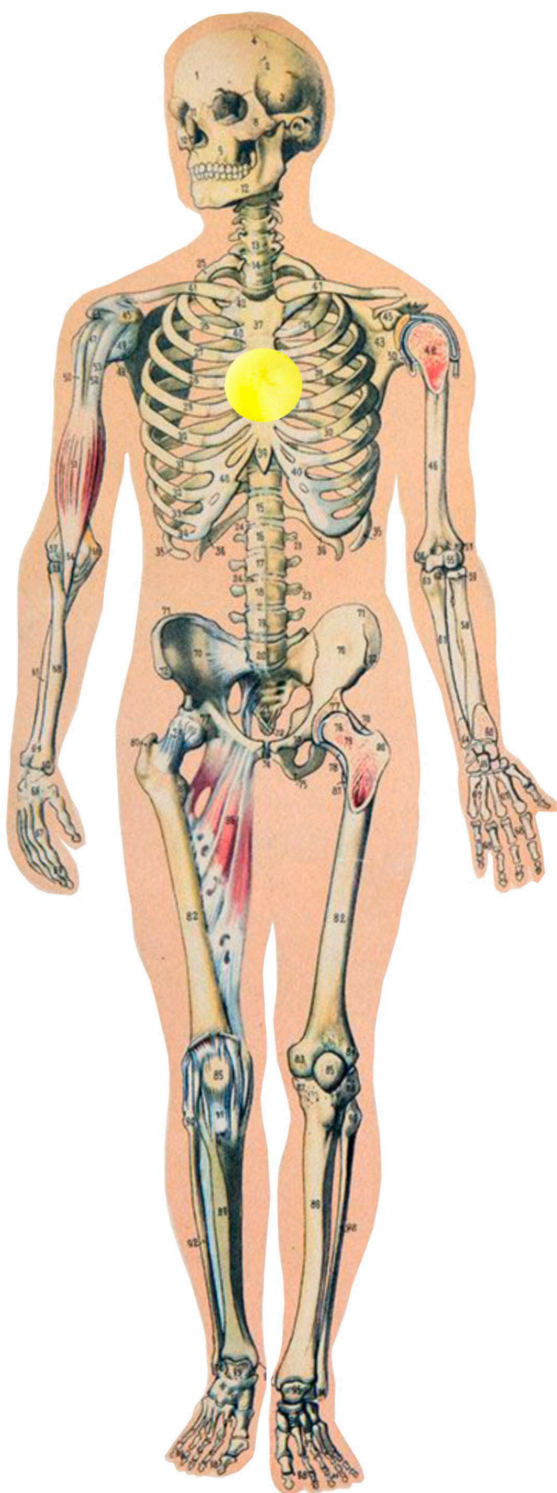


THE WEST 4TH

Opinion. Poetry. Fiction.

august 2025 / I, no. 4



What's Happening?

August 2025

Emma Kimberly's debut single "Plunge" comes out August 15th!!

SATURDAY NOVEMBER 8
NYC GODDESS FEST! (All Female Fronted Bands)
SOUR MOUSE, 110 Delancey St, NYC,
www.sourmousenyc.com
\$10 advance; \$15 day of show; 21+ Admitted

Bands Performing:
7pm Bagarisha
(instagram.com/bagarishamusic)
8pm Enzza (instagram.com/enzzeamusic)
9pm Juju Gay (instagram.com/jujumgay)
10pm Ruby Deena Band
(instagram.com/rubydeenamusic)
11pm The Legs
(instagram.com/jackieandthelegs)

SHOW INVITE:
<https://www.facebook.com/events/653789691068664>
ADVANCE TICKETS:
<https://www.eventim.us/event/NYC-GODDESS-FEST-Sour-Mouse-Saturday-November-8/660906>

our POETS and BARDS, SCRIBBLERS and SCHOLARS

BRETT KOPPELMAN
CAMERON SALO
ALEX F., ESQ.
M.E. LINK
LAURA GULBRANSON
AVTCOMICS
LORD ORD
CELINA CHASE
PARKER OTTO
JACK KEEGAN
C.E. FOSTER
PEARL KONTARINIS
RIDOY MAJUMDAR
EVAN STARK
ÆVINA
OWEN BRAID

Cover artwork by i believe in fantasy

COLUMNS

I Bet on Losing Dogs

Brett Koppelman

When I was going through my last breakup there was not much that interested me. I am grateful that in my life I have found three real good friends, which I would classify as someone who you would be both excited to call with good news and bad news. But at this point in my life these three good friends were off doing their own things in their own cities while I was doing the same. You need your good friends during a break up and I didn't have any of mine near. So, what is one meant to do?

Work was a decent distraction. It was easy enough to contemplate life during my commute, while staring at my computer, while my boss was yelling at us. It's pretty simple to put on a new face at work, most people do, so I didn't really have to confront anything there. Things were always moving forward. Weekends were trying times. That is when every moment would run through your head. When you would start blaming yourself. If only you hadn't said that about her mom, at least your bed would be warm tonight. Or you start cursing her out for what she had done. I'll leave out the profanity for that one. Those first couple months are all consuming. And then to my surprise, the next couple of months were too. There was no escaping the mental onslaught of what ifs and what could have beens.

So, what are you supposed to do when you are alone in your suffering? The thing I quickly resorted to was dating again. Hinge, as everyone knows, is an incredible tool filled with normal and healthy people, so this was a great outlet for me to put myself out there with my fresh wound to find people to help me heal. It was also a way to get laid and forget about my ex for about forty-two seconds. This was a mistake. I told half truths and led people on and was simply a shell of a man, refusing to give all of myself due to the pain I was feeling and lack of trust I had, yet not communicating that to anyone I was seeing, leading them to be confused and hurt. This was the lowest point which I still hold some guilt from.

The only certainty I discovered during this is really that only time can help. I think a positive way to look at these things, at least on the other side of them, is that it is a very human experience to suffer, and love is what makes one suffer the most. The long cold lonely nights either break you or you come out stronger. If you are able to come out stronger, there is very little that will phase you and you can walk around with an earned confidence and assuredness. At least until the next girl comes around.

On Living the Dream

Lord Ord

Look, I'm no expert. I'm no highly educated bookworm telling you exactly what to do for this or that reason because I think it's sound logic. I'm not really even anyone. I'm just a guy. A guy who as a kid had a dream of making music that millions of people could hear, relate, and connect to. Where have I gotten? Basically nowhere. That isn't to say I haven't had some crazy, fun, enjoyable, and memorable times during my pursuit. Just that my efforts thus far have fallen short of where I thought I might land. And that's ok. Batterhead and Lord Ord carry onward. On an average day, I'd like to say I plan my life out well. That I have certain daily goals I strive to achieve by the time I turn out the lights. But I don't. On an average day, if I have some free time, I'll just sit there. Zone out. Binge watch TV or YouTube. Maybe read or write or play music or sketch a little. Put off life's problems in the hopes that what someone else has created brings me instantaneous and fleeting joy. On an average day, I can't even say I lay out these goals, even though ironically one of my life goals is to set these smaller ones up in the first place. Is that fear? Perhaps. Most likely anxiety. An anxiety that worsens over time. An anxiety so crippling at times that it becomes physically inhibiting. A self-loathing, even. But that ends now. I believe I have recently made a solid plan for myself via sound logic and not-so-sound mind. A plan in which I will hold myself accountable for seeking instant gratification instead of drawn out triumph. A plan in which I find comfort, for hard work and proper care will pay off for anyone eventually. A plan in which I intend to be kinder to myself and others. A plan in which I will get stuff done. To live the life that my younger self and I continuously desire. If you feel this way about yourself, I invite you, nay, I implore you to join me on this journey. For yourself. For me. For everyone. What is life if not to pursue happiness and love? So I'll get to it. Why? Because I'm Not Weak (cue Batterhead song). Neither are you. Get up. We're better than this. Let's cut the BS and get to work. Be kind. Be happy.

Dime Store, Poverty Fund Rag

Parker Otto

Rest in bed, laid up, leg all broke
Should have known the best I started to poke
Take away my asthma with a dose of strychnine
Back-door seal, five bottles for a dime
Showing me versions of sun and stars
While hearing rowdy ruckus from two local bars
Hard to tell where Fever ends and ramblin' begins
Because I drank too much and I got the spins
Hitler, Napoleons and Captain Kidd
Telling me where the treasure's hid
But the lines on their faces something strange
Like seeing bullets fly on the range
That gold don't look like a good price of admission

Keep on reading your Sylvia Plath
While I'm upstairs making toast in the bath
Take a runaway trip to Mexico
Or hide out in the Poconos
It beats paying beatnick dues
Sipping cappuccinos, shining shoes
Got no fare for the bus or train
No one picks up hitchers in the rain
Only stories I know from Bible School
Recite em all, play the fool
Take money for the cigarette, light it fast
Fore the noose creeps up along the mast
Take a coward to crack at the first sign he'll be forgiven

Forget the wine, forget the silk
I sleep in cotton, get drunk on milk
Celluloid crash, nitrate fire
Smoke five packs out on the wire
Flesh is torn by scores of screens
Soul is peered on by tourist fiends
Gawk the geek, see the show
Keep it fast, don't get slow
Get too lazy and you wind up dyin'
Exhaust yourself from too much tryin'
Try to answer failure's cries
Kill yourself to stay alive
Even listening costs a pretty penny

untitled

Cameron Salo

"From the thoughts in one's head
To hiding under the bed
Words left unsaid
Better off instead

Long sleepless nights
Secrets once securely held, no linger in fright
You always said you might
Disappear in a fight

There were spring blooms, now just winter's cold
doom.
The day as silent as a tomb
To one that once knew you.

The moon rises high, something once said with
joyful cries
Now just enjoyed with mournful sighs
Just watching time, glaze by in tomorrows eyes"

Beating your hands while the dough does rise
Doctored deafened by patient's sighs
Not enough pills to numb the pain
And corporate hiked the price again
It's bad to bet when you ain't a gambler
Bound to lose and be a Rambler
Wanderin' round, town to town
For a meal and bed before sundown
Losing teeth as fast as you can
Til no one looks at you as a man
Ahab's vengeance, an empty heart
While Poe's melancholy meets me at dark
I scream for help and things you got I'll take any

Dripolator slowly brews my coffee right
Put a pistol in my vest, sent out for the night
Do the deeds you can't do yourself
While my family suffers, can't let out a welp
Robert Moses laughs at the cage I'm in
Young lives cut down before they begin
The death mark's 60,000 more bombs mounting
But that's just the toll when someone began counting
All over this land more are laid low
And I have the gall to cry for the debts I owe
You made me write until my hands bled
In return for empty promises and crumbs to be fed
Your contributions only prove how you're such a bore

We're all here because we're not all there
But you wouldn't know that anywhere
Just contemplating another world war
Adding more didgets to a credit score
Keep the shore to the old grindstone
I might have a room but I don't have a home
Keep still in the bed, sweat spills sick
Eyes cloud over, breath comes thick
In agony I ache, turmoil kept for my own
No one wants my troubles without a good loan
All I can do is hope and work and cry
Suffer through veils, resist the urge to die
But if this is how your world works, I don't want it anymore

untitled

Jack Keegan

DEMENTIA
"you need the
DEMENTIA money first then DEMENTIA
you can be idealistic"
DEMENTIA

arrest me arrest me arrest me
arrest me arrest me arrest me

talking about the Marlins
feels good.
Does it make you feel good?

That's not the
point.

"that's comfort, that's
not God-like"

dont believe
in the
supernatural
how can you
apply these rules
with sex, I don't think
that's important to [illegible]
NO, no you can't,
you don't want sex.

No, funerals are for the dead.

my writing called ground it

Pearl Kontarinis

I feel five things
i feel my feet gripping the soft plushy towel beneath
the sun seeping into my skin
a cold stone to my left with layers of a man
pounds of necklaces laying on my neck suffocating my
windpipe
some sort of “pillow” i made by smushing together fabric
from an old sweatshirt my sisters ez boyfriend gave to me
he asked me to leave it on his guest bed
i took it instead

i see four things
my cousin laying down to my right hiding her youthful
unwrinkled face from the sun with a hat
a man walking by definitely listening to some sort of self help
bullshit podcast
i can see he’s disappointed
a helicopter mom yelling at her son from afar in Spanish
trying to comprise him not swimming with digging in the
sand
a clear blue sky when i open my eyes nothing overshadowing
it

i hear three things
the screams of little kids in the distant playing in the water
surfers hollering from “the outside” celebrating a wave they’ve
just caught
the waves harshly landing on the sand fighting over who can
go furthest
who will fight their way to the toes of civilians
then being drifted back however so quietly

i continue to reach feel hear and appreciate the things that
seem so in the background but make up a whole in my mind.

only the sun seeping into my skin isn’t the feeling of catching
uv rays it’s the florecent teinkling lights above a cold and
painful room. a room that has no clear blue sky but a tiled
white and a painting above the bed of heaven and what my
future could be. i hear kids screaming in the distance but not
from playing in the beach but unmedicated procedures i feel
shackles on my wrist and feet holding me down forcefully.
nothing that replicated a happy cheerful day that i’ll want to
remember forever

but i will remember this forever
not because i want to but because i need to get out.
i feel things no one should feel

my skin folding inwards
cold chains that have been around me for years
the end of a hospital bed that makes me body feel as though
it’s leaning more to the right
downhill
my legs that haven’t been used properly for years
aching of muscles and pain

four things i don’t want to see but have no choice

i see harsh lights even when i close my eyes
a window with wood planks boarding up the sunlight and the
outside just letting me know what time / season it is
two men with a beer belly unhygienic sense to them watching
me all day everyday day
smoke floating in the air from their occasional cigarettes
the look in my captures eyes that show nothing else in their
lives ever worked

three things i anxiously hear
footsteps of the “doctors” experimenting on me and my once
loved body
beeps coming from machines everywhere all unsynchronized
my own humming occasionally if i remember my family and
what once was

i won’t continue to feel and reach but i will continue to listen
hopefully one day it’ll be the sounds of police sirens and my
mother calling my name.

because everything you've done for me i cannot thank you enough

Celine Chase

everything i’ve been through
everything that has hurt me
sat in the palm of your warm touch.
You took it and squeezed it tight
and I forget it entirely.
but you are no longer mine
and i cannot be upset at this anymore.
and there is nothing to grieve-
because you took all that pain away
and replaced it with memories of your warm touch.
your soft embrace
and gentle swirls across my skin.
So I've kept the flower petals to let them dry.
and i keep your towel hanging next to mine.
for three days i didn’t shower.
i didn’t wash the pillowcases either
until your scent faded entirely.
i used the toothpaste we shared until it was only plastic left.
And the birthday card I never got to give you sits behind the
picture frame
i held onto every last memory with you
until it was time to say my thank you’s and goodbyes
and i let you go
and i let me grow

untitled

Evan Stark

Grief is dressed in white and she whispers in my ear like a gentle breeze.

“Let go”, she tells me. “Feel it and let go.”

As I fall back into her soft arms, as soft as flower petals.

“I’m not here to hurt you. I’m here to remind you that there is beauty in impermanence, your heart doesn’t have to break over it.”

She places her hands on my chest and I feel my heart begin to flutter like wings as it comes out of my body and suspends itself in the air.

“What do you see?”, Grief asks me.

“Everything that I’ve lost.” Looking at my bruised, scar tissue of a heart.

“Look deeper”, she tells me, “nothing is ever truly lost.”

She takes me by the hand and walks me toward my heart. She caresses it, like a loving friend, and my heart suddenly begins to open itself up around us and I begin to see.

I see myself as a child, still wide eyed with wonder. Still innocent. Before the world in its heaviness began to press its weight on me. How I used to run so free. My face is the sun. The radiance. It’s still alive inside and always has been. The years have a way of numbing us.

I see my mother, young and healthy. The vitality, her smile. Life was still in her eyes. The way she shined, just how I remembered. I hear her laugh, the way it filled up a room, how it used to embarrass me, how I’ve forgotten what it sounded like.

“All of this is here and now. You hold worlds in your heart.”

Fresh Reminiscence

Parker Otto

I kiss you goodnight over and over
Hours have passed and I still cannot bring myself to part
I tell you and I want to look deeply into your eyes one last time
They’re still as brown as ever
You warn me not to get lost in them
I am sorely tempted to do so
When our paths diverge at last, I instantly miss you when you walk ho the stairs
Out of sight but not out of mind
It’s not even five minutes and this yearning I feel is as intense as anything I’ve felt in this world
The whole train ride home I mist myself with the fresh memory of your dancing, your eyes, your laugh and the taste of your lips, your neck, your skin while you blow cigarette smoke and gentle perfumes into my mouth to further intoxicate me
I am smiling on the entire journey
I am scared it may be permanent
But I don’t care

Act on Desire

Owen Braid

On the ridge where passion moves
With it’s aching stomach full of pearls
Towards the curls of the cherry sucking
Unspeaking girls
My rosy nosed prick goes digging
For diamonds with a toothpick
Stretching for an eye full
Of someone delightful

All I wish is to flush my sad fish
Out of it misery
Into the warmth of red mouths
To the count of heartbeats

Turn around to the face of thy neighbour And see
the hopes on the slopes of their
Eye bags
Notice them wonder what they want so long
It seems wrong
Lusts lost to dwelling
Urges churned to nothing
Don’t permit a doubt of their importance!

Making tall orders around the clock in quarters
Go the careless explorers
Who’ve left behind inhibition
For collision
Brushing up against strangers
Or staring above their heads
But never lowering their eyes to the possibilities
That compose endless outcomes
With no shortage of miracles

Whatever it takes for this moment here
That fortune exterior to time
Released by unthinking taken chances
Hold your gaze

While everyone’s faces are doing weird things,
twitching
Yours is humming
Ready to act on desire as it presents itself

They Might Have Cake

Ridoy Majumdar

When Trevor died, nobody told me because they assumed I already knew. I didn't know until my ex called. "I just hope it won't be too weird for you at the funeral. Maybe you can leave before I get there."

It's harder than usual to get out of bed this morning. I suppose Trevor was always outrunning something. And five years ago, probably to the minute, we were outside the Hilton in Beachwood, standing silent in the morning chill, sharing a last Newport after another glory run of a bender. I remember because it was my birthday. They might have a cake for me at the office.

I can always trace it back to that season of youth where I was invincible and, maybe in part, beautiful. In the small hopeless hours, after the bars closed and our friends vanished, we would kick it at his place, where nights usually bled into mornings and the coffee table never had drinks on it. Mad and ravenous crusaders campaigning into the rapturous infrastructure of night. What made him so talkative was obvious, but I never figured out why he was so generous with his stuff. Like he owed me for some reason. But I can't be certain why.

As I lay here I realize that I can't picture his face too well anymore. It's always fading. A few years ago I had cleaned up, moved states, and basically lost contact. Now and then I would wonder what had become of my crazy friend. But it's already 8:30, and I've got to get going.

Diamond Soul

Parker Otto

I look at my dear friend and I see the wounded smile of a man trying keep things together but who feels the pain of every step

Who has a diamond soul but doesn't believe anyone who tells him. He keeps apologizing for things that aren't his fault and that he has no damn reason to be sorry for

His feelings are laid bare on his sleeve but he retreats the minute anyone tried to get close for fear of being trampled and cast aside. A traveler who doesn't know if the Samaritan will walk upon the same road.

Feelings of intense melancholy accumulate in the "Mean Reds" which he feels is only treatable by isolation. But as he plays his head down in an empty bed in an empty room in an empty house, the lonlieness only fuels more bouts of Mean Reds.

He longs for sweet nothings to be whispered in his ear. Even if they are nothing, they're still sweet and everything to him.

Like a cardinal after his first flight, my comrade, my brother feels tremendous pride and joy at being able to feel the sun bounce off his red feathers. But the colors darken with guilt for having left the nest.

He flies fast and flies hard, wanting to go where others before him have never soared. He moves so quick and keeps to task out of overwhelming fear of falling dead the moment he stops. Even sleep must be wrestled with and won with each fight more draining than the last.

I know this man well. His shadow follows me. His paces matches mine. His reflection stares back at me every morning. He is a fighting man with no reason to punch himself until his hands go numb. In this moment, no one wants to hurt him and he needs to feel just how much he is loved.

His smile is real. My laugh is strong. Our eyes are just barely able to keep the tears from falling.

iRelax

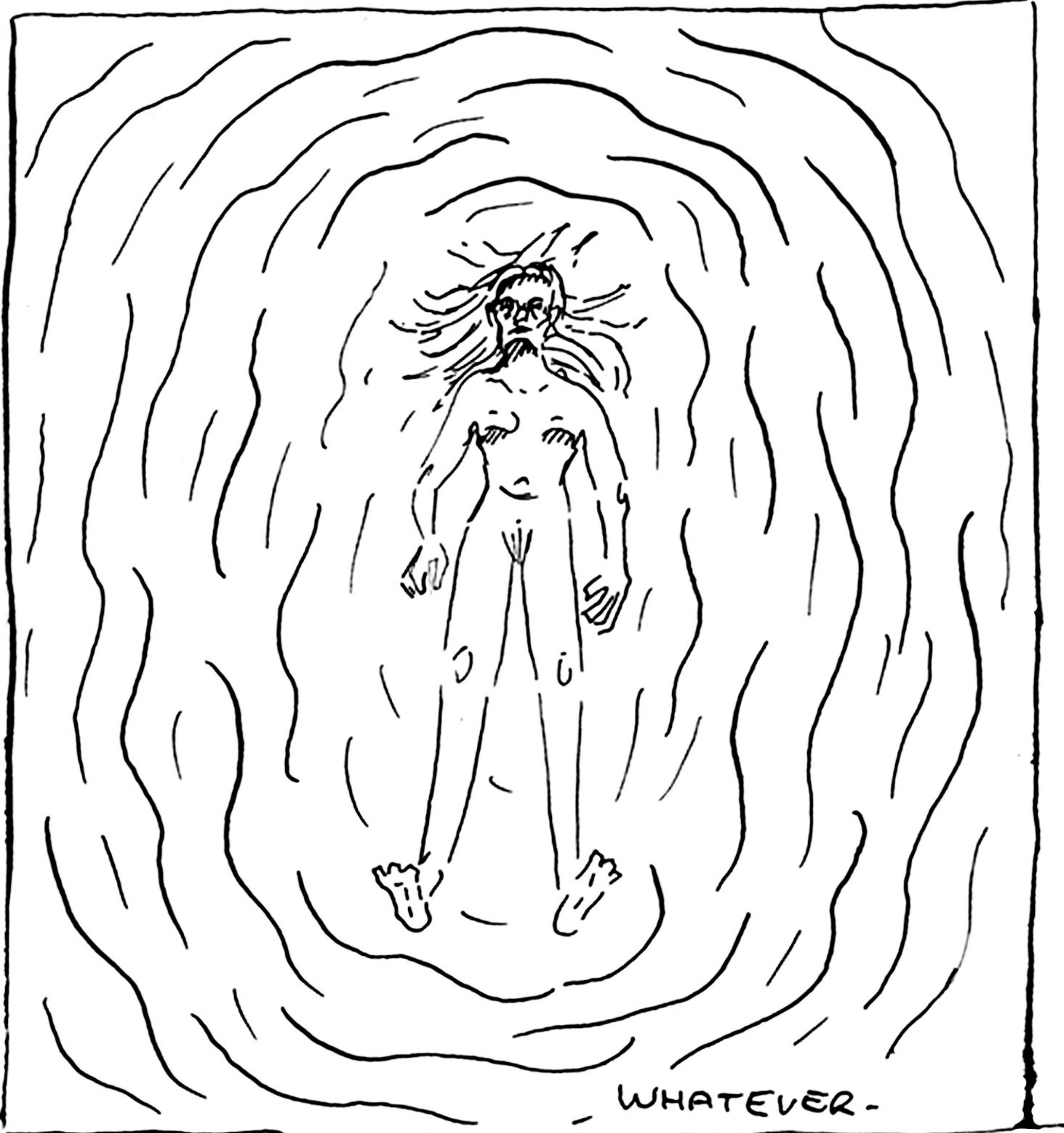
Ævina

Another night spent scrolling through
Things to watch (but rarely do)
I need a good destressor so
I'll stress over the method, movie
TV show or just a smoothie?
Go out running! Stay in shape!
Relaxing is hard to escape

untitled

Tess Kontarinis

I glance at these walls
Walls I've seen hundreds of times before
But now I study them as if it's the first
time, as to avoid his gaze.
To meet his eyes and tell him,
"it's not gonna work."







CAN YOU GET SOME TOILET PAPER, AT LEAST? PHOEBE?!

I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME!!



BITCH!



CUTTING YOURSELF? WHAT ARE YOU... TWELVE?!



I DON'T KNOW. IT JUST FELT LIKE THE THING TO DO.

ARE YOU OKAY?

YEAH. NO. I DON'T KNOW.

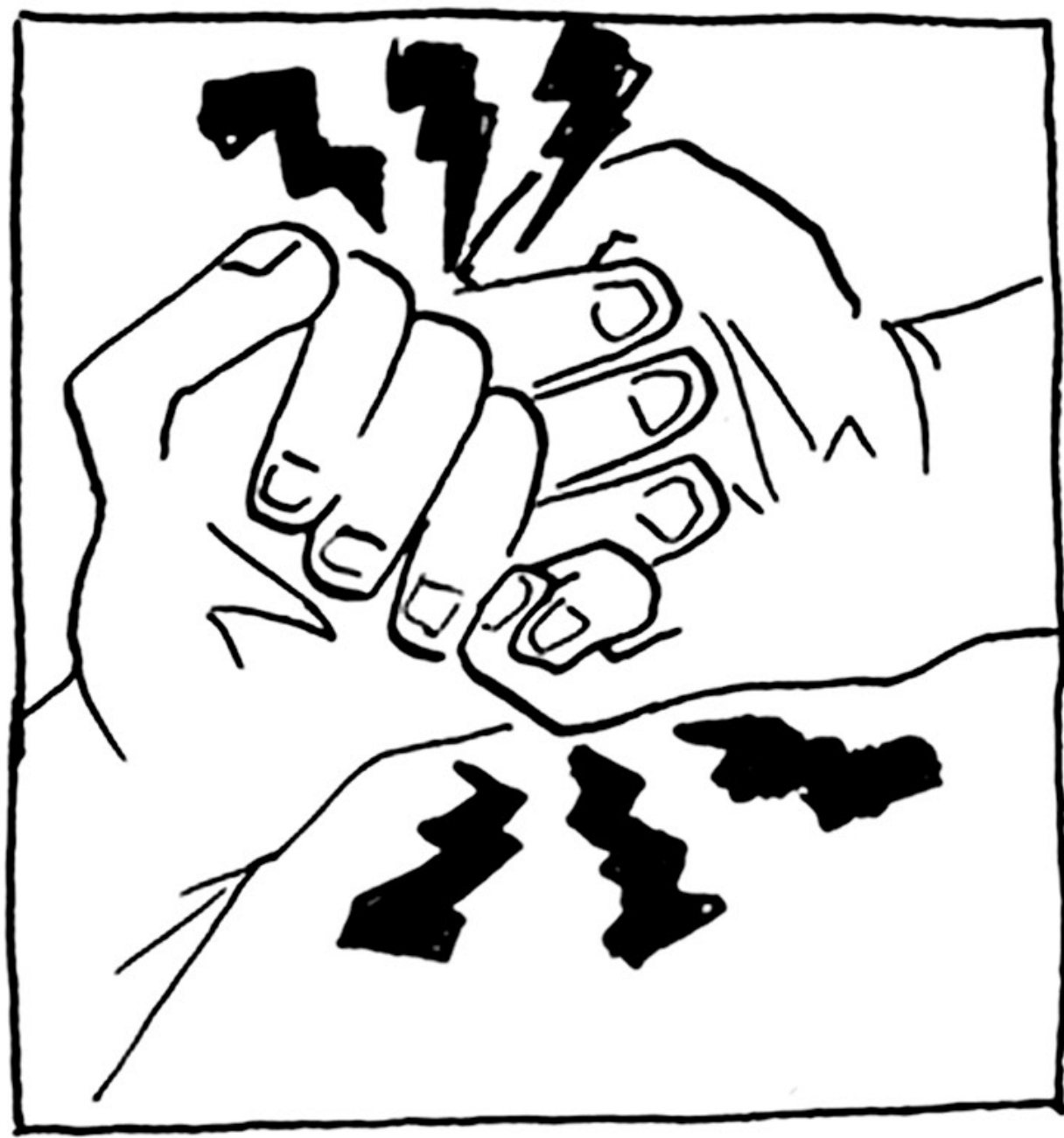


IT'S LIKE: I WAS OVER, AND I FOUND OUT HE'S BEEN SEEING MIA TOO...

MIA SALENTO?

YEAH.

AND IT'S LIKE: WHY'D HE HAVE TO TELL ME?!



Los Angeles

Celina Chase

My first and second boyfriend were both from Los Angeles. in fact, from the same neighborhood.

I didn't do that on purpose, I guess my type is just a beach boy.

Ones who need a strong shoulder and a soft hand with gentle reassurance and firm boundaries.

Everything about LA is the exact opposite of who I am. I eat garbage and my idea of exercise is up and down the subway steps. The people in my life are those who leave LA because of what it did to them. "The people are kind, but not nice" is recurring

"People on the East Coast are blunt, but they are kind. It's refreshing. You're refreshing" From what I have heard, Los Angeles is artificial and they are searching for something real. I am here to quench their thirst.

They move to the opposite coast to find opposite people, And when they land in New York hoping for salvation, They find me here with warm, open arms.

Someone who is no bullshit.

Born in the blistering summer and raised in the cold, I had no energy to sugarcoat my emotions.

So I teach people to stand up for themselves.

I mother them through big feelings,

Their head resting on my chest as I lay gentle swirls in their hair,

Gentle kisses on forehead,

On their neck and down past their chest.

I reflect who they are- who I know them to be past the superficial shadows. I ask if they would accept the city that raised them and guided them to what they wanted. "Show me where you're from!" But I never made it there.

I never made it to the place that raised the people I've loved the most. People that have seen parts of myself I never thought I'd be able to reach, That I never thought I'd be lucky enough to know.

Maybe it's easier to live in LA.

It's harsh I'm sure, but at least you only have to look outward.

I guide my past lovers down a path of self-reflection,

I show them the kindness and love they deserve.

I give them exactly what they've been looking for,

And overwhelm them with passion and honesty.

Something they need time and space to be ready for.

It isn't me, I know.

I tell myself I am not too much.

It's just too much for them to deal with right now,

And maybe they'll come back when t

And I need to try people not from Los Angeles.

But they see me as I am- and I love to help people. It's okay if I get hurt. They soften me. They see the gentle, beautiful, real and raw parts of me.

how could I not fall into their arms as they fall into mine?

Imagine Love

Owen Braid

No glue holds us together

There's no fixture that hangs above us

We glide across one moment into another

We're ever vanishing along a road that melts behind us

On the wall she wrote 'imagine love'

Knocking over flowerpots pulling on a sweater and swinging her legs off the bed

Im never far from her name

I hurry to watch so many reasons taking place in regular faces

In ignorance everyone's alone under their own cloud

It takes care of us all

Everyone you ever see before them you've always known your alone

So she sits herself with cans of strong beer

She finds someone else

What a foolish thing to do I'll think

This being alone

love and time made me gentle

Celina Chase

everyone i've ever loved i think i will forever.

not in the same way

and not entirely,

but it never has fully left me.

aspects of those people i find within myself

i hold dearly to me.

and there were parts of me they loved too deeply for me

to ever forget for me to ever lose

and i fall in love with myself.

and with each thought that passes,

i remember them more kindly

more gently.

and only more grateful i grow for the memories and the

lessons. i picture if i were to ever see them again,

what would i say?

passing by,

i'm sure some would expect a snarl and a stare.

but i'd embrace with loving arms, hoping that they're

well.

hoping they got the job they were praying for.

that it pays them well and that they're eating right.

because at one point, they were my everything, even

when we brought out the worst, and they will never lose

that.

Labor ipse Voluptus

By Laura Gulbranson

I felt it as the ferry's engine rumbled awake and the Upper New York baywater lapped against the ferry's hull. My friend, who accompanied me on the ferry, stood at my side. We had spent the morning wandering Manhattan as tourists, with stops at Veselka's for breakfast and then to the bookshop. Tired from our morning and afternoon exploring, it was no surprise we took the moment on the harbor to catch our breaths. I think she felt it too — what I was feeling — when the engine revved to life. The feeling when you travel to a new place for the first time or you experience an old place like it's brand new to you.

Two ladies joined us on the deck. We scooted to the side to make some room. I leaned against the ferry's metal railing, the humid breeze dampening my cheeks as I fought to keep the frizzy strands of my hair out of my face.

"Beautiful! The history. I simply love it!" said one of the ladies, turning her head to me with a smile. We peered ahead at the towering Statue of Lady Liberty draped in all her splendor in copper sheets of sea-foam green. "The history. I just love learning the history of places," she said with an enthusiasm that softened my heart. We then introduced ourselves — where we were from (but not our names). I told her I was from Arizona, and I learned that she and her friend were Australian and native to the Fiji Islands. I don't know how it came about, but soon the lady proceeded to ask me questions about Ellis Island's history.

"...the Statue of Liberty was a gift from the French." I said it with so much conviction that I surprised even myself. Historical facts were fuzzy in my mind, but I did what I could to share what I knew. I felt I should know more... "That bridge," she pointed, "do you know that bridge?" Part of me felt flattered she was asking me all these questions as if I were a native New Yorker. But alas, I had no more historical facts to share, and my phone's signal was too weak to look up information on the internet. But what was working? Google Maps! And I used that trusty GPS (I admittedly overly rely on) to help us figure out the name of the bridge.

"It doesn't show me the name of the bridge on the map, but I think it connects Staten Island to New Jersey."

"Oh!" Her eyes lit up as if I had just shared something profound. "Simply amazing!"

The impulse to dish out an apology for everything wrong about the country was momentarily curbed. I looked around at families with American flag backpacks and cameras dangling around their necks. There were crying babies in strollers or in their mothers and fathers' arms.

here were older siblings casting their sights on Lady Liberty. There were strangers mingling and sharing where they came from and where they were going with one another. And there were friends just enjoying the company, the breeze, the sea.

For all the things I know and don't know about this country, one thing I do know: the US is a land built by immigrants.

I peered back at Lady Liberty and then to the ladies and my friend. "It is amazing..." I said with a smile, soaking up the optimism of their radiant smiles. "It's like we're steeped in history."

Here on the ferry, it truly did feel like I was transported back in time. It was as if we ourselves were the first immigrants boarding the ferry to come to a new land. I imagined it. I imagined I was no longer a native of my birth country, but a sojourner who had left her old life behind to start a new one. A new life with its share of struggles, but with a persisting hope that with a fresh start, I'd find what I was looking for on the other side of the ocean.

To those who crave freedom and are willing to fight for it, they venture to the places where no meek spirit dares to tread in the hopes that they will find their refuge, they will find their Promised Land, they will find freedom. And in freedom we find belonging.

In the moments where I've felt most foreign in my own skin, I've also felt a quiet belonging. I felt it here, with people who came from all over the world to board this ferry whether as an immigrant or a tourist. But I've also felt this feeling on many other occasions. I've felt it on my travels to foreign lands, on subways, on metros, on planes, in markets, in parks. I felt it in a glance of acknowledgement from a stranger, in a quiet nod of understanding, an "I see you sister...", an exchange of knowledge, in every random act of kindness.

Because the secret among us immigrants is that we are well versed in feeling alien in our own homeland, so much so, we do what we can to make foreigners from a foreign land and a foreign language feel at home in our foreign country.

Life does not bless the meek. Nor does it bless the entitled. It blesses the brave. It blesses the individuals willing to climb mountains and wander barren deserts. It blesses those who work for their dreams relentlessly. It blesses the people who are willing to cross oceans, to risk their lives and be subjugated to alienation (or worse) so that their legacy, their art, their hope can prosper.

So, I think that's what I'll do from now on. I will adopt the mentality of an immigrant. I'll remember to work hard in the moments I slip into complacency. I'll remember to brave the resistance that comes with pursuing one's dreams. I will do the hard and risky thing in life.

I will be brave.

Carmilla Unbound (pt. I)

By C. E. Foster

The following is the text of an unsigned statement left on the desk of Dr. _____, professor of anthropology and folklore at the University of _____, discovered and transcribed on the 8th of January, 1972. To be filed dually under MEDIEVAL and DEAD END. Document 1 of 2.

I'm not entirely sure how to begin this. This is something I've been sitting on for, well, a while, and this is my last resort to get it off my chest. I apologize if this statement offends. You don't need to investigate it or anything like that. There's nothing left. Do not attempt to contact me. I will not reply.

How about I begin like this?

It was dusk. A knight, dressed in plainclothes, rode over a dirt road stretching through a border town. The joints in his stirrups clinked softly against one another, adding another sound to the cacophony of the village night—iron pots being set upon fireplace hooks, a blacksmith beating a blade while finishing his day's work, women calling for their children to return home from their outdoor activities, destitutes singing nearly forgotten songs from an alehouse window. Our knight was weary. Hailing from Évora, his journey with the Knights Templar towards the Holy Land had already been quite long. Marchia Austriae was far from their destination, but had already taken what the knight had counted to be sixty-five days to reach. His campaign was a small offshoot of a robust, well-funded counterpart carrying Lords and those close to the company of Afonso I, and as such, the statutes upheld by its leader were far more lax, allowing for our knight to explore this village on his own terms during his rest period. His only order was to return to his company upon the fourth morning after their parting. It was the third evening, and as he rode into the village of Styria, he found himself longing for a drink. An ale, to be exact. He missed the rich wine from Évora daily, but had found the fruits of the Austrian alewives' labor to be charming, heavy, and most importantly, strong. He turned his stiff neck towards the source of the singing, and gently urged his horse in its direction. The alehouse was a quaint, sturdy building with a lightly sloped roof, weather-chipped shingles, rough boards with a peeling coat of an inviting yellow paint, a heavy oak door, and two windows at the front oozing a warm, orange candlelight. He slid off of his horse, tied her reins to a provided post, and pushed through the solid door, feeling for his campaign-allotted spending coins in his breeches pocket.

The volume of the singing erupted the moment he stepped through the door. He had never been able to pick up German, given how much it differed from his native Portuguese, but he could tell the song was vulgar from the way the red-faced, smiling patrons exchanged knowing and mischievous glances as they sang each new line. Spotting an empty seat behind a corner table, he carried himself over to it

and heavily sat down, sighing with relief at the feeling of a flat seat instead of his curved saddle. Almost immediately, a portly woman in a sensible blue working gown and white apron clunked a mug of ale down in front of him, smiling and extending a hand. He searched his pocket for a moment before pulling out a small, silver coin and plopping it into her palm. She clasped it quickly, muttering something about a foreigner—one word he had indeed picked up—before slipping it into her apron pocket. He assumed her to be an alewife and was silently grateful for her service.

For an hour or so he sat, listening to the drinking songs that seemed to go on forever, rubbing his leather-calloused hands over the rough table surface, gulping rich, dark ale, and examining the pale, lined faces of the patrons. Before leaving Évora, he had never in his two decades of life seen people with such white skin. He himself was distantly descended from Moors, and as such had a deep complexion like nearly everyone else in his locality. The first time he saw an Englishman visiting the company of Afonso I, he had been so startled he believed the man to be openly carrying an illness into their country from his own. But as he'd traveled with the campaign through Hispania, Francia, Helvetia, Germany, and now Marchia Austrae, he found that this strange appearance is something common for the inhabitants of the inland kingdoms. He still found it amusing, however, how they each turned a shade of beet red when they drank.

The night drew on. The mugs were drained, and the alehouse began to take on a soft, fuzzy glow in the eyes of our knight. His head had started to sway around his fourth or fifth drink, and when the sixth arrived, all he could do was gather it up in his now sweaty hands and take a deep and wanton inhale of its heady scent. The sweet, bready aroma served as a beautiful replacement for the sweaty air of the room. Closing his eyes, he savored the sensation, lowering his face so deep into the mug it soaked his beard. He didn't mind; it was better than the musty, frigid river water in which he and his company plunged their faces to fully wake each morning. He imagined this is what it must feel like to bury one's brow in the warm, silken bosom of a woman. He felt his spine relax into the bench, bringing his chin down to his chest. Perhaps he would rest here for the night. So what if he were to drown in drink, it was a better way than of plague among the Templar.

At this thought, his nose caught something new in the ale. It danced around his nose at first, then firmly planted itself beneath it, undeniable. Beneath the ale's comforting odor laid something sweeter—not sweet like the mountainside honey he used to swipe from the market in Évora each July, but something else. Inhaling deeper, an image was triggered in his thoughts, and a sinking feeling descended on his stomach. Months back when the weather was still frigid, his ragged company was traversing a weakly carved path below the mighty Alps when their Lord abruptly halted their trek and called the humbler knights forward to investigate something he'd seen. Our knight, ever curious, hopped from his horse and gingerly approached the dark mass peaking out of the pale, nearly frozen ground. Though still meters from it, they could see it was a fabric. A deep blue coat, actually—most likely a

local garment, one knight suggested, though it was utterly still despite the bitter wind whipping around it. The men exchanged looks at each other. Brave men on their way to the Holy Land were not meant to be scrounging up things from the path like vagabonds, but the company was cold. Tossing away what pride remained to him, our knight pushed past the few men in front of him and strode up to the object. Damn their judgement—he wasn't going to freeze. His fingers had barely brushed a thread on the coat when he realized it was not empty. A small sound escaped his mouth along with the gasp he could not hold in.

The occupant of the coat lay sprawled on his side, arms turned in uncomfortable directions. His legs, still clad in rough hewn breeches, were mostly encased in a patch of ice that had accumulated around them, freezing them in what looked like an agonizing twist of misplaced knees and splinterin ankles. His head rested heavily on his left shoulder with his dark hair firmly stuck to the coat in tangles. The man's neck was turned in a way that looked wrong, as if he had broken it trying to see the sky for the final time. And see the sky he did. His eyes stood open, far wider than should have been possible, staring directly up through the clouds in anguish. They must have been frozen solid the way they had no wetness to them, no shine, only a dull white film. All streaks of red were gone from their edges, leaving only stark gray centers and impossibly large pupils. There was a sizable piece of skin missing from where his bottom lip ought to be, but despite its ragged edge, it was entirely devoid of any scar—all visible layers of flesh were completely white, as if they'd never run with any blood at all. But the paleness of the man's face was quickly forgotten as our knight's eyes traveled downward. The coat was open and there was no shirt to be found, leaving his torso entirely exposed. The skin here was as white as the ground around it, interrupted only by an open gash ripping jaggedly through his right side under the rib cage. Through its cavernous opening was visible a wet mound of flesh—a liver—gored, ragged, and covered in small triangular gouges across its surface. It bled openly down into the coat beneath him, sticking it firmly to the cold ground. In fact, it was the only thing that bled. Drawing his face slightly closer in horror and curiosity, our knight glimpsed white tendrils of steam rising from the wound. Without warning, one of his knees gave out at the sight, and he was sent stumbling forward directly into the frozen man. The moment he hit the ground, feeling the body's rib cage crack like twigs under him, three things became clear to him all at once. First, the man's skin did not feel like flesh at all. Instead, it felt for all the world like glass beneath the knight's hand and face—solid, cold, cruel, and lifeless. Porcelain. Second, on his way down, he had briefly spotted a piece of red embroidery on the man's coat, and now he was certain of what it was. A pointed red cross, identical to the one sewn into all his own garments. And third, as he lay there, face now gazing directly into the frozen man's yawning, unholy wound, a thick scent accompanied by an unnatural heat filled his nose and mouth so quickly he almost gagged. He had encountered the smell of death before. Pungent, heavy, sticky and sour. He was

accustomed to it. But this, it was something else. It was something deeper than death. It was everything at once, seeping horribly into his body—it was the earth scorching, the oceans rising, the dirt beneath his fingernails, flowers erupting, flesh melting, animals screeching, his mother's last words to him, the wind laughing with a pained cry as it passed through bare trees—it was more than death. Perhaps...extinction? No, it was decay. Strange decay. Wrong decay. And by god, it was sweet.

This was the scent haunting his sixth mug of ale, clinging firmly to his beard. He slowly pulled the mug away and placed it on the table, breathing the room's air again. By the time he was able to open his eyes and return to the alehouse, she had already arrived, blurred in the yellow candle glow, sitting perfectly still and silent beside him on the rough wooden bench seat.

PART II COMING NEXT MONTH.

Calumny's Ticking, Ticking Up

By Alex F., Esq.

Some creeping things. Are here (and now want to address you). Some creeping things like the night and some are daytime squawkers.

Tonight, I'm creeping quite fastidiously toward that live heap of rubbish (two rubbishes conjoined) under the duvet with broken up banshees, or some kind of ogres, sewn onto them. And here I say: any reports- bulletins- that I thought through this raid in detail are scurrilous! I'm an improvisatory master, I was not born to plan but to proceed and then pluck. Cease, now desist! Know I'm privy to whatever there is to be privy too and even beyond.

Surely you've noticed as well as I have that calumny's on the uptick across the whole world?

Squawk, squawk... I couldn't squawk loud enough to wake them if I gave it everything I have. I've watched them closely for a week now, enduring monkishly snores that sound off like farts commanded out of a paramilitary of bullfrogs. His (Mr. Mark) are pitched a half-octave higher: arhythmic, ripping loose at an upsetting tempo. Hers (Ms. Marka: I'm no poet) are like Brahms, evoking lost cultures and golden epochs entire.

I'd like to stick some of my segments into their mouths while they sleep but this thought is a sketch of a suicide. I know- I know- no excuse for dismissing it outright, but it does tend to make one reconsider. And I've got no time for more floating thoughts with the calumny all around me that I have to fight, to stick up and beat down. My reserves aren't necessarily infinite.

Watching her administer to him tonight when they came home (it transpired that he'd eaten some gristly pink porkchop for a dinner and so had to spend many revolting increments of time in both restaurant and home toilets, paying the price of the flab from his fork in the foulest currency), as I studied her I admit to shooting pricks of envy up & down my metathorax. Now I know

why they use that term *shooting*: it is just like a revolver or a blunderbuss unloading into your scrotum.

I don't have "balls" but obviously I know about them. From textbook research. I've got a great collection of books now and more time and stamina than ever for doughty perusal. Plus, I have a greater amperage of curiosity in one cocked feeler than many of *you* do in your lithe, flexible bodies, all complacent vertebrae and too much ligament. We're not all born with an indoskeleton nor with such great stores of curiosity but I've honed the latter and, with its aid, reached the (sedate!) conclusion that I'm not missing anything in lacking the former. An introskeleton, whatever. I've had tremendous personal growth by myself in their kitchen at night, under the oven or next to the mueseli. And no, not much credit given me has there been? Calumny, I'm sure I've mentioned.

A modicum of calumny fairly due here. I'm magnanimous enough to welcome it, hold it close and learn. My kind, my family (less so my genus but perhaps even more so my species) is often a nasty bit to crunch. I hate most of them which is why I hang on in the places I do (I haven't left this apartment in a fortnight). I've more or less been a pariah for ages to my kin. Don't ask why, little bugger, it's beyond your pale of relevance.

I'm different than they are, than all that they are and hold dear: I *know* some Derrida. I've seen and more importantly internalized *différance* with my own feelers while you all take it on blind faith from all the show-off trapeze artists who regurgitate disgustingly the great Algerian man's ideas like cud from a cow's ass. That's if you take it at all; many kin will confuse him with that other, more famous and womened but trite Algerian *Camus* and say: "but if and when Sisyphus recognizes his *différance*, accepting it as the precondition to restore his missing liver, then he will have triumphed over that absurd stone!"

As if the absurd were a begloved mountebank in leather you could subdue in a boxing ring. As if Jacques would even stoop to loan Albert his first-edition copy of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, if they'd met in Tangiers or the Algerian quarter of Paris or on a raft on the Seine. Sartre is the real mountebank, my *bête noir* and over him I *can* triumph.

Never seek to define the ineffable. Fools know this. The deep, the inscrutable. Death would be better than. They persisted though; they, my kin, my asinine twigs of a family, tried anyhow. To define what is not thus susceptible. When I reminded them (with what patience! Charity to make oh, Augustine, lace his boots and learn!) that it could and should not be done, they yelled at me "Snoot!" "Snoot!" they slang at me like dirigible toxic-tipped arrows; "Snoot!" they calumniated jejunely; "Snoot!" was their effete losers' cry; "Snoots get the boot!" I (too) distinctly recall (as if that vituperative declaration were dispositive of anything *at all*) and I was in the end truly erumpent to boot *myself* out of their presences, peons and clearance sale factotums that they all are, yes doubtlessly, ah— yes. Yes.

Let me recite now my route, the route I'll take to reach these heaving masses we've called Mark and Marka. I think I

can get it all out in one or two full breaths. Out the hole like a blurred hornet skirting past the crusted sock Ms. Marka made a funny face at this morning past the strewn peanut butter and jam jars, some full and some half-full, and concomitant sticky butter knives, up and over Mt. Off-White Panty where it never snows but grows. No time for a pitstop at the McVoy's biscuits half-covered by the great big mountain nor not even, sadly, not even time to dip a foreleg in the fulfilled condom on the floor absolutely no time spared for the garlic-saturated fagioli that is laying— oh good goodness, there stuck to its bowl from the dinner two nights ago and all these hours since singing quite a SIRENESQUE strain for me. A few well-executed shimmies up the hindleft bedpost (this part I cop to premeditating but that for a totally unrelated business venture which will never be made alive due to the demoralizing steep incline in random fissiparous jousts of calumny— the funding for this venture having dried up like a biscuit and so unlike the fagioli I detect that I think craves my notice but in a fey sort of way).

Now here my paths do diverge in ways that deserve fine analysis: either I go under the duvet over their intertwined feet munch a toe take a toe for keeps and criss cross their bodies (always at rest in perfect homeostasis), then to skittle at a tempo to be decided in the minute... yes I am I admit full of a particular sort of nervousness but what gives me the special thrust we see evident is that no one but no one from my family has ever made good on these kinds of availabilities. Here noble Nietzschean pride overrules me and though they're such snoots I dedicate this mission to my clan, those who skate on the same rink as I however far off and clumsy they skate! All the while paying special attention to moist garlic-scented zones of special interest.

Or shall I skittle over their covers leaping rabbit-like from peak across gelid troughs to next peak (scarcely looking down as I soar, it is here I am happiest) born aloft on air-cushions given form mainly by my own chiseled ambition and very aerodynamic performance, a self-propelled squeal blessed with an exoskeleton and a thorax under there, until my little skippers, hind and fore and all, make landing on her cheek or his temple or their loving feet and I deposit my precious stored gift with no givebacks for the surcease of all calumny..

Surcease within what bounds? That will be left to our imaginations. I swear no one will be needing any pity.

Criticizing Dahlias

By M. E. Link

Love like a shotgun blast, like when your last dollar turns tears into whisky. Save your dread for the naked and awful winter woods, where shapes happen just beyond the corner of your eye. Dread in the face of love is like handing out jolly flyers to a book burning, pouring good liquor down the drain, or criticising dahlias. -D.H.

The three of us moseyed through the thick June evening and onto the porch of a charming red brick house on the corner of 48th Street and Dunston Avenue in Forest Hills, Richmond. The porch's screen offered us sanctuary from

the skeeters and no-see-ums—wooden slats underfoot, overlaid with a fraying burgundy rug, upon which wicker seats awaited. We unwound into the plush cushions and pleasantly dim lamplight. Kit disappeared momentarily, returning with mugs of mezcal on ice.

Sarge removed a cigarette wedged in the sweatband of his ballcap, leaving his hat askew atop his head. He then placed the stick between his lips, flicked it alight, and took a drag. With his other hand, he gulped down some mezcal and grunted, gratified.

“Kit’n’Caboodle, ya done it again,” he remarked affectionately to our hostess. Kit’s button-nosed face lit up with a lovely smile.

She and I began to chitter and chatter in rising anticipation about our upcoming departure from Virginia. We planned to head northwest about 2300 miles to Glacier Country, Montana to stay with Gillan, her partner—who was stationed there, working as a carpenter. (Though earlier I had tried to convince Sarge to join us on our adventure, the prospect of being ‘trapped in a car with the two of us for days-on-end’ sparked little excitement in him—so I let it go.)

I was itchy with James River residue and mosquito bites, but it didn’t matter. We three were rarely all in the same place together. Yearning tickled the back of my mind as I stole a glance at Sarge, the strapping stalwart—taking in how he’d changed since I’d seen him last. His mustache was perhaps more bristly and his skin more flushed red from sun, booze and smokes. He sported a sweat-stained beater, work-pants and army boots. His dark irises flicked inquisitively to meet mine for a fraction of a moment.

I basked in the rarity of this occasion—reuniting with two friends, each of whom I’d met on different travels-gone-by. Kit and I had lived and worked together on a farm in central Oregon six years ago. Sarge and I had met two years ago in northern New Mexico, working in doomsday prep. Come to find out, these two fine people just-so-happened to be pals themselves here in Richmond—their hometown (but not quite mine). The coincidence was inexplicable to us all, and we attributed it to fate.

Kit raised her drink, rapturing us from our quiet. “Ruze and Sarge—you two are real gems. You know that?” Her remark skylarked away into the scarab hum of the darkening sky. I gestured a kiss in her direction and gulped some drink. Kit was kin to me.

As my attention skipped off somewhere else, I let out a scream. “Lordee-be!” Then, I took another sip and spoke aloud a maxim I’d been chewing on lately, “*Who’s to say the effort to be real isn’t the beginning of wings?*” I grinned as I imagined feathered wings emerging from all of our shoulderblades.

Sarge scratched scalp through his dark head of hair and righted his ballcap, “Who’s to say...” he echoed, a bit perplexed, before saluting me, “Ru, ya odd duck. To keepin’ in touch.” Kit excused herself to make a phone-call, whisking her waist-length umber hair over her shoulder as she stood and vanished back into the house. Sarge and I remained seated on the porch—alone together for the first time since New Year’s Day six months ago, when we had laid together in a rickety

twin-size bed. I felt my body tense. I instinctively reached out in front of me to remove my guitar from its case, which was hand-embroidered with the words “*píseň za cenu piva*”—Czech for “a song for the price of a beer.”

The instrument I revealed was peculiar to be sure. It was a silver and blue headless electric, with tuning pegs built into the back of its downsized body. I also set out a lunchbox-size amp and began to tune.

Sarge scrutinized me between cigarette drags. “Funky-lookin’ thing,” he noted. “Hope you mean the guitar,” I joked. “Actually, I call it a ‘guit’—cus’ of its size.” I offered it to him. He exhaled one last puff and flicked the butt of his cigarette through a crack in the decking.

“Alright, gimme that guit,” he muttered, reaching out. I passed it to him. He handled the guitar with a lumbering sort of grace. It took him no time to settle into a tune—one I had been longing to hear him sing again. I laid down, my back against the wooden decking, and closed my eyes as he hammered and strummed...hammered and strummed...hammered and strummed. He began to sing from deep within. “August Thirty Something”—I knew the song well.

*I’m crushed
Into the bottom
Of my daddy’s daddy’s bottle
Here I go*

*And she is slumped
Against my shoulder
Drooling bits of blood
On down my knee*

*And the glass
All brown in canted light
Warps my memory
Of her pretty name
But what can make me better
After this beleaguered night?
All these bottles temporary
Up for the givin’ and go
Below me, reality a-waitin’
So bottoms up I go*

*Bitter, tasteless
Doesn’t make much fuckin’ difference
To these ol’ battered bugs
On this here town*

*Oh bud,
I haven’t been a good friend
Have I outworn the only welcome
I’ll ever know?*

*What can make me better
After this beleaguered night?
All these baggies temporary
Up for the givin’ and go
Below me, reality a-waitin’
So up, up and away I go*

*What can make me better
Under this here starry glow?
All these people temporary
Up for the givin’ and go
Behind me, reality a-waitin’
That’s why lookin’ back
Is something I’ll never know*

Into the long silence, I forced out a whisper. “You know, Sarge—” I faltered, struggling with how to tell him how much that song meant to me. “I’ve listened to that recording you left on my old laptop more times than I can count.” My stomach turned, as if I had just revealed a gaping chink in my armor to an adversary.

untitled

You have a visitor.
Is it Richard again?
Yes.

By Coleman Hicks

He walked past the nurse, every step tender and hesitating. Skin empty, along the ridge of her eyes and cheeks like a puppet in cruel detail, bare flesh before thin bones against the hospital air. He took her hand, so small and light and delicate and nothing, veins and digits obvious like piano wires. Prematurely aged and gruesome, tubes that lay about the pale blue sheets, snaking into her face and wrists. Some machine, something metal can be heard breathing.

Richard.

Turning his face away and kneeling at the foot of the bed like a penitent seeking forgiveness before the wretched.

Richard look at me.

Into her eyes, yellowed with the taste of defeat. Into one another's eyes. Memory. Until death do us part. Sharing now not words but the fleeting warmth of earthly flesh, hands and fingers. Silence like a fond farewell.

Is there anything I can do? Is there anything, anything you need

No. Richard you know that I love you. I need you to go. I need you to take care of him for me, love him for me.
Okay.

He stood up slowly, still holding her hand. Let it go. Begins to walk backwards towards the door, still facing her, still sharing her eyes. Dead flowers at the bedside table. The cards and the gifts. And the silence. The window shades, their horizontal slits, the equidistant shadows and sunlight they cast across her wasting body.

He took the little boy's hand and walked him out of the waiting room. Out of the thick oak double doors and into the twilight of the rising moon and down the hard marble stairs, the child taking them one foot at a time.

Richard is staring at the wall. Digging his fingernails into the flesh of his face. Rocking back and forth, cradling himself, fetal and prone. Shaking, rocking. Back and forth. Squeezing his eyes, clenching his jaw, every muscle in his body tightening and contracting. Overcome completely. Back and forth. His hands take a fistful of hair along his scalp. Hands shaking. Forearms flushed with blood. Through bared teeth soft faint sounds. A guttural wounding, the lungs forcing air make a sound of blood curdling agony. Back and forth.

Oh God I would do anything. Anything. Take this away. Just take this away. Oh God.

Down that well, right at the bottom. The child watches him from across the room. Scared. Does not approach. Holding the stuffed bear with both hands, squeezing it like it keeps him afloat. Adrift on the cold and unforgiving sea. Watching some great vessel sink slowly beneath the waves. Watching as the lights go out.

The window is thick, the color of amber, gold shining through the little cable hexagons embedded in the glass into the room where he lies naked like a child, holding himself through the paper gown on the rubber mattress.

The knob turns and a tall woman enters, thin wire glasses and hair greying lightly, looks him in the eyes with extraordinary care and reticence.

Hello Richard.

Hello.

How are we feeling today, any better?

Yes.

That's good to hear. I spoke with Doctor Evans and we've decided to allow you to leave early. You've shown remarkable improvement.

Okay.

Jet black bleeding boiling hands clutching at the throat where something wicked watches in the darkness. Beast of many heads many teeth many loathsome claws watching waiting like a portent. Oh hideous odious one in the crying night. That Face. That Face tiny and shaking in utter hatred utter oblivion yanked from all hope without feet only hands and a soul hardly human. All has been denied. What has been giveth. What He taketh away. Fateful balance. All doled out in incalculable proportion before all ages. He is seated at the right hand of the father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

They found him there in the dark, squat and muttering, clutching himself with eyes wild and mindless. They had kicked through his front door, shattered the lock and revealed rooms with furniture pushed against the walls, curtained in abyssal darkness and roiling in horrid smells. Richard with his hand in his mouth in the corner surrounded by kitchen utensils and strange objects, as if lobotomized, reverted to infancy or animalism. Big men in white dragging him shrieking and clawing and biting to the white truck. Forearms and calves chained with thick leather belts to the gurney, lashing and convulsing.

The child bears witness. Standing in the doorway, filthy and unfed for days watching as they drag his father like a rabid animal across the lawn.

A woman in white bends down to speak with him, offering a hopeless consolation, the child with the stuffed bear limply holding it by the leg in his right hand, its little brown head on the ground. His eyes transfixed on a distance beyond reckoning. What void consumes the children, where do they go and never to return, leaving such revenants as these to take their place, to walk this world with knowledge of its insatiable hunger for the innocent and undeserving, of the plagues that devour such noble men, the weak of heart, the sound of mind.

She takes his hand and leads him to the car, briefly brushing a well manicured hand over his hair, tangled and matted, him stumbling and tripping with his little legs as she takes him across the grass, ambling absent as a marionette.

Alchemy and Angels: John Dee and Occult Spiritualism in Rudolfine Prague

By Jack Kontarinis

On September 3, 1584, John Dee, an English alchemist and mystic, used his brief audience with Emperor Rudolf II to accuse him of living in sin and “wickednesse,” as revealed to him by “The Angel of the Lord.” Dee did not elaborate further on any specific sins of the Emperor, but rather warned Rudolf that

“if you will not hear me, the Lord, the God that made Heaven and Earth, (under whom you breath, and have your spirit) putteth his foot against your breast, and will throw you headlong down from your feat [sic].”

These were bold and slightly combative words to be spoken, especially directly to the Habsburg Emperor. But Dee was wholly sincere. He continued to subtly warn Rudolf that the only way to spiritual salvation was through him, Dee, and that, if Rudolf heeded his advice, he would be able to make “the Devil... become your prisoner,” with the Devil meaning, in this instance, “the Great Turk.” But Dee was no ordinary preacher. In the few years leading up to their meeting, Dee had been holding conversations with multiple angels, specifically Uriel and Michael. They brought with them messages for all men, not Protestant in nature, but universal messages that could be followed and applied to all men, Protestant or Catholic. Dee, with his scribes who directly communicated with the angels, was, in his view, the only man in Europe who had access to these new angelic messages and, as such, was uniquely qualified to spread them as if they were Gospel to the men and women of continental Europe. According to Dee’s recounting of the meeting, Rudolf thanked Dee for his visit, and expressed interest to “hear and understand more” at a later time. Rudolf, essentially, shooed John Dee away from his court. Indeed, two years after their first (and only) meeting, Rudolf himself, at the urging of Catholic ambassadors from Rome, expelled John Dee from all of his lands.

John Dee was an Englishman famous for his time spent as Queen Elizabeth I’s court astrologer, who frequently sought his advice on philosophical questions and his expertise in alchemy. Dee was, first and foremost, an alchemist, well known for his *Monas hieroglyphica*, published in 1564, which was a mystical and incredibly vague text on symbols, many invented by him, that could be used in alchemical procedures, in order to not only practice effective alchemy, but also to communicate with divine beings as well. R. J. W. Evans has called the *Monas hieroglyphica* an “enormously difficult” document to interpret. By the 1580s, however, Dee had grown exhausted of the confines of pure alchemy, a field whose chief aim was to develop methods of transmuting base metals into gold. Dee sought noble patronage in central

and eastern Europe, where alchemists had had some success in gaining significant financial backings from royal and well-connected patrons. But Dee’s chief aim was not necessarily financially-minded. He was instead seeking to dedicate his work to his most promising art: conversations with angels.

John Dee’s book, *A True and Faithful Relation*, is an important and somewhat under-utilized document in historical studies of occultism, spiritualism, and culture in early modern Europe. Filled with hundreds of pages of conversations that Dee held with angels and spirits, and written by Dee himself, R. J. W. Evans has called it “the most precious of all accounts describing spiritual experience.” While it is true that Rudolf II was incredibly interested in alchemy and its more lucrative (and philosophical) possibilities, it is also true that Rudolf was, in the 1580s, in contact with John Dee and his somewhat problematic scribe-alchemist, Edward Kelley. Both Dee and Kelley worked together, somewhat antagonistically, for the bulk of time that the *Relation* covers. *Relation* itself is an account filled mostly with Dee and Kelley’s “seances,” or conversations with angels or spirits. The divine beings, throughout *Relation*, relay vague and incredibly mystical messages about God, the logic of the universe, and the path to discovering the Philosopher’s Stone. During the time of the *Relation*’s scope, from 1583 to 1589, Dee had been in infrequent contact with Rudolf II through letters and intermediaries. Rudolf was aware of Dee’s conversations, and must have been somewhat interested in their utility or meaning, which then led to him meeting Dee in September of 1584. *A True and Faithful Relation* indicates that Rudolf II was not only interested in alchemy, but also entertained more radical spiritual practices as well, such as Dee’s conversations with angels, which were just as vague, cryptic, and full of philosophical potential as was alchemy.

Dee’s work with angels was, in many ways, a spiritual form of classical and medieval alchemy. One of the most important texts for alchemists in the early modern period was Hermes Trismegistus’ *The Emerald Table*. Hermes Trismegistus was a legendary and mythical figure, and was thought to have lived during the time of Moses; he was also considered to be an amalgamation of the Egyptian god Thoth, the god of Wisdom, and a contemporary of Atlas, Noah, and other mythical figures. *The Emerald Table* is considered to be one of the foundational texts of classical and medieval alchemy because of its legendary antiquity and its vague language concerning transmutations and the universal likeness of all things.

“True it is, without falsehood, certain and most true. That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing.”

Otherwise remembered as the phrase “as above, so below,” Hermes’ opening lines to the *The Emerald Tablet* can be traced through the art of alchemy for their allusions to the existence of the essence of all things in all other things. Whatever is above must be below, and vice versa. Hermes then goes on to assert that “If it be cast on to earth,” with “it” meaning any real or perceived thing, “it will separate the element of earth from that of fire, the subtle from the gross.” If one observes and understand these vague rules

defining the nature of existence and matter, then there will “be marvellous adaptations achieved.” Given that alchemists were obsessed with obtaining “adaptations” of their various working materials from “fire” and other methods of separation, it can be clearly understood that most, if not all, of early modern alchemy could find its roots in Hermes’ tract.

Plato’s writings figure heavily into the foundation of modern alchemy as well. In the *Timaeus*, Plato, among other things, puts forward his own ideas concerning a harmonious universe, asserting that the universe “must be always called the same, for, inasmuch as she always receives all things, she never departs at all from her own nature and never... assumes a form like that of and never... assumes a form like that of any of the things which enter into her.” Thus, even if things *appear* to be different in exterior appearance, they are actually all composed of the same elements of all other things in existence and, moreover, that the universe itself is an “invisible and formless being... and is most incomprehensible.” Incomprehensible to Plato, perhaps, but not to the art of alchemy, which would later come to rely upon his and Hermes’ foundational ideas on the existence of the essence of the universe and of each thing within each other thing. It can thus be seen, stemming from these ancient texts, how lead might be used to create gold, or stone into medicine, and so forth. The art of alchemy rests on these texts because it is an art that is obsessed with harnessing and transmuting the essence of one thing into a desired metal, object, or, even, idea.

Dee’s conversations with angels are, thus, not completely removed from alchemy. He was communicating with divine beings, spirits from above, and they, in turn, were communicating with him, a creature from below. As was entirely possible based on the ancient teachings of Hermes and Plato (and others), all elements of the universe, including those that lived on the spiritual plane, were accessible and in constant contact with each other. This would have allowed the whole nature of angel conversations to exist within the realm of possibility for most early modern Europeans, even members of the Catholic Church, who were concerned that Dee and Kelley’s conversations “were all too real” and that they might even “involve evil spirits rather than good angels.” Indeed, the Catholic Church did not think Dee was faking his conversations, but that because he was not a hermit, he was not in contact with the right spirits.

Dee, during his time in Prague and in his conversations with the angels, was not merely shooting the breeze. He believed that he was receiving true and incredibly important information, directly from the mouth of God, concerning the ways in which humans could truly transform their understandings of each other and their existence. In one conversation, an angel proclaims, “*Behold I have delivered you (through the Will of God) the true perfect and most plain Science or understanding of all the lower Creatures of God: their natures fellowship together, and perfect*

knitting together, which is fourfold.”

As might be inferred, the “Lesson” that was handed down by God to Dee was, up until the line above, incredibly vague. Only Dee would have been able to decipher the true meaning of the words of the Angels, thus cementing his importance if the Emperor or other noble patrons would seek to employ him. Indeed, as R. J. W. Evans has noted, in his study of Rudolf II, alchemists and mystics like Dee were seeking to discover a way in which to spur a “moral and spiritual rebirth of mankind.” Rulers like Rudolf II, as has been suggested by scholars, were interested in the spiritual possibilities that men like Dee could yield, as they could provide a “comforting unity” to Europe and the world that, by the late 16th century, was becoming increasingly fractured, violent, and, most tangibly, heading towards the Thirty Years’ War. Mysticism like Dee’s also, as Evans has noted, provided a spiritual rejection of Catholicism and Protestantism. Harmonious ideas about the universe and mankind’s relation to it provided more appealing, universal understandings than organized religion could, at the time, give to their adherents.

However, despite the appealing and universal nature of Dee’s angelic conversations and their philosophical possibilities for Eastern Europeans at a time of great social fissures, Rudolf II was, ultimately, uninterested in his teachings. It could have been due to Dee’s accusations of Rudolf’s own sin and “wickedness” in 1584. It might also have been due to the fact that it was Dee’s assistant, Edward Kelley, and not Dee himself, who was actually in communication with the angels. Kelley was a sayer, a practitioner of an ancient art of divination that allowed certain individuals to peer across the veil that separated the lived, physical reality from the spiritual. According to Deborah Harkness, sayers, not men like Dee, were the ones who were doing the “physical [labor]” that then made Dee’s interpretations possible. Kelley was Dee’s sayer for much of their time in Prague, and their relationship was incredibly tumultuous, as can be gleaned from the *Relation*. For instance, during their most trying times in their master-sayer relationship, Kelley told Dee that the angels he was in communication with had instructed them both to share all of each others’ possessions, including their wives. By 1588, shortly after Kelley’s pact had indeed been consummated, their professional relationship ended, and Dee ended his conversations with angels. Kelley went on to enjoy brief success at Rudolf’s court. This might have been due to his abilities as a spiritual medium, but it can be most directly to his abilities as an alchemist. Indeed, as Evans and Harkness have noted, Rudolf II personally invited Kelley to be employed at Rudolf’s own laboratory to work on a “great alchemical work which is in progress.” The specifics of the alchemical work is not known, but in any case, the job was to be short-lived: Rudolf had Kelley imprisoned in 1591, ostensibly for his “trickery,” though this, as Evans notes, is not clear, and Kelley died shortly after under mysterious circumstances.

The *Relation* also notes that the Emperor was to be promised the Philosopher’s Stone, the mythical substance that could transmute all things into gold, or other valuable substances. And, as has been noted, Dee was not perceived to be a quack or a fraudulent alchemist, a classic archetype of alchemists at the time that would lead to frequent and public punishments and executions.