has helped me become the woman I am today.

My love of literature and writing brings me closer to my grandmother every day. I overcame parts of my dyslexia because of her, I found my voice through writing because of her, I discovered a hidden passion and talent for storytelling and poetry because of her.

My love of reading and writing act as keys that unlock the doorway to another realm that takes me back to those sweet moments.

And in those moments I'm with my Grandmother Blue. Cream Cakes. Red Shoes. Mermaid Magic.



ALAN SPINNEY

The Last Day

Davide Lepore

They sat there, smoking a last cigarette in the unforgiving December cold. Neither of the two had spoken a word in the half hour gone by since they met. There was too much to say to belittle it with pointless words, had thought Dario while they sat on a bench enjoying the last light of the day before them. Angelo had been his friend since primary school. There had been intermittent periods of distance, but during the university years they had become inseparable. The number of memories they had collected was astonishing, enough to fill more than one lifetime. How was he supposed to bid farewell to all that?

The setting sun was spreading shades of pink all over the sky. In front of them the silhouette of the whole town stood black, drawing the contours of familiar landscapes against the horizon. Dario recognised the two ancient pine trees on the side of the hill, his hill, there since he could remember; the bell tower of the church, the highest point of the town, just above the two trees. He could see one side of the ancient castle, made even more majestic by the reflections of the last minutes of sunshine. All that beauty was devastating, a painful memento of all the things he was to leave behind. He had just come down from that old part of the village. Up there the traditional Christmas market had started, and he had taken his mother to see it. One last walk before the departure. She had been smiling and joking the whole time, hiding her pain with motherly experience. He had been less good at that, his heart barely beating under the squeezing pressure of the limited time remaining. The Christmas lights of the market had made her smile the more beautiful, and he had started missing her right there and then. When the late afternoon wind had risen, she had asked to get back home, to get warm and start preparing dinner. He had withstood the disappointment, conscious that time had already started stealing fragments of his life and told her he would meet her back home. There was one last person to see.

So, he had walked alone to see Angelo, taking mental pictures of all the corners of his hometown he encountered on the way. Corners filling with shadows past and present, a theatre of dusty memories, haunting him, tempting him into questioning his decision. But he knew that if he started questioning, doubt would have overcome him and left him in despair. He had to move on; move on from everything he had ever known in order to survive, even if sometimes the things we do to survive take a little away from the reasons for which we survive.

When he had finally reached his friend, that unbreakable silence had been the best way they had found to express how they felt. He hated endings, happy or otherwise.

Saying goodbye to Angelo was saying goodbye to a substantial part of his life, and he was postponing it as long as he could, every second gained an extra instant in which he could

pretend nothing was really happening. He felt empty. The same emptiness that fills you after a long cry, but there had not been any crying yet. That would come too, later. All he wanted was to stop the sun from setting. He wished time would break and that there would be no tomorrow. Only that sunset, at home. He had no idea how to say goodbye to his whole life.

He thought again of his parents, the hardest part of it all. A sting of guilt hit him knowing they were alone, at home, waiting for him to come back and spend their last evening together. His mother preparing dinner, his father wondering why he was late; a premonition of the years to come. And they would eat together, and joke, and laugh, the love they would share digging deeper inside his heart. The idea of going to sleep terrified him, an unconscious bridge to tomorrow, the day that would take him away.

Deep inside of him he knew his family, his friends, and his town would still be there waiting for him. But he also knew there would be changes. He knew things would move on, as it is always the case, and that from now on they would do so without him. He knew that from that moment on he would be able to come back only occasionally, each time finding new things that would make him feel a little more like a stranger. And he suddenly realised that those final moments, those few hours left at home, would be the very last in which he truly belonged to that place, to those people. The next day he would be on his own. An immigrant, like many before him in his family; like many before him in his town.

He looked at Angelo, who smiled and kept smoking. Then he went back to the view in front of him.

He hated the sunset for stealing the day from him. He could feel time slipping away and instinctively pushed his feet against the ground, as if to slow it down. But it was done. The last spark of light shone on his hill and then dusk opened the way to the night. It was done. His last day home was over.



Life Force

Erik Cheung

Born in Hong Kong, Erik is now a Canadian who embraces three cultures; the British reminiscences is still vivid, as in the minds of many Hongkongers whom are fleeing today. Once an international city, Hong Kong has provided a unique palette of cultural perspectives from which he draws from.

The many great Exhibits at the AGO (Art Gallery of Ontario) enlightened the student Erik during his days in Ontario. Then came the scenic Victoria which gave natural inspirations while the Indigenous images infused an influence which he was not aware until 30 years later - his lines, red, black and gold!

Soon after, Erik became an art teacher while creating and exhibiting on the side for almost two decades. He quit teaching realizing the lack of grounds to inspire, provoke and engage. The part when he devised stimulated projects for his students and saw how they were amazed at their own creations was diminishing.

Moving back to Canada in 2010, residing in Edmonton, he retreated into over a decade of line

Artist Statement

I believe that grace outlives trends and fashion. It transcends an art for generations to appreciate. Whichever era we are in, we are that same human possessing the same emotional needs, requiring that same art quality to fill that appetite.

It is an artist's job to present the best of his time, which is the reason for the variety in my life's work.

Our time is diversity.

A Letter To The Teacher That Changed Me

Marielle

Dear Ms. X,

You won't remember me, and that's fine. I was not one of your memorable students. I wasn't the kind to give a Christmas present every year even though I no longer had you as a teacher. I wasn't the one to visit you after graduation to bring you a coffee and thank you for your work. I find it kind of ironic that somebody can have such an impact on another's life yet not remember who they are. Or am I wrong? Do you know the impact that you left on me? Because as much as I try to forget, my life brings me situations that remind me of you. And even after the last time I walked out of your classroom ten years ago, I still think about how you changed me as a student.

You see, recently, I saw that they promoted you. Congratulations on no longer teaching the 4th grade. Was that a choice? Or did someone maybe help you realize that you weren't cut out to be a teacher for students at that age? By the way, I thought you were a great educator. All the third graders were so keen on having you as a teacher (including me). You threw up peace signs in pictures. You had spa days with the girls in your class. You took us on trips to the park. You played Justin Bieber's "Baby" on the class radio. You were passionate about the environment. You had a youthful energy that none of the other teachers had. And you were a good teacher! At least for most students. So imagine my excitement finding out that I lucked out with getting to be in your class.

I thought I was a good student, but maybe I'm biased. Maybe the grades on my paper weren't enough to praise me like you did the other students who weren't getting nearly as high marks. Okay, so intelligence didn't matter to you. Besides, I wasn't the smartest in that class. I was smarter than most because I put the effort into my school work, but maybe motivated students couldn't win your approval either. Or was it that you liked nice girls? I had a strong friend group. All the girls in your class who you loved chatting with when you had the time during your recess duty. But never me. For some reason, you never liked me. And that didn't really bother me until one day.

In French class, our French teacher occasionally awards kids in the class who are strong students. This time it was Jillian. Jillian's a good student. She knows her vocabulary, completes her work, and

presents well. She deserved the award. A couple of girls in our class didn't think so. And I caught them talking about it when Jillian wasn't around. I never said anything about it, but other people seemed to have heard them too because eventually, Jillian found out. And of all the people in the class, Jillian asked me. Jillian asked me if it was true. And I wasn't going to lie to her because lying is wrong. Right? So, I told her. I told her that I heard them in the bathroom whispering about it and I really wished that I hadn't.

Jillian didn't take this too well. And I was too young to know that Jillian was super sensitive. She brought the problem to you. Maybe she had tears on her face or tried to be strong about it. Either way, you called these two girls aside with Jillian to talk it out. At first, you couldn't believe Jillian because these two girls were some of your favourite students. They were like you in a way because they were sociable. You had a connection with them that I would never have. How could these two outgoing girls be so cruel to an intelligent girl like Jillian? That is, of course, if they weren't.

After shooting down the accusations, you asked Jillian how she could possibly know those bad things were being said behind her back? And Jillian pointed to me because nobody else had the decency to tell her. She asked somebody similar to herself. Someone shy. Someone soft. Someone who wouldn't lie. You called me over to the conversation that you were having with Jillian and these two girls. And you asked me, plain and simple:

"Did you tell Jillian that they said that she didn't deserve the award?"

And I said, "Yes." Then suddenly, you were no longer using the soft voice that you had earlier used but your normal speaking voice. The class went quiet, you were loud enough for all of them to hear. You told me that this was my fault. I was wrong. I shouldn't have done that. I should've known better before spreading false information. I was the one who had to apologize to Jillian and the two girls. And so I did.

Say I was wrong. Maybe I did mishear them as did all of the other 20 students in that class. It was my fault and I shouldn't have been listening in their conversation anyways. Why were you so quick to blame me? Why did you demand my apology so quickly? Why wasn't I given the privilege of an explanation? I know that I'm being dramatic. I should get over something that happened when I was ten. But I am never going to know the answers to these questions. I'm never going to know why I never asked the girl in 7th grade why she was crying in the hallway. I'm not going to know why I never told my sophomore math class to shut up about the boy who stalks the hallway. I'm not going to know why I turned the volume up on my earphones as the lady on my bus ride home from my lectures got harassed. Cause somehow, I really thought that if I ever tried to speak out of my place again, it would somehow be my fault and I would be the one in trouble. So Ms. here is the lesson that I took from your classes. Maybe it's better to be a bystander. I shouldn't do something because I'll risk the chance that I'm wrong and then have to be punished for it.

Sincerely,

M

White

Yael Zam

White.

Everything is white here. It is an empty space. I feel a buzzing that soon turns to pressure. I hear it and feel it only in my head. I want to throw myself on the floor in fetal position but I don't feel my body, I only feel my heavy head.

Black.

I see nothing. I only feel my heart rushing and my heavy breath. Everything feels faster than I can resist. I feel more weight than I can bear. I am afraid and I cannot see anything that happens. I feel my body again and then, suddenly, all I feel is pain. I desperately want to burst so as not to feel it. I want to return to the emptiness.

Red.

I swim in a river with dense, salty, red water. Quickly the watercourse of the river begins to rise and the end of this dense river becomes a monstrous waterfall through which I fall. Red floods my sight as I fall. The great waterfall empties into a rocky bay with wild waves dragging me from one side to the other, hitting me over and over again. I don't feel my body, I only feel pain.

White.

The buzz, the pain, everything is still here. I see nothing, not even myself, I only see the blank, inert emptiness.

I forgot my name, the date, your name, the place I lived. I did not know how to distinguish day from night, nor the sounds that were heard, all at the same time, without being able to focus on just one. My body does not feel mine, the pain, once again, spreading throughout my body. There is an anguish in my mind that seemed to have no reason to be.

Suddenly a flash of memory appeared in my mind. A huge shadow was coming towards me. I turn around and the last thing I see is the flash. I cannot bear the memory, it weakens me and I return to the emptiness.

This emptiness seems safer, I no longer feel my body but neither pain nor anguish. I don't know if time has passed. I don't know if I should just open my eyes and that way the emptiness will be filled. Maybe

that's the solution but I don't even know where my eyes are.

At last, sounds. They seem like sobs. It seems like a conversation that I still can't make out.

Finally, a sensation. It feels a bit damp and uncertain. Now the feeling is a little warmer. I feel safer. But I'm still blank.

Black. Red. Sparkles The emptiness begins to fill extraordinarily fast. It's too fast and the buzzing starts again. The pain begins to invade me and little by little I feel my feet again, numb, but there they are. I feel every numb toe, my arch, my ankle, my calves and shins, my knees, my thighs, my pelvis, my butt, my torso, my abdominal muscles, my back, my breasts, my clavicle, my shoulders, my arms, my wrists, my hands, the palms of my hands, my fingers and even my nails. My neck and head feel too heavy. After the pain I feel a flash that runs through my body.

A few minutes go by that feel like an eternity, but at least I can tell the time and I finally feel human. I see the room, the devices around me, the probes connected to me, it seems that I am in the hospital. It feels so cold. Even though I came out of the emptiness, I'm still alone.

To my right, on a metal table, I see a newspaper with tomorrow's date and a photo of Elena crying on the front page. The headline reads, "The call that took away the hunter's prey."

On March 21st, Elena spoke on the phone with Martha, her best friend, both were leaving their work places and as usual they talked to make the return home more enjoyable. Martha notices that every turn she walks, a man follows her. She comments on it with her friend, she tries to speed up her pace and goes out to a long and neglected median and crossing, there was a bus stop. The median had several bushes and trees and at that point the man had already reached Martha, who was still on call with Elena, who was listening and was on the lookout for everything. Elena was simultaneously trying to get help. In the call, the attacker confesses to having followed her for several months, he knew her name, her address, her personal relationships, everything about her. And now he was threatening her to go with him. A fight is heard, she seems to hurt him in some way and so she can escape by crossing the median. Suddenly she is run over by the light rail. A passerby who was a doctor immediately gives her first aids. Elena's call to the police made help arrive immediately, being able to save Martha's life and trapping the homeless man in the streets near the place of the events. Marta is currently in a coma. Her friends and family pray for her recovery.

The nurse comes in asking me questions and speaking to the doctor. She asks me my name, age and current date. Although I think it is March 21st, I infer from the newspaper of the day that it is March 22nd. The nurse corrects me saying that it is March 19th and almost a year has passed.

One year! A year in that emptiness. I don't remember how I got here. I know how it happened but I don't remember it. The doctor tells me that it is normal, with time I will recover my memory and my motor skills. I will spend some time under observation. After that I will have to come to rehab for some time. An hour passes and my parents arrive. My mortified mother runs to hug me. My father hugs me more discreetly. My mother asks me a lot of questions and my father asks her to calm down and leave me alone. I ask them about the accident, I want to know what they know but my mother refuses to talk about that day. She changes the subject and she starts talking about what I missed this year, out of nowhere she starts crying and she hugs me. They finally leave. It's not that I didn't want to see them, but their visit was exhausting and I didn't get the answers I wanted. Also, as far as I'm concerned, I had dinner with them yesterday.

The next day, Elena finally arrives. When she arrives, she hugs me almost suffocating me. I immediately asked her about what happened, she tells me the same thing I read. It still seems like a story to me and not a memory. Then she starts crying. I don't understand why they are so emotional. She confesses that she had to empty my room in the apartment we both shared and she sent all my things to my parents' house. I try to hide my anger but she notices it and the atmosphere feels tense. So she says goodbye and leaves. I know that a year passed but for me it was only one day and I find it difficult to understand that she got rid of me like that.

My parents take me to their house. Every Tuesday and Thursday they take me to rehab. Little by little I become more independent. I go to my work to speak with the principal, because I would like to go back to work but I have to wait until the new school cycle in August. When I leave, I feel my heart racing and I feel a lot of anguish, I start to walk faster. I take a taxi and come home, I don't understand why I felt that way.

Summer passes slower than it ever did. But finally August arrives, the first day of school. I am very nervous and excited. The day is going great and the time of departure arrives, I offer to do the watch of the departure to stay until the last child leaves. When I leave I feel that anguish again and I take a taxi again. Two weeks go by, every day I offer to do the guard but the director talks to me and tells me that we have to roll the guard so it won't be my turn for another month. That makes me feel very bad and even scares me. I go out and take a taxi.

I am exhausted from feeling this anguish every day, I do not even have memories of what happened, there is no reason for me to feel this way. I went to speak with my doctor looking for an answer or solution for my memory loss, but his answer was that in time I would remember it and that everything I feel is normal from such trauma.

What a waste of time! I can't just sit down and wait. Tomorrow I will go to the median where everything happened.

White. My mind is still blank. This place does not bring back any memories. I take the light rail. He greets me cheerfully. Who are you and where do I know you from? Still I greet him. He begins to tell me that he is the doctor who gave me first aid as soon as the rail hit me, that he saw me running from the median. I already have to get off but I ask for his number to talk again, maybe he saw something else and can fill my gaps. He accepts and gives me his number.

It's Sunday and I'm going to have breakfast with him. At first he confesses to me that he has known me long before. His mother cleaned the school where Elena and I went, which is where I teach. What a great coincidence. Suddenly they call him, he has an emergency, he apologizes and he promises to meet another time.

We met the next Sunday. I arrived and he had already been waiting for me for a while and he had ordered coffee for both of us, my coffee was already cold but I was ashamed and I drank it all. He confesses to me that his son also goes to my school. Three years ago when he picked up his son on his first day, he immediately recognized me. It was very rare that he recognized me because he was in my classroom for a very short period of time and I hardly ever spoke to him. He confesses everything to me. When his mother used to clean my school she asked the principal to allow her son to be a student and the principal generously accepted since he was a very intelligent boy, so he joined my group, because there was only one group per grade. This did not please my mother, nor Elena's. One day he heard them saying that they would file a complaint because a poor child that would never become anything in life, would only delay others in their education and they did not pay for charity, they paid

for an education with more status. My mother threatened the principal and he never went back to school. My mother was happy because she thought that he would be in the place he was meant to be, the public school. The worst thing for him was that he saw much less of his mother and he had to go to and from school by himself. I tried to apologize but as soon as I opened my mouth, he asked me not to. He not only gave me first aids that day, he was the man who had followed me, he had confessed the same thing to me at the time but I escaped and his plan changed. My coffee had a cocktail of drugs that in a few minutes I would have an epileptic attack, I will not survive and everyone would see how he tries to save me but it will be in vain.

I feel like I am leaving my body, I see flashing lights in my head. I feel a buzzing in my head and electricity going through my body. I see people around me.

Black.

White.

Flashing light.

I see everything brighter than ever. I cannot speak or move. He explains to me that he will now be my doctor. He lied to me he never wanted to kill me, his plan was to leave me with permanent damage and my mother would be the one who would suffer and all the time my health would depend on the child who would become nothing.

LU

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