

SUNSTRUCK

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Wonder

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Steve Passey

Oil is under \$40/barrel and times are hard. One man seeks to borrow, another to steal.

-*Broke*,
pg. 43

Nora Ward

Are Western and European modes of thinking behind the harm done to our environment? John Moriarty thinks so.

-*Down A Rabbit Hole*,
pg. 15

Taylor Crisler

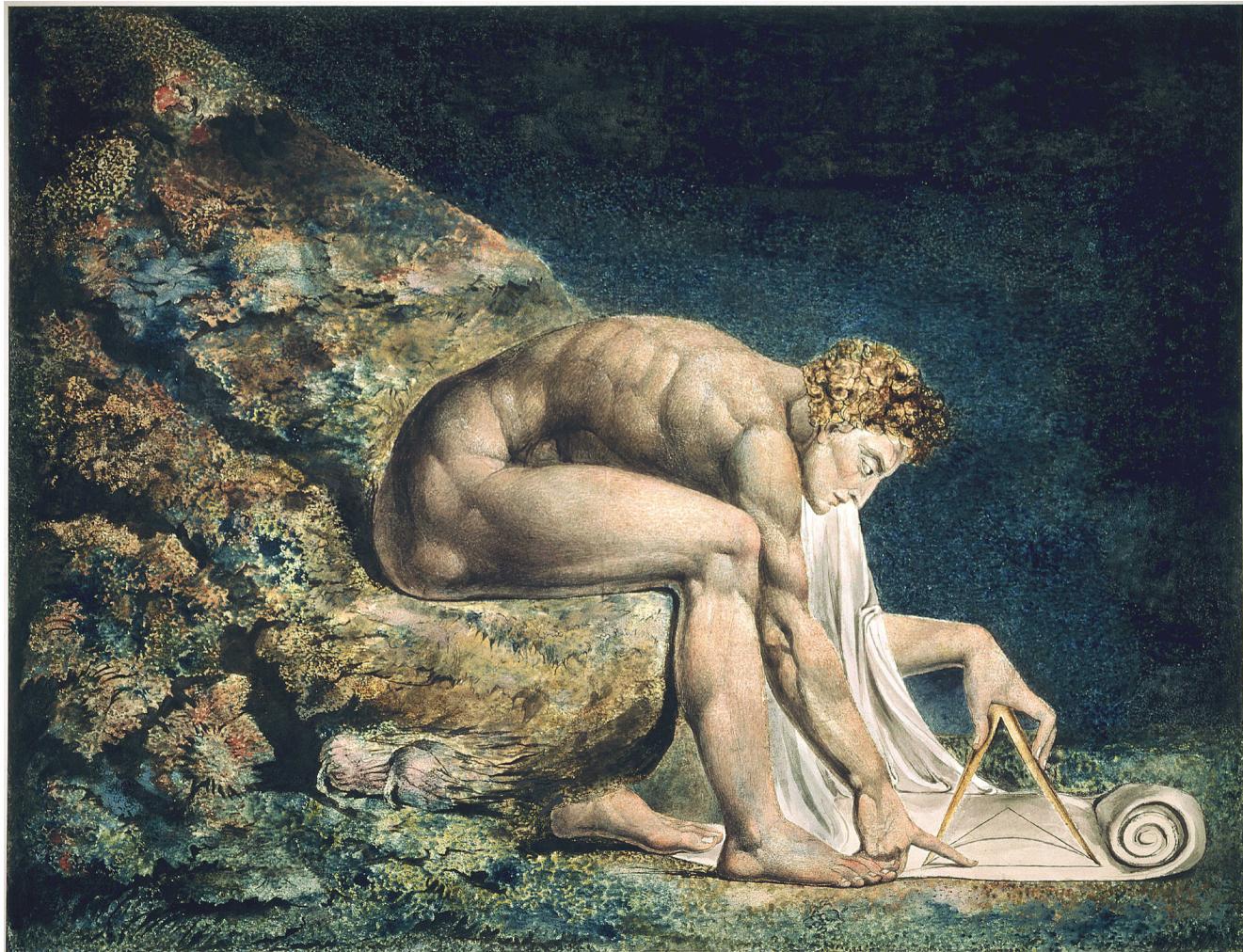
Comics are rarely regarded as a “significant” art form, but Jim Woodring’s work may make you reconsider that notion.

-*Frank In The 3rd Dimension*,
pg. 7

Rage Almighty

“Briusing” will command your attention and demand your contemplation before leaving you breathless and exhilarated.

-*Briusing*,
pg. 32



Newton - William Blake

Readers,

William Blake's monotype "Newton" is one of my favorite works of art. Upon first impression, I was struck by the rich blues and greens, the spongy textures and Newton's brilliant, almost angelic, hair. Yet, I was never sure what Blake was trying to communicate with the work. Newton is an intellectual titan, so why is he at the bottom of the ocean? Why is he hunched over in such a strained, undignified position? Why is he so isolated?

It wasn't until recently that I learned that Blake, an 18th century poet and artist, fiercely rejected Newton's scientific perspective of the world and went as far making Newton the center of his "Unholy Trinity," which placed Bacon and Locke on either side of him.

The pieces then began to fall into place. Blake, who was an intensely spiritual man, claiming to have seen visions filled with religious imagery since childhood, must have been fundamentally opposed to the Enlightenment Age notion of human beings "daring to know," as Kant phrased it. For in daring to know, are we not transgressing against spirituality and erasing all of the dynamic possibilities of the human imagination? Are we not systematically stripping the world of wonder by applying laws to it? "If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character the Philosophic and Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, and stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again," Blake said.

Yet, I look at "Newton," and I see the greatest scientific thinker in history, hunched over and oblivious, but radiating a ring of light in the ocean depths. I see a face determined to understand. I see a man in his natural state, with radical ideas literally pouring from his mind. I see this, and I can't help but think that even though he disagreed with him, Blake must've deeply respected Newton's intellect.

This month, SunStruck Magazine discusses Wonder. The work contained in this issue asks whether the human craving for knowledge and our inevitable tendency to ponder the world around us has enhanced or detracted from our experience of the world. All agree that wonder should play some role in the human experience, but offer different opinions on exactly what that role is. I sincerely hope you enjoy this issue of SunStruck Magazine, and even if you disagree with the ideas presented here, I hope they elicit some degree of appreciation, as Newton did for Blake.

- Caleb Downs
Editor in Chief

Unendingly I marvel at your flowering,
the wonder of your existence, o blessed trees,
as you continue, forever renewing, to
bear these so soon to vanish exquisite blossoms.

Oh, he who unlocks the secret of flowering:
his heart will rise above the smallest of dangers
and will meet the greatest of them, death without fear.

Rainer Maria Rilke, "Almond trees in bloom"

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condemned
to see your
ad here.*

*-Jean-Paul
Sartre*



THE TOWER IS NOT OUTSIDE

BENJAMIN ROSS

Your whole life has been spent with this stranger – this outsider – named, appropriately enough, “Outside.” We have all been told to go there, and perhaps there were moments when we thought we knew the stranger: fishing at sunset with Dad, locking eyes with the giant tortoise at the zoo or backpacking through a forest. Although, try as we might, “Outside,” also affectionately called capital-N “Nature,” refuses our best attempts at a relationship. It is an irreducible empty set, and thus, we can never know it. At least, we cannot know Nature as something apart from us, able to be strained out from our existence like so many leaves in a suburban swimming pool.

Last year, just as spring was about to become summer, I learned that even outside there is no Outside.

“It’s 4:30. Are you awake?” I heard the disembodied voice drift past my tent in the mystic dark of pre-dawn, that magic time when we love to find ourselves naturally awake without having to artificially wake up.

I considered not responding to my friend Drey, who was the major impetus for this journey. His name suggests otherwise, but he is a tall, lanky and thoughtful guy. After all, he was kind enough to ask if I was awake, rather than shaking the tent or simply unzipping the fabric and peering in with a flashlight. Such kindness might have something to do with the fact that I spent the previous day retching my guts up as we traveled all night from Texas into Kansas before I gratefully passed out into the air-conditioned backseat as we made our way to Utah. I wish I could say it some kind of horrendous malady that put me down, but honestly, it was merely some kind of stomach bug that I watched jump from my parents to my siblings. I

thought it had skipped me. I was wrong. Laying in the tent with my jeans and sweatshirt pretending to be pajamas, I had no strength left beyond what I could glean from saltines, and therefore no right to answer in the affirmative.

“I’m awake, let’s go.”

What can I say? I came to do a climb.

What followed the false-resolution of acknowledgment was a collection of hazy images both gazed-at and gazing-back from somewhere deep within my Cartesian theater: sneaking through camp so as not to disturb the members of our group that were not making the climb, seeing our sleeping-bagged friend Neil sit straight up as we backed the truck out of camp leaving us to think we had most likely just run over his legs, watching our good-natured driver spilling re-hydrated eggs into the lap of his less-than-good-natured navigator, meeting our soft-spoken though enthusiastic guides in a bank parking lot and winding our way along the Colorado River on the rock-strewn highway, arriving at the towers just as the sun made its first appearance.

Ah, the vagueness of the towers. Sure, the formation was called “Ancient Art,” but they could have been anything, anywhere – a skyscraper, a battleship, a grain silo or Osaka Castle. The sandstone was visible, but only just so, jutting skyward up from the hardness of the ground as well as from deep geologic time. Questions of scale lapped at the edges of my consciousness, while with each blink, the sun rose ever higher over the horizon, further establishing the towers’ existence.

I felt more than a little ashamed for the hours spent on the Internet trying to understand the climb. This painful stab was the result of having taken this miracle – that we should be here, now,

at the same time as the towers, with equipment, ropes, guides, and bodies – and denied it a full measure of wonder by allowing someone to bind all that up with words, descriptions, observations and instructions. In the place of wonder, I had given in to the satisfaction of expectation rather than the sublimity of the uncertain.

Ah, the uncertain. From here, the tower was just a thing, a theory seen from far away, but soon it would be so much more. Our tendency as a culture is to think that when we know the name of a thing, when it can be perfunctorily plugged into a reference system – when we can describe it – we certainly understand it. This is the function of an education, after all – the ability to make comparisons and put like with like. What happens when we come up against that which we have no comparison?

I was climbing that day because I wanted to know.

Sure, I was an amateur climber. Sure, I was not feeling 100 percent. Sure, I was scared. Sure, I was exhausted. Sure, excuse five and excuse six and excuse seven. None of that seemed important that day. I was simply wondering if I could do it. Could I climb if I had to? I had no reference system for what I was attempting, and getting outside the reference system was all I was after – looking for a realm where excuses do not apply. There is nothing inherently wrong about fitting everything into boxes fashioned out of concepts like DNA, religion, upbringing and politics. We are doing it constantly, and, without this ability, no one could buy bread or cross the street. Ever since I was a kid, the problem seemed to be when people allow the feedback loop, the framework in which they are living, to become invisible in the true sense of the word – so transparent that it no longer reflects or is able to be reflected upon.

Seeing the tower outlined against the clouds, the irony of my road trip sickness struck with a force more powerful than the sight of my stomach contents left by the side of the road, rendered pink by good old Pepto: most of us will just regurgitate what we swallow and call that realization.

Does that sound harsh? I suppose it does. Does climbing a slick-rock tower change anything in an essential way? Probably not. But, it is an acknowledgment that we should ask more of ourselves.

Finding creative ways to do this is the spice of life.

"Rain is moving in soon, but if we hurry, we can still make the climb. Grab these bags and those helmets and go, go, go." Weighed down by the gear, I followed behind my climbing partner, Emil, as well as Drey, his wife Steph and the guides, Justin and Eric. I tried to hide the fact that we had barely even started hiking to the base of the tower and al-

INSOFAR AS A HUMAN BEING IS REQUIRED TO RUN, JUMP, SWIM OR CLIMB, ONE IS CHRISTENED AN "ATHLETE" BY DEFAULT.

ready my breath was escaping in gasps. No time for second-thoughts as I was just trying to keep pace with my companions. Everyone was definitely excited about what we were about to do, but I noticed that the guides seemed mostly non-plussed. We all watched as the rain was indeed holding off in the distance despite the wind picking up in step with the burgeoning squall line in the distance.

Incredibly, there was no one at the tower. We needed to begin the ascent immediately. I nodded gamely. Could everyone tell that I was already soaked in sweat? I would just say I fell in a puddle. Most days, I like to imagine myself as an athlete, but that is probably just my naive realism at work. Insofar as a human being is required to run, jump, swim or climb, one is christened an "athlete" by default. I had passed the point of no return. My only option was to climb. I watched Eric take Drey and Steph up first. He quickly explained the instructions to these seasoned climbers and off they went. Fast. I was incredulous at how quickly they were ascending. At this point, the other guide Justin began to give Emil and I our safety brief. We tried to seem like old hands, but Justin easily saw through this facade – I had never met anyone so calm in my life, and I have visited monasteries in Cambodia. Justin's soothing voice had a hypnotic effect that made anyone want to agree with whatever he

might be saying at that exact moment. He was so relaxed, however, that he was sometimes difficult to hear.

With both of these traits in mind, after an explanation about rappelling technique, my ears, straining to hear him, picked up another sound: a quiet, but sustained squeak, squeak, pause, squeak, squeak. Justin immediately spoke up to Emil, but in a voice that sounded as gentle as the clouds forming and re-forming on the horizon, “I’m...not sure what you’re doing...but...I need you to belay me.” That is, Justin needed Emil to protect him from taking a fall as he began the climb by staying tied together, yet Emil was inexplicably removing his carabiner and undoing the knot attaching the rope to his harness. Without a trace of anger, Justin re-tied all of Emil’s equipment and then began to move us toward the rock face.

Emil could have sworn Justin said to go ahead and take off the rope, but instead of arguing the point, Justin quickly added that he understood that he might be hard to hear sometimes as he had recently been struck by lightning.

The approaching storm seemed closer than ever after he said that, and it reminded me that rock climbing involves not only technique, but faith. For me, this manifests as a strong belief in one’s equipment. The ropes, harnesses, carabiners, quick-draws, runners and the rest of the protection we shared definitely looked cool – and while it might not protect me from a lightning strike, I had to trust it was crafted for more than aesthetics. The climb was rated a 5.10, and as I started up, I realized why: twice I had to use my knees to clamber over the red spines emerging like swords from the scabbard of the rocky landscape. A 5.10 is generally a climb in which a “weekend warrior” like myself would rarely feel comfortable unless they are truly attacking the rock every weekend or possess some measure of natural talent. For me, it should have been rated a 6.66-.

Though the clouds were rapidly descending, we were making our way up to meet them ourselves. My mind was as fully engaged as the elastic around the ankles of my “climbing pants,” which are called “joggers” these days. My sister calls them my maternity pants. I was slapping for holds like a billy goat sliding down a precipice. I gripped every hold like it was my last, making every move about as

sloppily as one could make it. To be honest, I really just did not want to be the only one to take a fall that day.

At one point, something below my foot cracked as a bit of rock came loose. How, I cannot say, but some divine force kept me from buffering off into space to be swung down, down, down. My eyes closed involuntarily. It is strange how it does not matter if one is dangling hundreds of feet above a valley floor or meditating on a cushion in the local Zen center, the flickering blackness on the back of one’s eyelids is always the same. Whatever reassurance such a thought might have given me quickly evaporated as I found myself underneath a thick ledge extending out from the wall.

Being told to “move out and away” when encountering an obstacle is something that no one ever wants to hear when climbing. My friends and I agree that what is fear-inducing is not so much the question of technical ability required to get upside-down in order to move past a rock slab suspended in space, but that doing so infinitely magnifies one’s lack of control over the situation, which until that moment had been concealed.

It was this clear sensation of being exposed to the void below that started my fear radiating outward in waves as I clung tightly to the hard, sandy surface. I cannot chalk it up to simply being afraid of a certain elevation, rather, the feeling of protection had evaporated. I looked down and felt completely naked. A person can hear all the safety briefs, read all the labels on the equipment, and it was true, there certainly was a rope clipped to my waist that would stop me from bouncing off the desert floor, but it might as well have been made of twine – it offered no sensation of safety. Without this sensation, which is one of the first things that human beings crave upon being born, I was going against some of my most powerful instincts. Of course, none of this mattered. Things can be no other way than they are – and the only way down was up. The Earth was yearning for me – the nearness of immanent disaster was reaching for me – and I made my decision.

I breathed in. I breathed out. I arched backwards as I tilted my head back toward the ground, moving my arms above me in time with the movement of my feet. I pulled myself taut, but the strain was replaced with a confusion at how I was actually

still on the wall. But I was – and more importantly – I was upside-down. It only took a second for me to move around the outer protrusion of the slab in order to reach up and around with a monkey paw grip that found some purchase. From there, I brought a foot up to my waist to prepare for what came next: a good, old-fashioned shove against the wall. My body felt heavy – like trying to get out of a swimming pool while wearing a three-piece suit – still, the tower's trap could not contain me. Just as I passed the point of no return, however, my momentum began to fall backward. I reached hard above my head, grasping blindly for a hold. In the microseconds which saw this feverish grip battle, I was victorious – my fingertips sunk into a crevice that must have been carved by the gods. There was no pain, only the relief that somehow I did it. I held on.

My reward was a messy scramble which put me on top of the ledge to rejoin the world of the vertical. It also happened to be where we were staging before going for the summit. As my friends came into view, I exaggerated the ease of the last few

AFTER NEARLY TAKING THAT FALL UNDER THE LEDGE, I HAD RE-DOUBLED MY CONCENTRATION, BUT THE STRAIN WAS TOO MUCH. MY BODY WAS EXHAUSTED, MY NERVES HAD SAPPED THE ADRENALINE THAT HAD BROUGHT ME THIS FAR AND I HAD NOTHING LEFT TO GIVE.

feet of climbing it took to reach them. I made sure to give the impression that what had just taken place was a normal, everyday occurrence. This was followed by offering up a knowing half-smile to the “of-course-I-made-it-too” looks that everyone else was shooting me.

Just then, the wind began to pick up until it was whipping by at Sears Tower speeds. At that moment, I heard some more nonsense erupt from the guide: “Ok. Grab the camel’s head. Keep climbing around and pull yourself up to the summit.”

This singular moment, the idea that everything that I had ever done somehow amounted to these instructions. After nearly taking that fall under the ledge, I had re-doubled my concentration, but the strain was too much. My body was exhausted, my nerves had sapped the adrenaline that had brought me this far and I had nothing left to give.

It was right then and there that I experienced the paradox of “giving up while continuing.”

I gazed out at the empty space. It looked back at me. It was like looking into a mirror. My mind had stopped its silent language of inner dialogue. A lifetime of sequential thoughts and conversations with no one vanished into the emptiness. I looked out over the desert landscape and found it to be not barren and desolate, but a place of potential. I continued around the rock formation which, incidentally, did look exactly like a camel’s head. I grabbed it, head-on, and pulled myself around and up the nylon runners which had been placed to aid us. With a few surprisingly easy pulls, I was on the summit.

Before, when I chanced looking up from my feet, which I had been struggling to keep moving as we hiked in, I could see the tower, the other towers, the mountains behind it, the mountains behind that one, the sky above and the earth below.

But, now where was I? Where was “Nature?” Going this far “outside” had annihilated “me.”

As the guide led me to stand above my protection, none of those things could be found. Instead, there was only the wonder at being this nothingness, climbing into the vastness and experiencing not meaninglessness – but freedom in the purest sense.

And what was this freedom that I felt standing on that summit the size of a pizza box? It was literally the freedom of soaring to new heights, the

freedom of doing more than I thought possible – of deriving something certain from the uncertain. However, it was also nothing more than an absurdity in the Latin sense of *absurdum* – “out of tune” and irrational. Why pay to go on a climb? The only answer is “no reason.” That is to say, it was simply a choice. If Camus was right about the absurd, that human beings are caught in a constant attempt to derive meaning from a meaningless world, then consider me the “absurd-est” of them all.

The curious thing, though, about this absurdity is its concealed authenticity. To be authentic, is to face up to that fact and admit to ourselves that our plans and projects are mostly in vain – and yet! – struggle on regardless. It is exactly this recognition/continuation, or as another philosopher put it, this sedimentation/reactivation, that drove me to climb, others to paint, still others enter hot dog eating contests.

We each affirm the absurdity of life and continue, and in this affirmation and continuation is freedom – like Sisyphus or Hyakujo’s Fox.

So, in an effort brimming with absurdity and its younger sister futility, I pulled my phone out of my little butt-pack to take a summit selfie. Of course, it was completely useless since I was too afraid to stand

tall on the summit with the wind and the altitude, but also because of this truth which only then became apparent:

Nothing I could photograph would look like the tower.

Nothing would look like I was in the mountains.

You had to be in the parking lot to get a good photo of where I was now standing, which I found



THE WANDERER ABOVE THE SEA OF FOG - CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH - 1818

out after rappelling down the tower with the grace of a grandmother trying out for the Special Forces. With my feet out of the air and firmly planted on the ground, I realized that when you are at the summit, there is no tower.

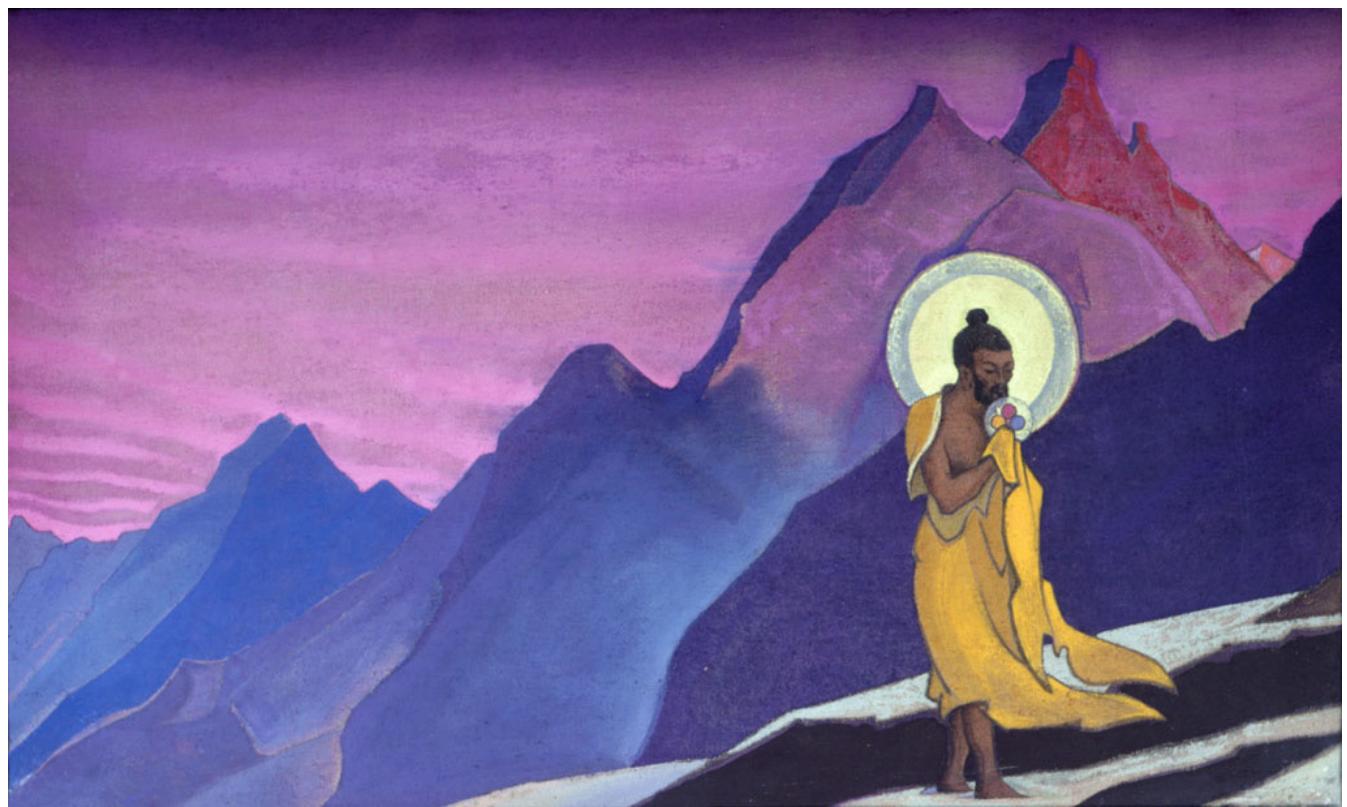
We take up this same position every single day of our lives with everything we experience – we are it. Only in memory is there an “I.” When we are reading, is there “someone” reading? Sure, but only when we remember to think that we are reading. Otherwise, reading is reading, climbing is climbing, eating is eating and driving is driving. Similarly, there is no “Nature.” We simply are nature naturing – with all the bells and whistles that go with it, all the other members of the present that we call humans and non-humans: birds, cars, trucks, right triangles, trees, mountains, fish, dictators and corn on the cob. We are not “one” with it, we do not “belong” to it – all of these are outsiders looking in. That is not who we are. The climber is the mountain. The mountain is the climber.

This is not a problem – it is possibility – it is “wonder-full.” Thinking otherwise, we fall victim to a lifetime of programming. Not everybody is going to climb the tower and challenge the way they think about things. And that is fine. In fact,

climbing is nothing compared to the absolute terror of confronting how and why we think like we do. Such fear stems from admitting uncertainty. However, those of us that are able to question themselves, their culture, their leaders, have a responsibility to do so, and to keep going, to nurture the intimacy that erases distinctions while simultaneously honoring them.

The effort of climbing the tower, the concentration of will in an effort to go beyond “myself,” is nothing more than an attempt to question limitations. It is an effort founded on uncertainty, that is, curiosity also known as wonder.

Finding the way to cultivate this for oneself is paramount. Luckily, we have everything we need – an entire universe that cannot be photographed because we are standing at its apex in every moment. To paraphrase the immortal words of Archimedes: “Give me a selfie stick long enough and a fulcrum to stand on, and I shall move the world.” ☺

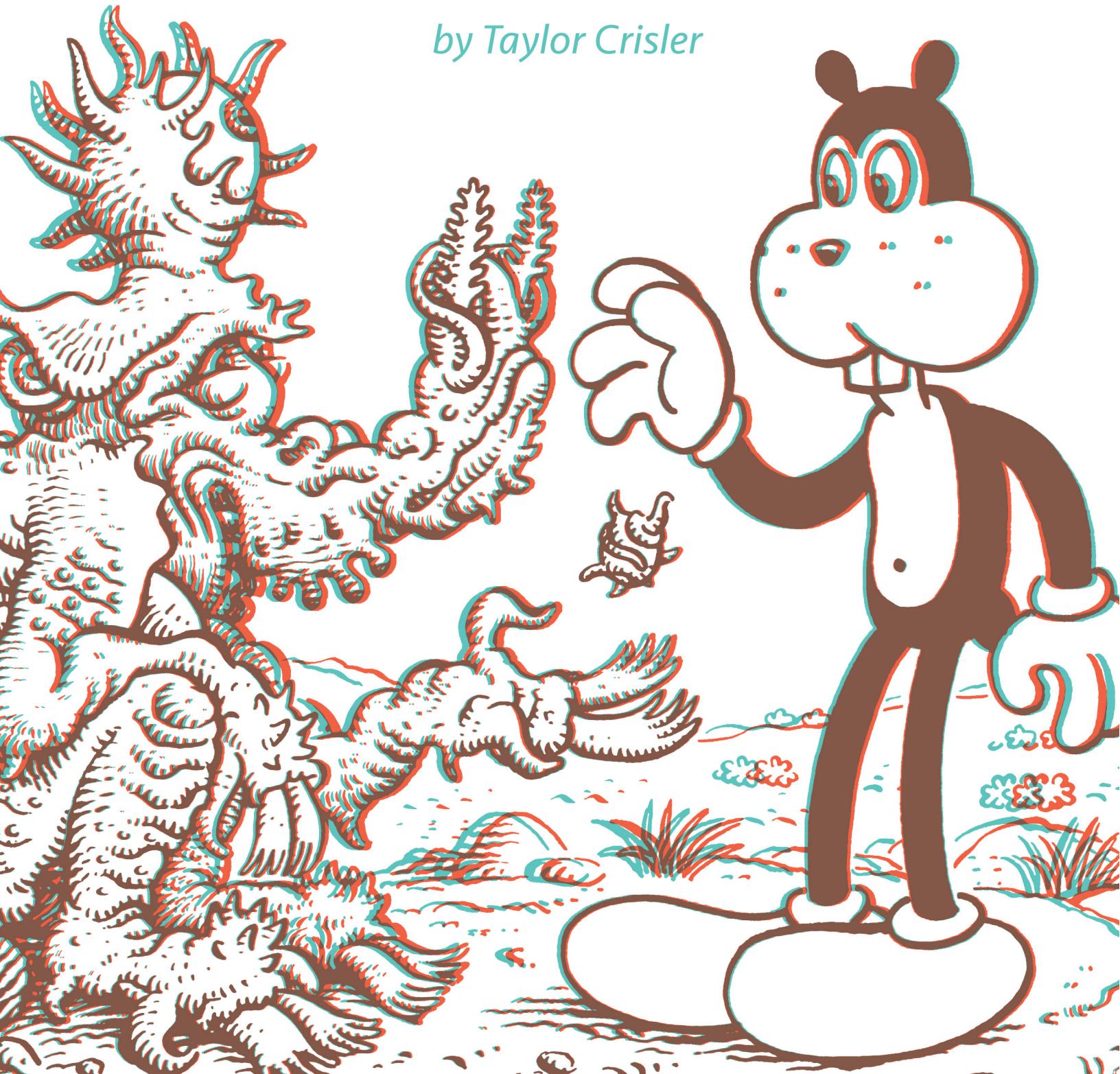


BLESSED SOUL - NICHOLAS ROERICH - 1924

STRIVING TOWARDS THE TRANSCENDENTAL

THOUGHTS ON JIM WOODRING'S
"FRANK IN THE 3RD DIMENSION"

by Taylor Crisler



A recent issue of the New York Review of Books carried an essay by Edward Mendelson on the inner-life on T.S. Eliot. The essay provides valuable, nuanced insight into the poet's inner life and the attitudes and personalities surrounding his work. Of particular interest were Eliot's years at Harvard. Eliot slacked off in class and was even placed on academic probation at one time. It wasn't until he started reading and studying philosophy and language that he began to take his classwork seriously. Later on during his graduate studies at Harvard, Eliot began searching for "religions more visionary and demanding than his parents' Unitarianism, more committed to a reality that was otherworldly and absolute" which initiated his interest in Buddhist and Hindu texts.

Mendelson hints that this desire for a practice more focused on the "otherworldly" might've come from mystic visions that Eliot experienced. The factual basis for this is sketchy, as it rests upon comments made by W.H. Auden to his friends. However, Eliot also wrote poetry during his time at Harvard that may confirm this aspect of his life. The second stanza of "Silence," which was written a few months before Eliot graduated, "describes a moment of religious awe, a terrifying vision of the peace that passeth understanding":

*This is the ultimate hour
When life is justified.
The seas of experience
That were so broad and deep,
So immediate and steep,
Are suddenly still.
You may say what you will,
At such peace I am terrified.
There is nothing else beside."*

This information, previously unknown to me, immediately brought to mind Jim Woodring, another great, literary mystic. A cartoonist by trade, Woodring is the creator of the award-winning "Jim" and "Frank" cartoon series. His work is heavily influenced by dreams and the hallucinatory "apparitions" he's experienced since childhood. Also of note, Woodring is a follower of Vedanta, a branch of Hindu philosophy which has influenced several Western philosophers and artists, including Arthur Schopenhauer and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

With this in mind, it's easy to draw similarities between Eliot's and Woodring's influences. In fact, the second stanza of "Silence" sounds similar to Woodring's description of his own religious experiences given in an interview with comedian Duncan Trussell from last year:

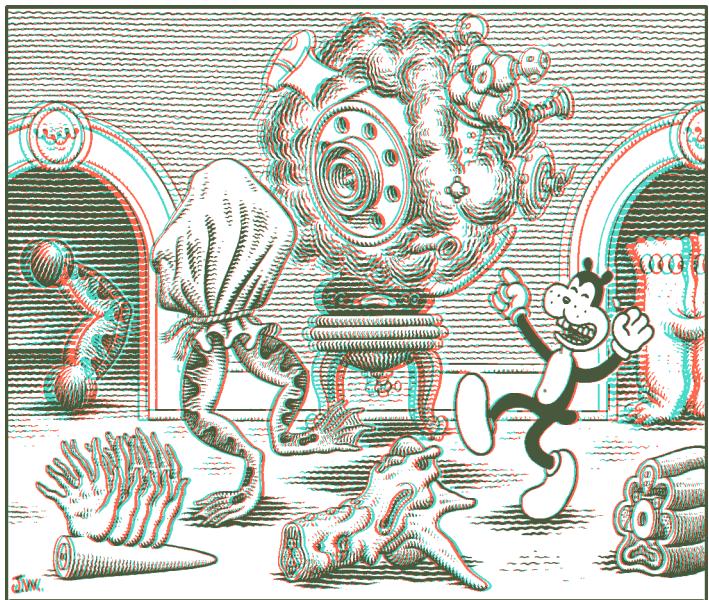
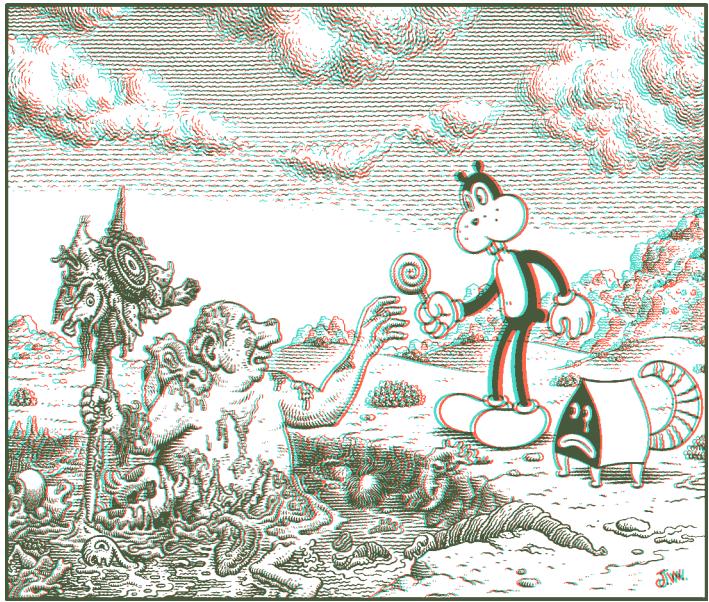
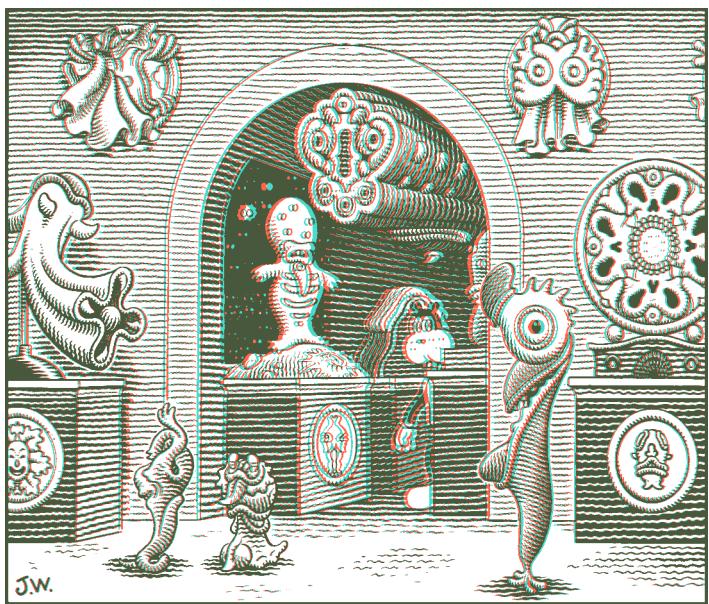
The experience of getting into a practice, sitting in meditation, and being into it for reasons you cannot say and getting results that may be slight but you know them when they happen because they belong to a different order of experience.... Is what they call 'Experiencing the white light.' When that happens to people, and it happens to people in varying degrees. It's a sign – because it's not light. Its unlike anything you've ever experienced. It's a kind of radiance and it's accompanied by a kind of soul-warmth and you say 'Oh, this is an emissary from that place I want to go to!'

Woodring's orientation toward metaphysics has been a tenet of his work throughout his career. The early "Jim" stories, which Woodring self-published before they were released by Fantagraphics in 1987, are described as "autojournals," diary-esque comics of dreams. Critic Joe McCulloch refers to the distinct dream-like quality in Woodring's comics as a "unique fusion of waking and sleeping autobiography that was the corpus, in relevant part, of his gift to the American funnybook memoir."

His work is heavily influenced by dreams and the hallucinatory "apparitions" he's experienced since childhood.

Due to the similarities in influences and personal experiences, one begins to understand that although Eliot and Woodring use radically different forms, they seem to be striving towards the same ambitious goal: conveying awe and revelation at something beyond the reach of human experience. And it is this very ambition - expressing wonder towards the transcendental – which informs his most significant work: the "Frank" stories, which won Woodring The Stranger's "Genius of Literature" award in 2010.

The wordless, surrealistic "Frank" stories, which Woodring has been publishing since 1990, are both



funny animal comics in themselves and works of art that use the symbols and tropes of animal cartoons to reflect on the material and metaphysical realities in human existence.

I'd been awaiting his newly released "Frank in the 3rd Dimension" since last year, mistakenly expecting the fourth in his recent line of graphic novels depicting Frank's long form forays into the cruel terrain of the Unifactor, a "closed system of moral algebra" and anthropomorphic spiritual architecture, which nonetheless provides Frank with everything he needs (shelter, food and what you might generously call a family unit).

Francis Ford Coppola, in his introduction to "The Frank Book," a collection of early "Frank" stories, describes these tales as "vivid tableaus of tenderness and bloodshed, cruelty and sacrifice, love and betrayal, terror and bliss; and it offers them wrapped like candies from another planet." He maintains that while the events that unfold in the Unifactor may be near impossible to explain, we understand them on some level. We understand in these early stories not only a Frank who is almost entirely driven by selfish desires, but also the Mephistophelian torturer Whim, the ignominious Manhog (often the subject of the aforementioned torture) and the irascible sidekicks Pupshaw and Pushpaw. We also understand, by the virtue of shared nostalgic experience, a world that resets itself at the beginning of every story as did the "Looney Tunes" of yesteryear. But unlike the "Looney Tunes", readers glean meaning and understanding from the "Frank" stories that deceptively subvert the visual language they share with more wholesome cartoons.

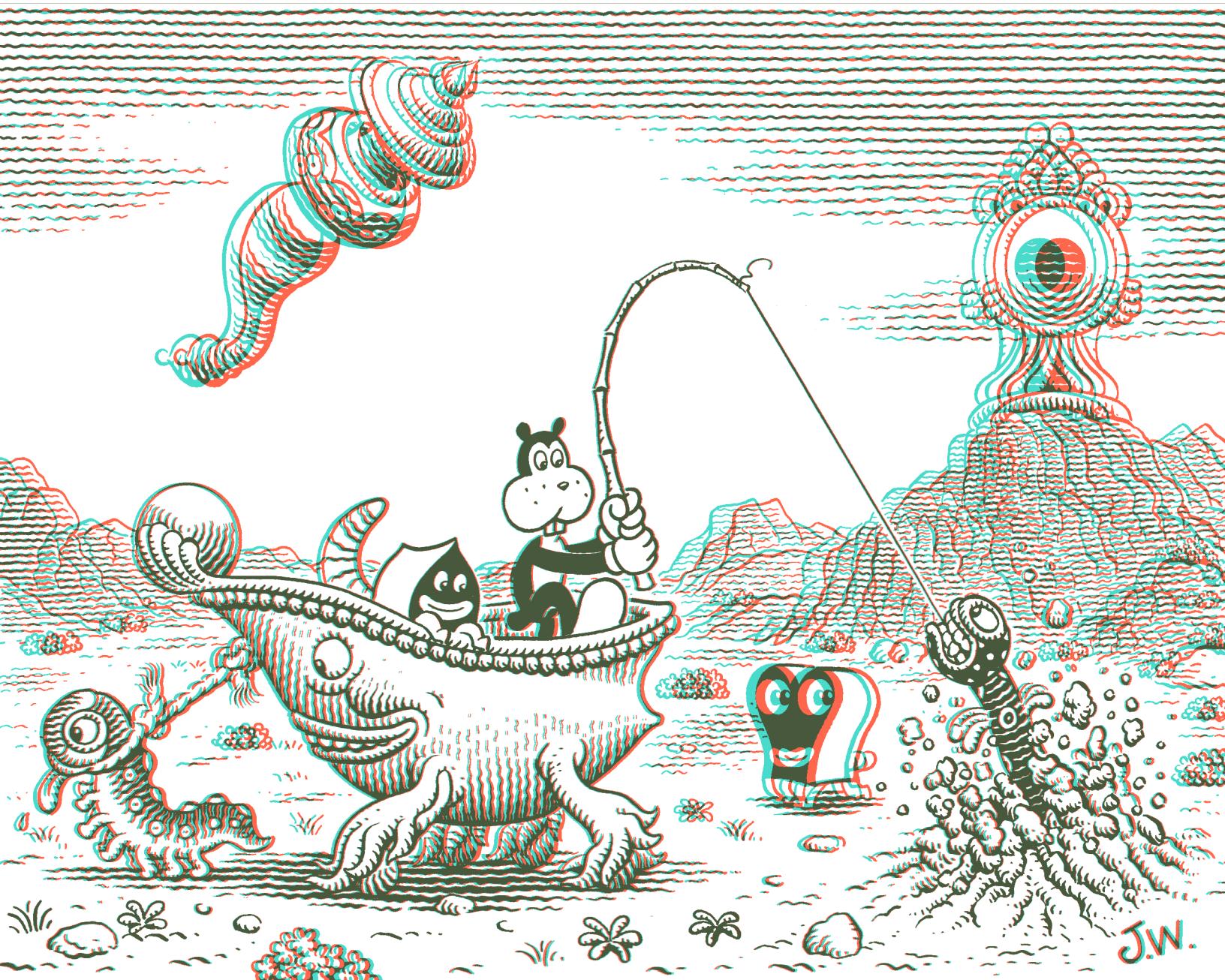
However, unlike the narrative-based iterations of the "Frank" stories, "Frank in the 3rd Dimension" is more akin to 2005's "Seeing Things" – a collection of anecdotal charcoal drawings largely comprised of the work done for a multimedia project with jazz musician Bill Frisell. The new book forgoes the charcoal rendering (and, sadly, the text pieces interspersed throughout "Seeing Things") for 27 tableaus in the singular Frank-styled wavy lines with no crosshatching. In a 2013 interview with the culture and technology site Boing Boing, Woodring said he wants his drawings to "look like they're charged with this kind of energy... I want it to look like the landscape has this constant field

of all-pervading consciousness to it, which is how I see it."

So, what is the effect when Jim Woodring's drawings have been converted into richly composed red-blue stereograms by Charles Barnard (whose process involved cutting them into "200-400 layers in Photoshop and minutely shifting each element, left or right, to create the slightly different vantage point")? Contrary to prejudices I might have had regarding previous experiences with stereopsis, the resulting illusion of depth is staggering and serves as a *natural* extension of Woodring's own style. The 3-D conversion is winning in a way that easily could have felt hackneyed. Woodring's sublime creations are frozen in time, but their world, which has always felt eerily familiar despite its surreal nature, now pulses with every turn of the page. Grotesqueries hide behind

corners and shadows, and clandestine meetings between Taj Mahal-like creatures take place. In one drawing, Manhog pokes a stick into the sky and a set of organs dump out into his reality.

Looking through the dynamic and visually pleasing illustrations in "Frank in the 3rd Dimension" made me think about the evergreen topic of words versus pictures and the strengths and failings of both. In recent years, the conversation has had much to do with the unique strength comics have in shifting the temporal structure of storytelling, cemented perhaps by the honest-to-god achievement that is Richard McGuire's "Here." Woodring's perspective on this topic, and how it's evolved throughout the years, is interesting to me, and it's a journey that begins with a gigantic, reality-shattering bombshell dropped in his interview with Gary Groth in *The Comics Journal* in which Woodring



J.W.

claims that comics are not capable of being as significant as art or literature.

Woodring references Jean Valjean's redemption in Victor Hugo's "Les Misérables" as the basis for his argument. The power of that single passage is enough to convince him of the inferiority of comics as an art form, because "even if you don't have any thoughts about Christianity in your mind or any early experiences with Christianity to be revivified by this experience, it makes you know what Christianity is all about, BOOM! in that one second."

"And I think you couldn't do that with a comic strip because those words flowing through your mind trigger an internal revelation, and I think a picture connected to those would be self-limiting. You couldn't draw that as well as you can experience it in your mind, as deeply. It goes beyond images and it goes beyond even the words and I think that will never be drawn as well as it is conveyed in those words. I think what pictures and words both do is they trigger responses, they set off bombs deep inside your inner system, and these things pop up to the surface where you see them and it can be a life-transforming experience."

Woodring's insight into the strength of prose is particularly astute I think, but what I find more interesting is how the wordless nature of his "Frank" stories have made a particularly good argument for the power of comics to express more idiosyncratic ideas. From an interview with Nicole Rudick of The Comics Journal almost a decade later, Woodring provides insight into his decision to keep the "Frank" stories wordless since 1993.

"I wanted to do a story that expressed things that were difficult to express in words. I wanted the stories to be beyond time and place. And I knew that if I had these characters speaking, they'd be speaking in idiomatic modern English, which would tie it to this time and place. I wanted it to be specific in terms of what was going on but unspecific in terms of how those events could be interpreted. I just thought it'd be more powerful and ambiguous and genuine. Words can be deceptive—you start using words and people apply to them whatever meanings their prejudices dictate. Images are less open to interpretation in a way."

Ironically, the wordless quality of the Frank graphic novels gives them much more literary heft than the original short stories, often subverting Campbellian mythic structures in the service of a

more intuitive, poetic conclusion. In those three books, "Weathercraft," "Congress of the Animals" and "Fran," there are moments where reality warps around a character's emotions with an intensity that goes further than the cartoon world. This aspect of Woodring's work is sometimes compared to another great surrealist, the director Luis Buñuel, but one of the great arguments I think Woodring makes for his craft is that, in practical terms, he is able to carry the same weight much more succinctly than a filmmaker with cast and crew can be expected to. Although, it should be said that Woodring is quick to lay to bed the idea that his work carries any real spiritual power, but instead describes writing the stories as a search for "fluorescence," a glow that tells him when he has something.

"Frank in the 3rd Dimension" remains in communication with the Unifactor, and although it does not further Frank's adventures, it undeniably inhabits the same psychic architecture that makes Woodring's work so unique and significant. Looking at a cartoonist of Woodring's power flex his muscles and set his pen to imbue a single image with such sustained potency is always fascinating and particularly valuable. His cartoons may not be able to comment on the human experience with the potency of Eliot's poetry or Hugo's narrative, but they are able to reveal aspects of unconscious experience – specifically the world of dreams, which transcends the world of human experience – with an ability that I would argue is practically unmatched in the realm of ink on paper. ☺

I think what pictures and words both do is they trigger responses, they set off bombs deep inside your inner system, and these things pop up to the surface where you see them and it can be a life-transforming experience. - Jim Woodring



WE ARE STAR STUFF

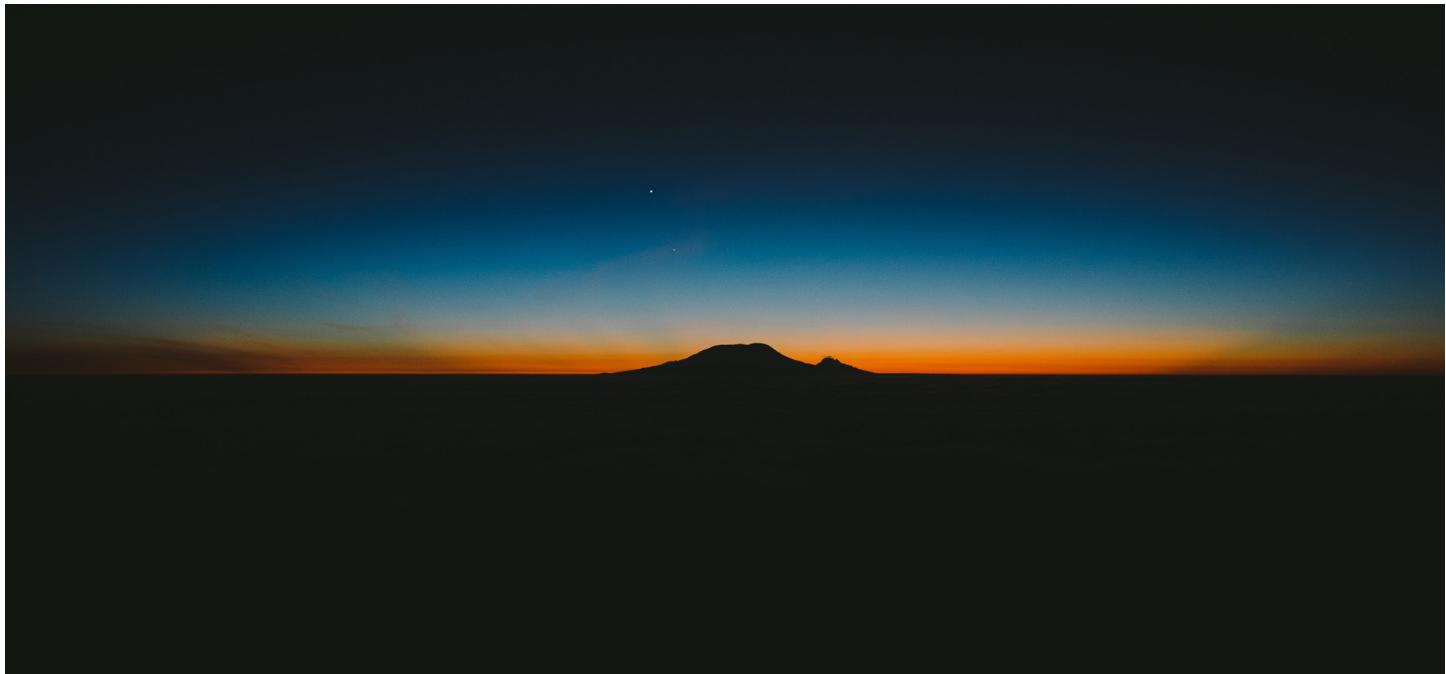
IN DEFENSE OF SPACE EXPLORATION

FÁBIO POSSAMAI

For Aristotle, philosophy begins with wonder, that feeling of unfathomable incomprehension. “It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize,” Aristotle writes in Book 1 of his “Metaphysics.” Wonder was the driving force behind the birth of myth, religion and science – and it was probably the first thing we felt as human beings after our consciousness somehow emerged. To this date, the origins of this process continue to be extremely elusive to us.

However, we continue wonder about it – and we like it. I would even go as far as saying we need it. Without wonder, I do not believe change would be possible. We would just accept things as they are – even the nastiest aspects of our society. We would be mere followers of the status quo. By wondering, we question, and by questioning, we can change things for the better.

My first contact with this feeling of wonder arose when I read “Cosmos” by Carl Sagan. I was around 16 years old. The circumstances of this “first contact” I honestly cannot recall. However, I vividly remember reading the first chapter. It was about the immensity of the universe. Life, Sagan said, must exist elsewhere in the universe. That certainly peaked my interest. What kind of life?



Where? How? Why? After I finished the last chapter, I began wondering— and I have been wondering ever since.

“Space, the final frontier” – these are the first words uttered by Capitan James T. Kirk at the beginning of every Star Trek episode. But space will not be the final frontier, for there is none. We will never find the “final answer,” the “ultimate truth,” or something of the like. Our trajectory as humans, our path as conscious beings, is to keep improving – and one of the best ways to achieve this is through wondering. But not just in the natural realm. In the social realm, wonder can help us understand what it feels to be “the other.” Empathy, in a sense, depends upon wonder to exist. If one never wonders about other perspectives, other cultures, other experiences, other feelings, how can one leave his or her existential bubble behind? Bigotry and prejudice cannot afford to wonder.

Sagan was sometimes accused of being “too focused on the stars, thus forgetting about Earth.” Yet, he was deeply worried about our planet, and he cared about social and environmental issues as well. He famously said, “Anything else you’re interested in is not going to happen if you can’t breathe the air and drink the water.” Even if he loved the stars and drank from the well of mysteries fed by the universe, he never forgot that he was also an inhabitant of this planet. Earth is our only home. There is no other. It is a special place and deserves

to be treated as such.

Sagan was also cognizant of the inherent relationship between humans and the universe. He believed that by knowing more about the cosmos we would know more about ourselves. To better understand space is to better understand what it means to be human. After all, we came from the stars – or, as he put it, “We are made of star-stuff.” If we close one of these doors, whether down here or up there, we will be losing a precious part of our souls. Humans are imperfect beings, always changing (hopefully for the better), and we’ll never reach the last and final stage of our evolution because there is none.

OUR PATH AS CONSCIOUS BEINGS IS TO KEEP IMPROVING

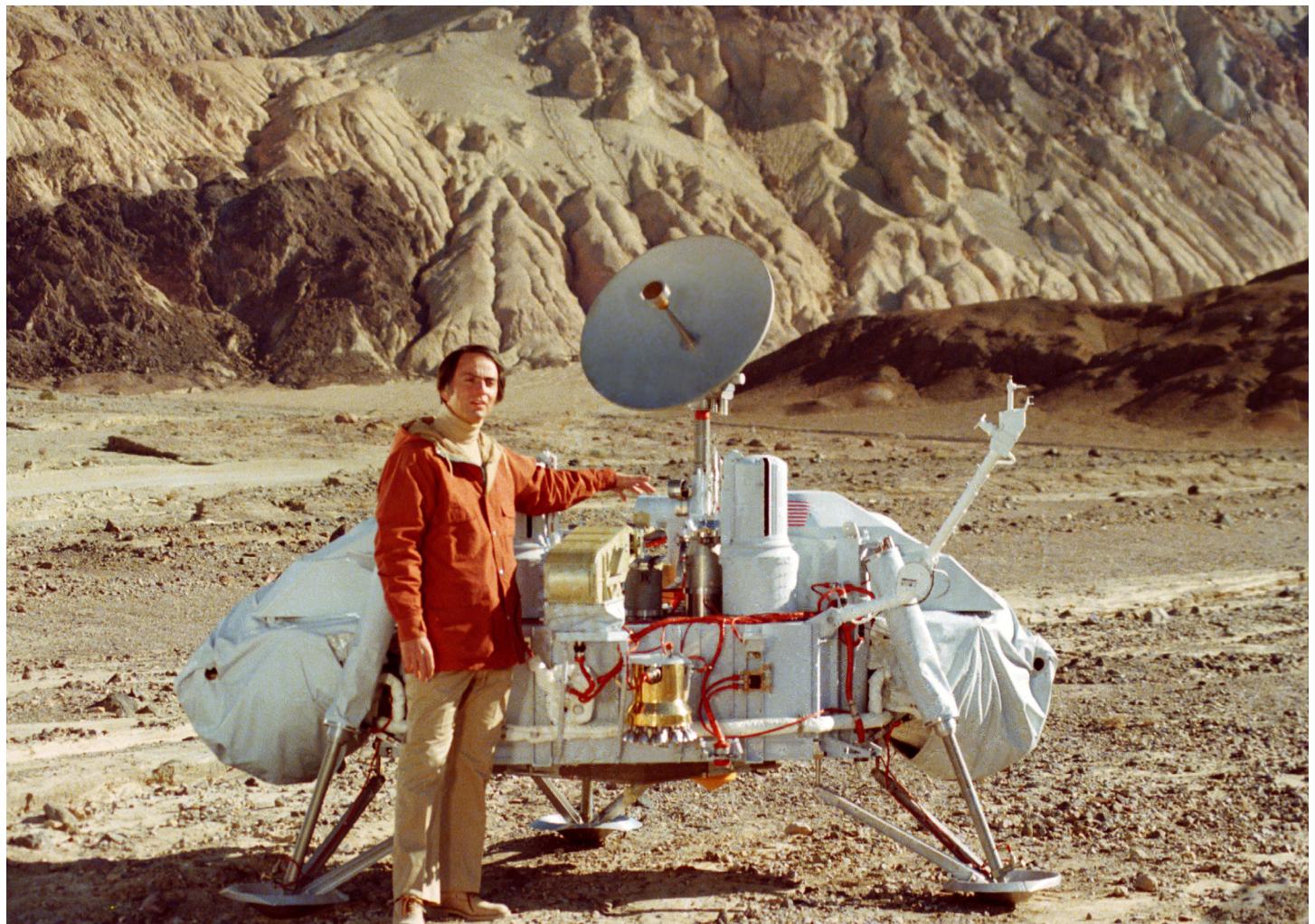
The moment we abandon space, and everything related to it, we would also be abandoning something inherent to us as humans. In other words, we

would become incomplete. People often think of the Earth and the rest of the universe as separate entities, due to the fact that we inhabit one but not the other. But this is a false dichotomy. Humans are a product, and a part, of both. By focusing on space and leaving Earth behind we are failing as human beings. However, by focusing solely on Earth and abandoning the cosmos, we are doing the very same thing. It does not have to be A or non-A. After all, the universe is unitary. It is everything that ever was or ever will be (as far as we know).

Our future as human beings, here on Earth and elsewhere, is tied to the secrets of the cosmos. Try imagining space as our boat, endlessly sailing the incommensurate seas of the universe. There will be no final destination, just the act of sailing. Wonder can help us improve some areas of the boat, and our room on that boat, Earth, as well. Without wonder, we might run the risk of sinking into the dark depths of a predictable and stagnant existence. After all, in the words of Carl Sagan: "We have evolved to wonder." ☺

THE MOMENT WE ABANDON SPACE, AND EVERYTHING RELATED TO IT, WE WOULD ALSO BE ABANDONING SOMETHING INHERENT TO US AS HUMANS

**BELOW: CARL SAGAN WITH THE VIKING LANDER
DEATH VALLEY, CA - 1980**



STICK YOUR HEAD IN A RABBIT HOLE

JOHN MORIARTY'S LIFE OF WONDER

NORA WARD

I first became interested in the work of John Moriarty in 2012, when I was interning at Lilliput Press, a small publishing house in Dublin that has published all eight of his books. When I began working there, I was only vaguely aware of him. I had noticed his wild face peering back at me from book covers with strange titles as I sat packaging and printing out address labels. Towards the end of my internship, Lilliput was publishing the memoirs of Mike Scott, lead singer of “The Waterboys.” One day, when Scott was in the office signing copies, he approached me and asked to buy a copy of Moriarty’s “Invoking Ireland.” I knew that there was only one copy left, and I also knew that you were never supposed to sell the last remaining copy of any book, but I sold it to him anyway (in my defense, he’s hard to say no to). It is a small book, by far Moriarty’s least dense, and on the cover was a picture of the Hill of Tara, an ancient Celtic site in the eastern part of Ireland. Something about the simplicity of the image, a stone (called the *Lia Fáil*, or “Stone of Destiny” in English) standing against the backdrop of a shimm-

ering sunrise, stood out to me. In that moment, I decided to give some of those strange titles a try.

Moriarty is, at once, an elusive and towering figure. “Dreamtime,” his first published book, was described as “the most extraordinary book ever published in Ireland.” His autobiography, “Nostos,” was deemed the greatest Irish book since Joyce’s “Ulysees” by Aidan Carl Matthews, an Irish poet and dramatist. According to poet Paul Durcan, “Nostos” is to “Irish literature what ‘Thus Spoke Zarathustra’ is to German philosophy.” When he was given an honorary degree by the National University of Ireland - Galway, the president of the university said that during his time in office, the two greatest individuals he had presented honorary doctorates to were Nelson Mandela and John Moriarty, praising Moriarty for living a “unique, and uniquely brave, life.”

Uniqueness is certainly a characteristic that Moriarty had in abundance.

Born in County Kerry, in southwest Ireland, he graduated from Trinity College Dublin with a first class honors degree in philosophy and literature.

After graduate studies in the U.K., he entered academia and taught English literature at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg for a number of years. Then, in the 1970s, he up and left, leaving Canada and abandoning his academic post.

He then returned to Ireland, having been gifted a house in Connemara, in western Ireland. He lived there in complete solitude for three years, and near solitude for many more. Many of his previous class-mates, and those who knew him from his days in Dublin, had neither seen nor heard trace of him for years - decades even.

And then, on the evening of January 1st, 1985, on his radio show, "Dialogue," the eminent host Andy O'Mahony introduced his guest by saying: "My guest tonight is one of the most remarkable people that I've ever met in my entire life." This would be Moriarty's first public appearance in Ireland in decades and would represent his burgeoning beginnings as a published author, poet and cultural shaman.

During the interview, it emerged that Moriarty had spent the interim years on a spiritual journey that would rival that of ancient monks. He had physically and spiritually left the world of contemporary European culture behind him. Paul Durcan wrote:

"HE HAS SPENT MOST OF HIS LIFE SLEEPING ROUGH, WALKING, WALKING, WALKING WHERE MOST OF US WOULD NOT DARE TO WALK EVEN FOR ONE DAY—"

"He has wandered the face of the earth, working as a gardener. He has spent most of his life sleeping rough, walking, walking, walking where most of us would not dare to walk even for one day, not least those of us who would call ourselves environmentalists or cultural historians or artists."

Sometime after this, having decided to live in Ireland permanently, Moriarty began writing and



O'MALLEY HOME - HENRI ROBERT, 1913

publishing books. They are dense and contain poetry, prose, snippets of songs and biblical passages. Spanning cultures, religions and eras, his work is a panorama of intellect. At times, his scope is so vast that it seems almost impenetrable. But a certain elusiveness seems to be the goal. He meanders and marches through a radical questioning of the world; so radical that it can feel, at times, like new eyes and new ears are needed to understand it. And that's perhaps exactly what Moriarty wanted.

The main focus of his work harkens back to the most basic of philosophical pursuits: an attempt to understand how to be in the world. He opines that the conceptual epoch (in which we are living) is the product of the modern European philosophical tradition, a system of thinking that has its roots in Ancient Greek and early Christian traditions and was cemented in place by modern thinkers, such as Francis Bacon, René Descartes and Isaac Newton.

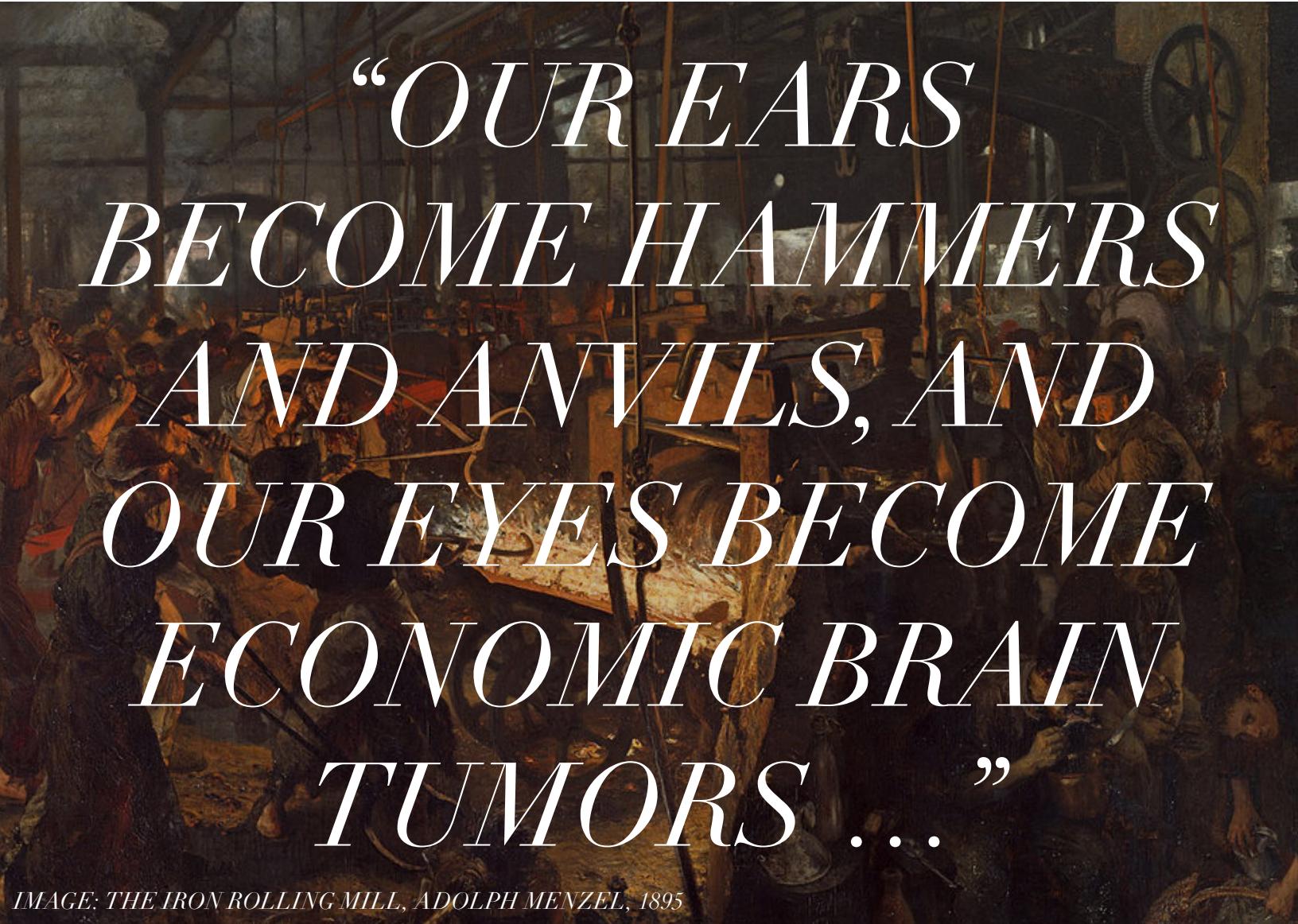
This tradition – and way of being in the world – brought about the Industrial Revolution, the birth of modern science, capitalism and the rise of technology. And, according to Moriarty, it may be the very agent of our demise.

What is characteristic about the Western/European tradition, says Moriarty, is a reductive and dominating mode of perception in relation to our-

selves and the natural world. For Moriarty, our perception of things determines our behavior towards them. He argues that the Western/European perception of reality is largely oppressive, instrumental and utilitarian. Since the blossoming of modern philosophy and science, which provided a theoretical justification for humans to possess and master nature, we now perceive nature and its parts to be there for us. Nature is simply matter that can be dominated, mastered and possessed, either intellectually (through scientific understanding) or physically (through exploitation and “resource-use.”) When an attitude of this kind holds sway, Moriarty maintains, our senses and cognitive faculties turn malignant. “Our ears become hammers and anvils, and our eyes become economic brain tumors ... consequently, when looking at a cow, we only see milk and meat, when looking at a tree we only see timber, and when looking at ourselves, we only see labor and manpower.”

Perception informs behavior, and our habits of

perception have inevitably led to actions of destruction. Since Moriarty’s birth in 1938, nearly 50 percent of vertebrate wildlife have become extinct due to human behavior. We are currently championing the sixth greatest extinction in the history of the planet. Moreover, our relationship with nature is threatening all life on Earth due to global warming and the release of greenhouse gases. Since the Industrial Revolution, we have invariably treated the planet like a trashcan, made up of “resources” that we can discard at whim. According to Moriarty, it is of little surprise that we act this way. In one of his funnier, lighter moments, he said that if he were to think of his wife only scientifically (what she is biologically composed of), or instrumentally (what labor or resources she can provide), it would be impossible to really love or respect her. Moriarty asks, “If I only considered what my wife was biologically, a bag of groceries in other words, how could I ever, possibly, write a sonnet to her eyebrow?”



“OUR EARS
BECOME HAMMERS
AND ANVILS, AND
OUR EYES BECOME
ECONOMIC BRAIN
TUMORS ... ”

What is needed, therefore, is a change in perception, a widening of our sensory and intellectual faculties to include broader forms of perception, so that we can see past narrow utilitarian and reductive models. Only, then, according to Moriarty, can we begin to live harmoniously with ourselves and other living beings.

The problem, however, is that this instrumental form of perception has become ingrained in Western minds, so that referring to nature as a “resource,” or to talk about the “productivity of humans” becomes so natural that it is hardly questioned. In “Nostos,” Moriarty refers back to William James who once compared a habit to a folded sheet of paper. For once folded, he says, “it has a tendency to fall forever afterwards into the same identical folds.” As Moriarty notes, “once educated, a mind is no longer as transformatively available to alternative modes of thinking, intuition and perception as it originally was.” This was even true in his own experience. After leaving academia, he recounts having to “learn and unlearn” the modes of perception that he had acquired from his Western upbringing, claiming he had to mold “new senses” and a “new mind” for himself. In one of his radio interviews, he even described walking one day in the wilds of Connemara and sinking his head deep into a rabbit hole, willing the wet earth to “suck out his European education” and give him a new “head” through which to see the world. This was not only an individual quest that Moriarty was undertaking, however, but also a cultural

one. He sought to unfold the creases of European ways of thinking and provide an alternative to the contracted habits of Western eyes and minds. To do this, and to stimulate a different, broader and more respectful form of perception, Moriarty reins in the help of poets, shamans and visionaries - including William Blake and Wallace Stevens - as well as myth, folklore and song. Steven’s poem, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” is particularly representative of this goal, as it demonstrates

THIS WAY OF INHABITING THE WORLD WAS MANUFACTURED AND CREATED BY POWER STRUCTURES, AND, AS SUCH, CAN BE UNDONE—

brilliantly multiple ways of perceiving the world. For Moriarty, there are infinite forms of perception, and by illustrating these, he wants to inspire a radical questioning of our own.

Further, in his undertaking to “alter mind, which in its altering, alters all,” he not only contrasts the economic-utilitarian perspective with that of the poet-visionary, but he also uses myth to inspire different ways of inhabiting the world. One of these myths is told by the Blackfoot Indians. It tells of a tribe facing death by starvation, when a young female member of the tribe agrees to marry a buffalo bull in exchange for food from the buffalo. This young girl, for Moriarty, symbolizes the dissolution of the myth of human insularity and represents a transition from “us and them,” or either/or awareness, to “we-awareness.” The story ends with the buffalo teaching the girl the famous “buffalo dance,” representing the final bridging of the conceptual gulf that separates humanity from other living things.

By injecting myths such as these into the Western sphere, and by reinterpreting and re-invoking those that we may have forgotten, Moriarty wants to foster a state of “commonage” consciousness, or “we-awareness,” where – like in many Eastern philosophies – we understand ourselves not as isolated beings, but in direct relation to other beings. This, he says, must begin with altered perception, and conclude in a state of understanding where we can inhabit the earth not as oppressors or masters,



BLACKFOOT INDIANS - PAUL KANE, 1856

but as co-inhabitants.

It is now nearing ten years since Moriarty's passing, and four since I disobediently sold the last copy of his book to Mike Scott, and his work seems only more relevant. His vision has been criticized by some, largely for being impractical, incomprehensible and too radical. His critics may have a point. It is certainly a big ask: to mold new ways of seeing, to change our perspective so entirely.

We may argue that our tendency to exploit, to see only instrumentally, to be reductive about ourselves and others, is natural. We may further argue that the human lust for explanation and possession cannot be quelled, that the wonder and mystery necessary to achieve a poet-visionary perspective, is inevitably doomed by scientific advances and our continuing possession of the physical and intellectual secrets of the planet. But Moriarty reminds us that it has not always been this way, that this way of inhabiting the world was manufactured and created by power structures, and, as such, can be undone, or at the very least, brought into question. He reminds us further that wonder and

perception were not always so disconnected. The Latin word *mirabilia* meaning "wonders" or "marvels," can be connected semantically to the Spanish words, "mira," and the verb, "mirar," to look at. To look again in wonder, without the myth of human superiority, with new eyes that see the stupendousness not only in mountains and oceans, but also in daisies, grains of sand and rabbit-holes, and that see past the utilitarian, the economic and even the scientific, may be a suggestion we should stop to consider.

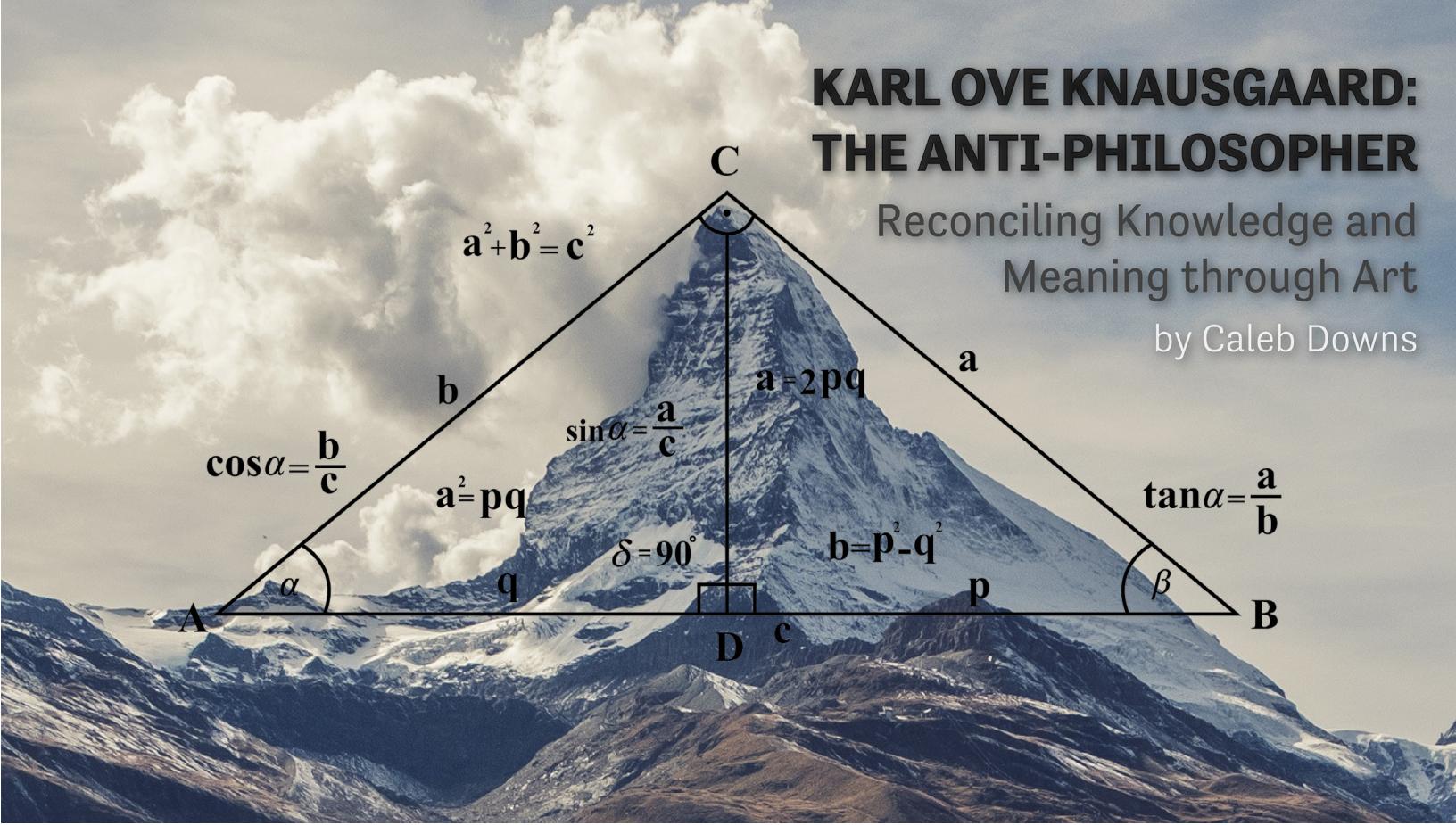
As he writes: "every bush is a burning bush; every river is a medicine river; every stone is a-stone-ishment turned inwards on its own rose window wonders." ☩

*HE DESCRIBED WALKING ONE
DAY IN THE WILDS OF CONNE-
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NEW “HEAD” THROUGH WHICH
TO SEE THE WORLD.*

KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD: THE ANTI-PHILOSOPHER

Reconciling Knowledge and
Meaning through Art

by Caleb Downs



When we know something, it's as if we've rendered it immobile. The shifting uncertainty that once lay behind a situation or an object is suddenly frozen, and we're able to examine it, store it in our minds and return to it later. This is part of our nature. We are curious beings and we feel a constant desire to explain things. As we progress from childhood to adulthood, and as we come to know more of it, the world hardens in our minds and becomes stagnant. What was once unknown, interesting or frightening simply becomes a stale fact. Nothing more.

This is beneficial in many ways. We're able to map our surroundings, apply laws to natural phenomena, manage societies and cure diseases. But without the mysterious movement of things that suffuses childhood, our experience of the world becomes much duller, and the world itself seems much smaller. This is because what we don't know holds meaning for us. Knowledge erases that meaning.

Karl Ove Knausgaard, the Norwegian novelist whose *Min Kamp*, or "My Struggle," has propelled him to the peak of literary acclaim, portrays the world as something dead, murdered by our own knowledge of it. We cannot return to past ages

when we imbued the world with life and respected it as such. This is the way things must be. Human nature dictates that we strive toward worldly knowledge, and we have done so through science, religion and other ideologies over the course of our existence, simultaneously mastering the world and stripping it of any meaning.

It's a fatalistic vision of the world, but it is not one completely devoid of hope. Just because the world is known, and therefore dead, does not mean that it cannot be reanimated. We have the ability to make the world – and the life contained within it – eternal and "inexhaustible," as Knausgaard would say.

This is because we have the ability to create art.

"My Struggle" spans six books, 3,600 pages and Knausgaard's entire life. I read the first of these books at my parent's house over the Christmas break. Work had slowed down for the holidays, so I was able to devote most of my time to reading. Every morning I'd pour myself a cup of coffee, smoke a cigarette or two, take a seat in my father's blue sofa chair and begin reading. My father's chair was perhaps the most appropriate place to read the



MY STRUGGLE

BOOK 1

KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD

"A living hero who landed on greatness by abandoning every typical literary feint, an emperor whose nakedness surpasses royal finery." —JONATHAN LETHEM, THE GUARDIAN

first book of “My Struggle,” as it focuses on Knausgaard’s troubled relationship with his father, who was a severe alcoholic. His presence haunts nearly every page of the book. In my father’s own chair, I felt as though I was better able to appreciate Knausgaard’s work, like one might have a heightened sense of appreciation for a William Faulkner novel if they read it while in Mississippi, surrounded by the lush and Gothic scenery he so beautifully depicts.

“My Struggle” derives its provocative and controversial title from Adolf Hitler’s autobiography of the same name. Critics have analyzed and debated his aspect of the novel *ad nauseam*. Knausgaard himself has said that he only read *Mein Kampf* after writing his book, and that the title was meant to be ironic in the sense that there is no climax, no grand struggle, in Knausgaard’s work. It is a series of one man’s small, daily struggles. Yet, we also know that in the sixth book of “My Struggle” (which has yet to be published in English), several hundred pages

are devoted to an exploration of Hitler’s life and rise to power, and that it’s doubtful Knausgaard would’ve gone into such depth without reading Hitler’s autobiography. Perhaps when Knausgaard said that he read *Mein Kampf* only after writing his book, he meant after writing the first five volumes, which he says together form a circle that the sixth book reflects upon. Either way, Knausgaard is not a Nazi nor an anti-Semite. He has conservative tendencies, although not in the political sense. His conservatism is ontological, more akin to pessimism or fatalism than the economic or social conservatism of modern political thinkers.

It is perhaps most appropriate to treat “My Struggle” as an ironic title and leave it at that. For once we’ve accepted the title, we can move on to the real meat of “My Struggle”: Knausgaard’s exploration of the relationship between knowledge and meaning.

The first book of “My Struggle” takes readers from Knausgaard’s childhood days when his life was “jam-packed” with meaning, to his adult years – when he is writing “My Struggle” – in which the world no longer has meaning for him. “As your perspective of the world increases not only is the pain it inflicts on you less but also its meaning,” says Knausgaard. What does Knausgaard mean when he says “the world”? Does he mean the natural phenomena that make up the world? Or is he talking about a more holistic definition of the world, a definition that includes the life and experiences contained within the world?

Any proper understanding of Knausgaard’s definition leads one to the conclusion that it must be the latter. This is because death and meaninglessness

**THIS IS BECAUSE DEATH
AND MEANINGLESSNESS
ARE SYNONYMOUS FOR
KNAUSGAARD. HUMANS ARE
SIMPLY “ONE FORM AMONG
MANY, WHICH THE WORLD
PRODUCES OVER AND OVER
AGAIN.”**



ness are synonymous for Knausgaard. Humans are simply “one form among many, which the world produces over and over again.” As we approach closer to death, we are simultaneously “approaching closer and closer to meaninglessness.” We are finite. We live, we grow and we die. There is, in Knausgaard’s eyes, little difference between living one life and never having lived at all.

It wasn’t always this way. But at this point in history, we’ve explained the “How” of practically everything. In previous eras, when man was in what one might call his “natural” state, the answers to “How” were unattainable. The technology and intellectual development necessary to answer such questions were not in place to allow them that possibility. The world was inaccessible to them, but because of that, it was also wonderful, terrible and mysterious. Nature was revered and held up as a great force. It inspired mythologies and religions. Life was imbued with meaning. In that sense, they were childlike. Though not childlike in any derogatory sense. In fact, their perception of the world is quite enviable. Today, if by some chance I wake up

early enough and look at a sunrise, I see planetary motion facilitated by gravity. I see waves of light being reflected at different frequencies, producing an aura of color. It’s beautiful, of course, but it means nothing to me. On the other hand, ancient civilizations worshipped the sun. It was the center of their lives and the source of their origins. It must have been a spiritually invigorating experience to watch a sunset thousands of years ago. Unfortunately, those understandings of the world belong to a past with which we have been fundamentally separated. Such understandings no longer fit into this world we have created “where the great, the divine, the solemn, the holy, the beautiful, and the true [are] no longer valid entities but quite the contrary, dubious or even laughable.”

This is due to the fact that we no longer have the luxury of uncertainty. Because we know the world, we’ve been able to control, standardize and dominate it. For Knausgaard, “the problem is that the intellect has taken over everything.” What does this cryptic statement mean? Perhaps the best way to answer this is to discuss the opposite of the in-

tellect, which would be something like feeling or sensation; something tied to the natural world where we eat, sleep, speak and run. The problem is that we are no longer able to understand those sensations on their own. In other words, we make abstract what would otherwise be concrete. Knausgaard uses death, a central theme of the novel, as an example:

"On the one hand, it is all around us, we are inundated by news of deaths, pictures of dead people; for death, in that respect, there are no limits, it is massive, ubiquitous, inexhaustible. But this is death as an idea, death without a body, death as thought and image, death as an intellectual concept."

Death is something we cannot know, but we have intellectualized it in order to understand it. Though no one in the world has experienced death, we feel as though we know it. This is absurd, of course, because no one is able to truly understand nothingness. Yet, our endless intellectualization of death – in other words, our depiction of death through images and language – gives us false confidence in our knowledge of death.

The same is true for everything else in the world. That which is “unfathomable” no longer exists. “We understand everything, and we do so because we have turned everything into ourselves,” eliminating the possibility of anything beyond ourselves. “Our world is enclosed around itself, enclosed around us, and there is no way out of it,” Knausgaard says. In a paradoxical way, rather than solidify our commonality, our understanding of the world has turned us all into solipsists.

Nietzsche, in his earlier writings, expressed similar feelings. In “The Birth of Tragedy,” a short book in which he praises Greek theater for its

DEATH IS SOMETHING WE CANNOT KNOW, BUT WE HAVE INTELLECTUALIZED IT IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND IT. THOUGH NO ONE IN THE WORLD HAS EXPERIENCED DEATH, WE FEEL AS THOUGH WE KNOW IT. THIS IS ABSURD, OF COURSE, BECAUSE NO ONE IS ABLE TO TRULY UNDERSTAND NOTHINGNESS.

emphasis on the tragic experience of life, Nietzsche discusses the limits of scientific knowledge and the purpose of art. He says that when man “sees how logic curls up around itself at these limits and finally bites its own tail, then a new form of knowledge breaks through, *tragic knowledge...*” Notice how Nietzsche uses the phrase “breaks through,” as if once tragic knowledge is reached, the old foundations on which one had based one’s life are destroyed. On this point, Knausgaard and Nietzsche are in deep agreement, leading one to the conclusion that “tragic knowledge” must be the central metaphysical struggle in “My Struggle” (whereas the central physical struggle

is in Knausgaard’s relationship with his father). In a beautiful passage that demonstrates for readers the back-and-forth of his inner thought processes, Knausgaard lays out how tragic knowledge has affected him.

“The feeling this gives that the world is small, tightly enclosed around itself, without openings to anywhere else, is almost incestuous, and although I knew this to be deeply untrue, since actually we know nothing about anything, still I could not escape it. The longing I always felt, which some days was so great it could hardly be controlled, had its source here. It was partly to relieve this feeling that I wrote, I wanted to open the world by writing, for myself, at the same time this is also what made me fail. The feeling that the future does not exist, that it is only more of the same, means that all utopias are meaningless. Literature has always been related to utopia, so when the utopia loses meaning, so does literature.”

In these lilting clauses, which are a distinct facet of Knausgaard’s style, we discover what was once Knausgaard’s motivation to write. His use of the

past tense is key, for we discover that his attempt to “open the world by writing” failed. Why? Because he was trying to “combat fiction with fiction,” as he later says. The world is the world is the world. Any work of art that attempts to disregard this fact, or somehow portray the world as other than that which it is, serves no purpose. And this reveals what Knausgaard prizes in art, and, not surprisingly, what Nietzsche too prized in art: an acceptance of tragic knowledge.

Tragic knowledge must be “simply endured,” according to Nietzsche, but art is “protection and medicine” against it. That is why an acceptance of tragic knowledge is so critical to art, for one cannot fight against what one does not know. This is why Nietzsche so admired Greek tragedy, going as far as calling the Greeks “chariot-drivers who hold the reins of our culture.” Tragedies like Aeschylus’ “Prometheus Bound” or Sophocles’ Theban plays elevate tragic knowledge to thrilling and beautiful heights. Their dramas are self-affirming celebrations of the human condition, and because of this, they are not only cathartic, but therapeutic.

Knausgaard takes a more direct approach in his use of art as “protection” against tragic knowledge. He had no other option. In ancient Greece, society’s relation to mythology and the divine had not yet been completely severed. In fact, it was the dominant force in society. While both Knausgaard and the Greeks are using art as a means to counteract tragic knowledge, “logic,” as Nietzsche made sure to clarify, is what led the Greeks to the acceptance of tragic knowledge. But in the modern age, our “knowledge” – in other words, our understanding of the world – has led us to tragic knowledge. The problem is that mythology no longer holds the potency it once did. It has been rendered mute, as has everything else in the world with the exception of one thing: ourselves. Because we live in a world that “no longer acknowledges that there is a beyond,” as Knausgaard says, personal experience is the only experience we can truly communicate through art. In this sense, Knausgaard was forced to use his own life as the vehicle for his art. Knausgaard’s realization of this fact is what makes “My Struggle” great. This is also what is so brilliant about Marcel Proust’s “In Search of Lost Time,” which Knausgaard says he “virtually imbibed.” Both authors understand that reveling in the ex-

THE PROBLEM IS THAT MYTHOLOGY NO LONGER HOLDS THE POTENCY IT ONCE DID. IT HAS BEEN RENDERED MUTE, AS HAS EVERYTHING ELSE IN THE WORLD WITH THE EXCEPTION OF ONE THING: OURSELVES.

perience of one’s daily existence is the only way to soothe the spiritual emptiness brought about by a meaningless world.

Much has been written of the seemingly ineffable attraction of Knausgaard’s writing. “There is something ceaselessly compelling about Knausgaard’s book: even when I was bored, I was interested,” wrote James Wood in *The New Yorker*. This was my initial impression of Knausgaard’s work as well. I couldn’t stop reading it, but I had no idea why. Passages about the author making a cup of tea, being bored at a party or doing chores held my attention just as well as the more objectively interesting passages did. But after reflection, I’ve come to understand that what animated the pages of “My Struggle” was my own envy of Knausgaard’s reverence towards the minutiae of daily life.

Yet, when reading “My Struggle” it’s easy to get a different impression of Knausgaard’s relationship with the world around him. In fact, he seems like a pretty miserable person. He constantly berates himself for his failures. He’s irritated or annoyed by most people. And he never ceases to remind readers that the world is – and always has been – ultimately meaningless. But where we find Knausgaard’s reverence for life is in his rigorous descriptions of everything he experiences. As Ben Lerner wrote in the *London Review of Books*, the “hierarchy of value” is broken down in “My Struggle.” Everything is of importance. Everything needs to be written down because everything has value.

When viewed in this light, it’s no longer a mystery why passages like the following didn’t make me put the book down in search of a better

use of my time:

"I continued down the street, rounded the corner and came into Holländergatan. With its deserted sidewalks and two lifeless rows of snowed-in cars, squeezed between two of the city's most important streets, Sveavägen and Drottninggatan, it had to be the backstreet to end all backstreets.

I shifted the bag into my left hand while grabbing my hat with my right and shaking off the snow that had accumulated on it, ducking at the same time to avoid hitting my head on the scaffolding that had been erected over the sidewalk. High above, tarpaulins thrashed in the wind."

Most novelists would've condensed this part of the narrative or skipped over it completely. But Knausgaard is not most novelists. His work is something completely other. When understood properly, passages like this become necessary to the work as a whole. Every moment of life is crucial to Knausgaard because every moment is an experience that can be made into art. Every moment is an experience that can soothe our tragic knowledge and reestablish the beauty and wonder of life. (Fortunately, most of "My Struggle" makes for objectively compelling reading, and passages in which nothing happens are sprinkled throughout only enough to make a point, but not enough to bore readers to death).

The vast majority of discussion about "My Struggle" focuses on Knausgaard's relationship with his

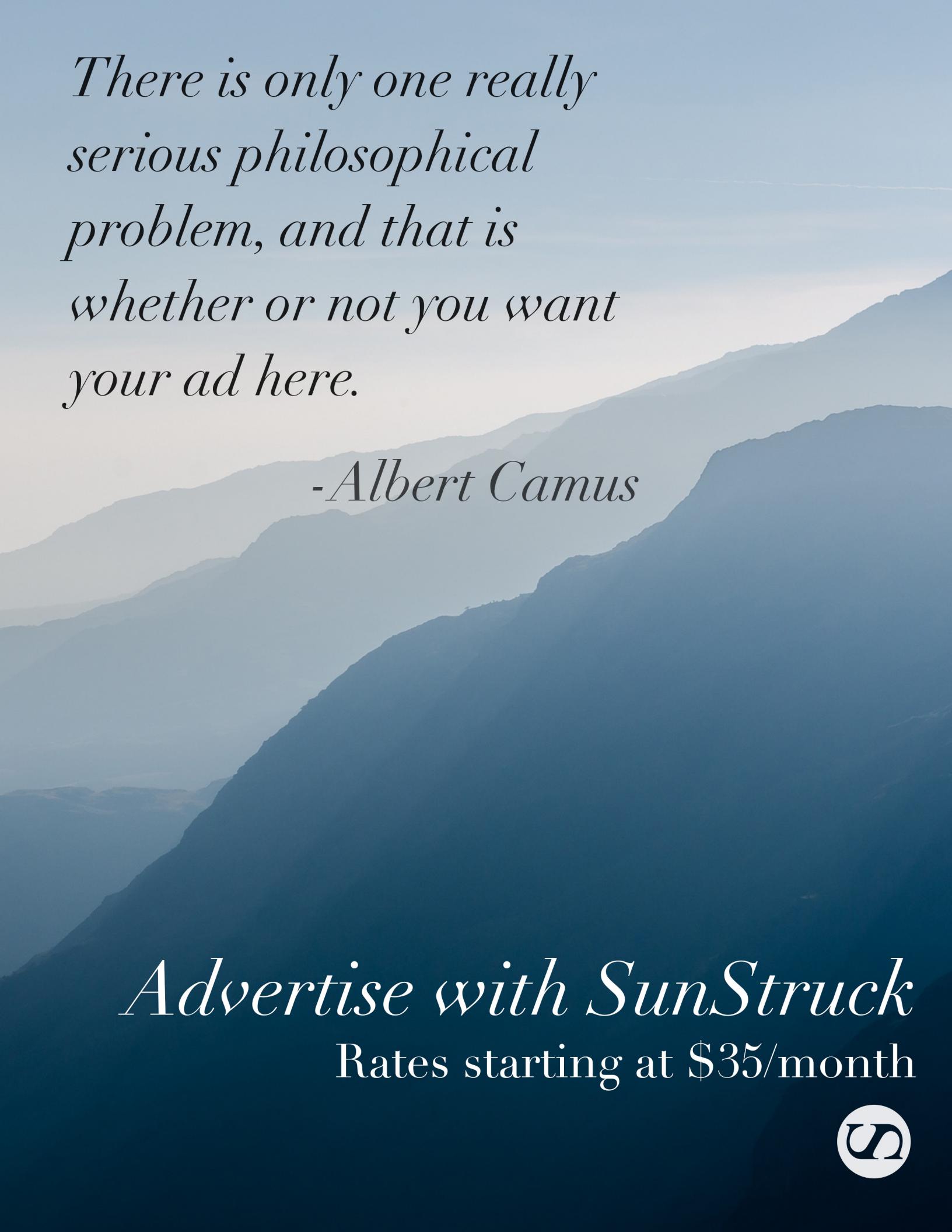
father. And if not that, then the focus is usually on the people whom Knausgaard writes about and their reactions to his depictions of them. Though interesting (Knausgaard said he had to get into an "immoral state" in order to truthfully retell all the events in his life), I can't help but feel that focusing on these aspects of the work does little more than scandalize "My Struggle." We cannot learn anything of substance from scandal. Moreover, it does a disservice to what is one of the most profoundly important works of contemporary literature. One should treat the characters of the novel as if they were actually fictitious and instead focus on the true message of the book: a meaningless life is still a wonderful life.

Living authentically does not necessitate one's misery. Quite the opposite. It is only by setting aside our distractions – our ideologies and mythologies – that we are able to recognize life for what

it is. Then we are able to truly understand life's beauty and celebrate that beauty through art. "My Struggle" accomplishes all this in the most surprising way, and that is why it is so crucial to our age. Knausgaard reminds us we are thirsty, and then he graciously shows us where the well is. ☺



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BLUE COLLAR MEDITATION



BEN
ABERCROMBIE

When I was a kid I expected my heart to reveal truth in real time. I wanted it like those movies with the cardigans and searching intellectual foreplay that give way to galactic expansion: rose-colored, MDMA immensity. I lost myself, once, in pursuit of that high definition emotion.

So this is something else. This is dark matter filling in empty spaces. It's just what I know to be true. It's me saying I drive a blue-collar frugality badge to work, and when we get there I pat her flanks like she's a stallion. We park behind the dumpster of this Italian place on the gaudy side of town where I wait tables.

Across the street, there's a nightclub and a Maserati and a right-angled Lotus Esprit and Bruce Wayne's Lamborghini¹ parked end to end to end. Everyday I convince myself that privilege is boring, and that cinching my belt around an ever-thinning frame somehow makes me righteous - 'cause I'm grinding, man.

Tonight, there are a few stars overhead looking like bits of fuzz on a sweater. I feel 'em floating up and into my eye- I'm not supposed to be looking into the past. See when we were younger, she moved away without telling me.² I'm better now, and the Ritalin hardens my veins... I keep this Rilke line under my breath while swinging open the back door to raucous kitchen noises:

*"Whoever has no house now,
will never have one
whoever is alone, will stay alone.
Will sit, read, write long letters
through the evening
And wander the boulevards up*

1 - You know, the gunmetal grey one that just oozes sex and danger and succ... it's not important.

2 - She wrote a letter the night before locking the door on an empty apartment. I finally read it when it was published in a magazine seven years later. I'm still trying to figure out what holding on to her meant.

*and down, restlessly
while the dry leaves are blowing."*

I know, I know that bit's a syringe though the breastplate. But I keep forgetting the world owes me exactly shit. Reeducation's empowering, on some level. And I send radio calls, syncopated like a church hymn out to my faltering ambition.

Like, O', skittish wind, you don't gotta go softly into the cold night.³ Push me through this kitchen's menacing howls and the cook top's perpetually bared teeth and the clattering of pot and pan. Ease those wriggling shrimp into Death's sizzling, saffron-scented embrace. And I know the white wine smoke hangs heavy. I know. But we still got to paint these lemons gold. I need you skittish wind.

Angry Hispanic men bounce my frequencies into the trash bin with aggressively mumbled greetings.

"Hijo de puta."

"Ay, pinche gringo."

Some interlocking, high-pitched mechanisms grinding and grinding: the sauté cook, Walter, he calls me "Burro."⁴

Weekend dinner shifts start with serious(ly) useless shift meetings. Normally, they crumble beneath the weight of forced "development." Like the very nature of kissing ass and slinging massively over-priced wine had shifted on its axis. But corporate restaurant work is only ever cruelingly unfulfilling

The purposes of these meetings vary. Maybe we're sold out of Merlot. Maybe the price of strawberries skyrocketed so we're using raspberries on the cheesecake instead.⁵ The scallops are going so

3 - I sure wish that hadn't already been written. Rest in pieces, Dylan Thomas.

4 - Don't worry; I call him Uncle Wally on account of his looking like a spherical fucking pedophile.

5 - Of course, the probing mind might find that interesting. Most of our strawberries in the region are source from California, which is currently weathering a biblical drought. So, Global Warming is affecting your nine-dollar slice of cheesecake.

we need to sell them. All of it easily represents itself with an existential sigh. Moreover, these meetings are always a cover for the real purpose of gathering the entire staff.

But to understand hollow intimidation, you ought to understand Cassidy Armstrong, the general manager. She's not much older than me. There were whispers that her thirtieth birthday might be approaching, but no one dare ask lest they receive passive aggressive and latent punishment, which could genuinely affect their quality of life.⁶ No, the only safe question to ask Cassidy is, "How high did you want me to jump?" And subservience never looked good on anybody.

As a manager, Cassidy is meticulously insecure, obsessive and quietly callous. As a person, she's a wannabe cowgirl, possible Presbyterian and lonely bachelorette. If she were my commanding officer in the army, and shells were exploding overhead, she'd be on the unfortunate end of a forced decision.

She helms the shift meeting while thumbing through folders of applications and describing the special for the evening: seared Ahi Tuna over roasted red potatoes and baby arugula, shallot, kalamata olives and sun-dried tomato over the top; balsamic reduction over everything. Sounds like some food porn, right? Nah. It's little more than a crudely assembled pile of nearly expired Lego bricks. Aside from our noble prep cooks, everybody just collects a paycheck and weathers their disappointing life.

Chef stands next to her, arms folded with a big spoon hanging out of his pocket 'cause he saw Wolfgang Puck do it one time. His brand of bull shit is nauseatingly self-important, and it's an entirely transparent show of force. He points out my wrinkled shirt in front of the whole staff.

His eyes are sharp, despite the muscle relaxants. I'd picked the sweat resistant button-up off the floor earlier that afternoon.

"Hey, cool guy, you get that shirt out of the hamper?"

"Nope. I got it off the floor."

"Yeah, it looks like it. Why don't you go in the office and iron that? You're making the rest of us look bad."

"You know, your pants are hanging kinda low Chef, are you still trying to look like a skater boy?"

Silence. A 29-year-old, balding server with a

6 - This one time, she purposefully scheduled a girl during all of her college classes.

blossoming drinking problem and fondness for exuberant friendliness with his female coworkers sits next to me. I hear this hung over rasp come out from under his breath, "Ben, Ben, Ben. You done fucked up."

AHEAD OF ME, THE YOUNG HOSTESSES' GOLDEN HAIR SWINGS IN AUBURN, FINE DINING LIGHT. IT DIRECTS MY EYES DOWN TO THE SEWN LINE BECKONING BACK UP TO HER LONG FISH-NETTED LEGS.

Cassidy flips through her folder, Chef stares at me, but our remarkably stunning hostess stalls his inevitable retribution⁷ by climbing the stairs and telling me I got a table.

I feel each descending step, and not because of what just happened, really. Who gives a shit about that? No, the act of working awful jobs beat the sharp edges of truth into me years ago. My back and knees call to me for painkillers that give me an escape I can't handle. Ahead of me, the young hostesses' golden hair swings in auburn, fine dining light. It directs my eyes down to the sewn line beckoning back up to her long fish-netted legs. I lose myself along the hemline of her sundress. I feel an old memory casting its projector light onto the walls of my brain.

I'd been learning how to take pictures. She wore this brilliantly yellow sweater and tattered blue jeans that glared in the face of my mother's SUV headlights. She hid behind this half-smile that so reminded me of a fiery, smirking fox I saw in a dusty National Geographic buried alongside old radio equipment in this basement way, way north of here. When he died, we packed up my grandfather's old stuff. At night, I think about him flipping through his nature magazines and calling out to someone, anyone on those old H.A.M. radio frequencies. I keep thinking loneliness has got its own code in our DNA.

7 - His punishment often looks like shitting out ridiculous, below the belt insults. Once, he asked me if I learned how to write from the junkies in the rehab I attended. I asked him if he felt good about his fused spinal disks and a life wasted on feeding mean rich people.

Anyway, her portrait came out harsh and over-exposed. She looked beautiful. We were never deliriously happy, but she taught me about the nature of everything. How I'd only ever be able to depend on irrevocable change. She showed me how to get into bed with just myself and to be okay with it, because that's all there is.

MY DAD RAISED ME TO BE A GOOD MAN, BUT HOW COULD HE HAVE ANTICIPATED THE HATEFUL FEVER PITCH OF RESTAURANT WORK, OR THE CONSTANTLY BURNING EMBERS OF HEARTBREAK AND DORMANT ADDICTION?

I still feel grateful for that, and I never told her thank you. Suppose I only just recently recognized the constructive power of pain. I still send her my love on my grandfather's frequency that's probably tuned to time's eventual end.

The other day, my mother asked me, "Why are you being so hard on yourself? Why do you have to make living so difficult?" And those were fair questions. I didn't subject her to a philosophical dissertation, but I did say that somewhere along a narrow mountain road, I got it into my head that life is remarkably fleeting. The time I do have ought to be worth something.

I feel that deeply every single day, and my dad raised me to be a good man, but how could he have anticipated the hateful fever pitch of restaurant work, or the constantly burning embers of heartbreak and dormant addiction? And the life of a restaurant worker received elegant, artistic brushstrokes years ago. It's the same paradox poets face when writing their crude lines while feeling the cold stare of dusty, obsessively annotated stacks of Pablo Neruda taunting them from a writing desk or clean laundry shelf. And I don't mean to paraphrase wise space squids, but this is a trap masquerading as a trade-threatening crisis. Expression is singularly

purposeful, self-descriptive and intrinsically valuable.

So, I've got to wait on a husband and wife. He's wearing a Land's End sweater vest. Her University of Arkansas sweatshirt betrays her superior air of impatience. Without saying hello, she asks me if I'd been on a smoke break.

"No ma'am, I heard smoking was bad for you. May I help you with a drink?"

"A Tito's martini, slightly dirty; just a touch of Vermouth. Blue cheese stuffed olives. And it has to be shaken really, really well. Would you ask the bar tender to step over to where I can see him? I'll gesture towards him and tell him when to stop shaking."

I give her half smiles and a laser vision stare before relating her hotel, schlocky brushstrokes to my bartender, Schmitty.⁸ He rolls his eyes, but shakes it off and says, "S'okay señor. Don't worry, be happy."

My stomach sinks and I feel a big, inner bang. A rapid expansion divorced from revelation. Fetching this vapid woman her deadening act of aggression just doesn't matter. And I could look for art by placing her knife and forks just so, but all of it makes me think about those few stars I saw earlier. How they were the only ones bright enough to make it through all the light pollution. How their faint twinkling covered an unimaginable distance over and around billions of other stars. And how all those stars are gathered around this single black hole just to form one galaxy amongst billions of galaxies. They're H.A.M. radio frequencies the breadth and width of all of creation. And the harsh truth is that when time ends, it's just gonna begin all over again.

And the woman gestures toward Schmitty. He stops shaking her martini. I take hold of the frosty stemware and watch as the liquid concentrically waves in time with my steps. The woman watches as I set her drink down in front of her. My wrist watch ticks and ticks and ticks and I am so very small. ☺

⁸ - His real name is Aljandro Gutiérrez. It's not a hard name to say. I don't know why we call him Schmitty. I hope we don't make him miss home.

poetry

Readers,

We've chosen to feature poems that question and wonder and tumble and oscillate. You're going to feel movement in your chest and on the page. We begin with Rage Almighty, a slam poet featured on Lexus' "Verses and Flow," a talent showcase for poets and musicians, and an ever-brightening light in the spoken word scene. His piece, "Bruising," beats you by proximity. It commands your attention and demands your contemplation before leaving you breathless and exhilarated. It's huge, and tumultuous and we could not be more excited to share it with you.

Then, Jamie Haddox, an incredibly characteristic poet, presents "Always Never About You" and "The Way Through The Wild." Look out for unexpected turns: objects and images transfigure themselves into textures and aesthetics you won't be able to predict. Relish the hurting headspace Haddox conjures, because these poems embody creative work with clear, visionary voice. They show you something that you might not have seen before, and that's what pushes poetry forward.

Kierstin Bridger rounds the tattered edges with healing eloquence. Her poems wash over you and never stumble. "I Can't Read Tea Leaves or Tarot" reaches out, and it wonders what's going to happen. These yearning questions fall out on to "Liminal On United." This piece is unlike anything we've featured before. As one block of text, it forms a loop while acknowledging that some answers just won't come. As a reading experience, it envelops you.

Enjoy,
Ben Abercrombie
Poetry Editor

rage almighty

bruising

I used to have full blown conversations with my mother's bruises
When the reservoir of whiskey & cigarette smoke would bellow
From the bathroom to the den & leave mother's body capsized
On the living room couch I'd talk to them
Gave them identities & voices
I'd name each one after how they were conceived
The one on her cheek was called
"Don't worry where the fuck I'm going"
I'd call her ribs whatever bill was overdue that month
I don't recall what I called the one on her forehead
But I recollect naming it after the women who would hang up
When anyone but my father answered the phone
This one that would appear in this general area I'd call
"Why is your kid so stupid"
I'd talk to that one all the time
I'd try to imagine that her bruises & my welts were related
But they're just long lost friends
Connected at the epithets
My welts were extremely chatty
Not as talkative as my mother's bruises
But they definitely had a mouth
Always keeping me up at night
Babbling on about how my mother beloved her bruises more than me
I did them
But we all had an imagination
That would attempt to crowbar itself inside our father's benevolence
How hollow a man do you have to be to keep a beast inside you?
Questions we never asked
Instead
Argued over which of his hands were more affectionate

bruising

Jealousy is the weeds that grew between the screws in doorknobs of our closets
My childhood was a crawl space between two people who forgot how to hold each other without
Leaving marks
My mother's skin was a cemetery where my father buried his affection
Her bruises taught me
Everything about loyalty
About obedience
About silence
About authority
About masculinity
About love
About love
About love
My mother's bruises taught me everything I know about love
That's really fucking frightening if you think about it
I was never taught how to hold anything softly
I was never taught how to let go
My ex fiancé for example
I'm not sure if we were in a relationship or holding each other hostage from other people
We made sport out of scarring each other
Then making love to the wounds like we don't know where they came from
On the subject of love
I have to borrow my mother's tongue to convince myself
That I have so much unlearning to do before I love anyone
I constantly make it a point to NOT fall in love
But shit!
I get clumsy when I'm lonely
I'm saying
I break things just by lustng at them
...hiding my childhood in love

bruising

The wallpaper looks like my mother's skin & reeks of my father's ego
This filthy heart has revolving doors in each of the chambers I make
It's easy to walk out my life before these contusions get contagious
Love is a word that bruises easy
As many times as I let it rain out my mouth
It should look like a storm cloud or soft fruit or floorboard of a flame
That wants to be more than a way to get through the night
I use love to get through the night
If I learned anything from my parents
It's to love someone with your inside voice
Scars can be leashes if you leave them in the right places
Hurt always tailgates love
Love doesn't come gentle
I know what love is
I don't want it
If I learned anything from my parents
I learned
That the bullet & the target make the perfect couple
Because they both destroy each other in the end

jamie haddox

always never about you

You blamed the wheel in the
hamster cage, said it steered
your mind away. When you arrived
you started out restless, searching
for some village you never had, but
claimed to have owned forever.
I'll bet whatever you missed
was just a spade deep if you had
really wanted it. I'll never forget
that dazed disorder: out of your
breath a message, most of it,
too drunk to decipher, smashed
in two the moment I heard you.
It reminded me of the drug
I was trying to write.

the way through the wild

Cold. Cigarettes. Kicking the dirt.
Love is a distant bell,
and the heart is steeling.
The trees wave, bending
to horizon, can't be bothered
to stop and meet the sky. They live
without something that is disappearing.
They just have a drink with the line
and go. Back and forth.
Sometimes there's nothing but the sound
of the pain teasing. Shin splints.
Watch the moonlight, awake, yet worn.
More cigarettes. More kicking. Washed out,
crying about the burned bridges, stumbling
down under an evergreen. It stings
like some standing bird falling,
head down, wondering if it's true,
but swearing with a weak smile
that there are worse ways to be alone.
Pilfer clothes off a line
because the morning is half warm,
half vacuum, and it won't soften
until the red sun walks across that line.

kierstin bridger

i can't read tea leaves or tarot

This December day's a snow globe. It may not be crystal but if I gape long enough I see summer, his index finger hooked in the jaw of a trout.

If I shift the lens to the edge of my brother's lip, I couldn't count all that snags him, keeps him fettered to his catcher.

Name the drug or deny it—a cousin who loved him, blitzed with him, quit the smoked crack, showed me the gaps near her gullet, craters in her gums.

In the pit of his yawp there are acres of junked cars and condemned flats, a well foretelling the fate my cracked mirror gives, divination's scraps and spent entrails.

It's a horror house ride with a clown mouth gate. I got off the spindly cart long ago, thought I dove, but I'm still holding my breath in a murk so green

and bottle-weary swimming through triggers rust puncture, tin slashes, and bruised calves hit by fixed obstacles I can't define with eyes shut tight.

Inside a song I hear echoes from the day my mother issued him into this world, while I sat, squirming in the lobby, waiting to hold him—

the verse: goodbye fresh water fish, goodbye game. The boy too is smolder-tongued and crisp. But when I open my throat to ask the luminary, —scraped scales at my feet,—

can this be right? The answer floats in a pool hall's magic eight, *without a doubt* it says. Then will he live to forty? *Concentrate and ask again.*

liminal on united

— on this plane

a man rocks his toddler in the dark aisle. Her curls obscure his face; he is only arms and sway. Wired, only I can hear Beck strumming me back into myself, singing like a beach boy but hipster. I think he's as old as me—older maybe, concerned now about good schools for his kids and if in his studio, he can coax the muse another day. The light from the panel above my seat illuminates the dust on the keyboard, my thumbs bounce off the space bar and I find sanctuary in middle distance. My stare lies somewhere over Oklahoma, somewhere over grain, somewhere over a poet's manuscript glowing on my screen. I woke up in Manchester. Hollandaise on a poached egg was so many hours ago I'm not sure it happened today—whatever today is supposed to be. Beck says he's so tired of being alone and yet it's all I crave. The sweetness of the cherub in 12 A is gone, replaced with intermittent cries, muffled by the skinny bard in my ears. He'll whisper me back home again while the breath of strangers fills this air-locked tube now skimming corn-husked fields, which rattle above the prairies. One seat over a long-limbed corporate executive rests, eyes closed. He must be listening to something reassuring, perhaps a fairy tale. Between his meaty thumb and index finger he holds a small rectangular lollipop, he laps it from time to time like a puppy nuzzled to a tit. It's almost black, that sucker, maybe burnt caramel or rum raisin. We never exchange a word and yet we've breathed in the same oxygen over and over, unwrapped small loaves packaged just for us, cut our chicken marinara with identical plastic knives, though my stomach thinks it's 2 am, and I'll never catch where he's from. We carry each other back. We won't acknowledge our connection in the cattle lines at customs, in the shared tension; the communion of overheard phone calls, coughs, and dropped scarves—



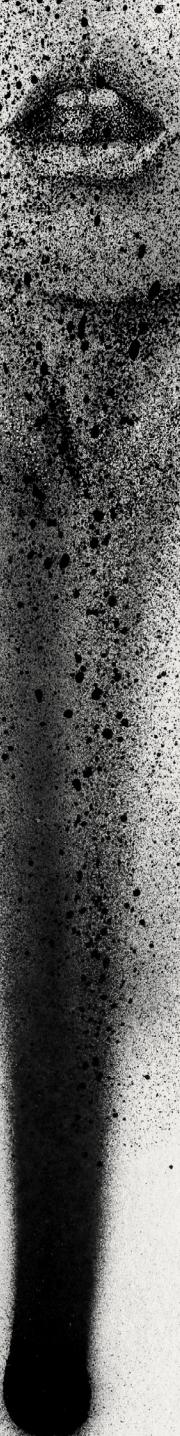
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cannot advertise

Thereof one
must be silent.

-Ludwig Wittgenstein

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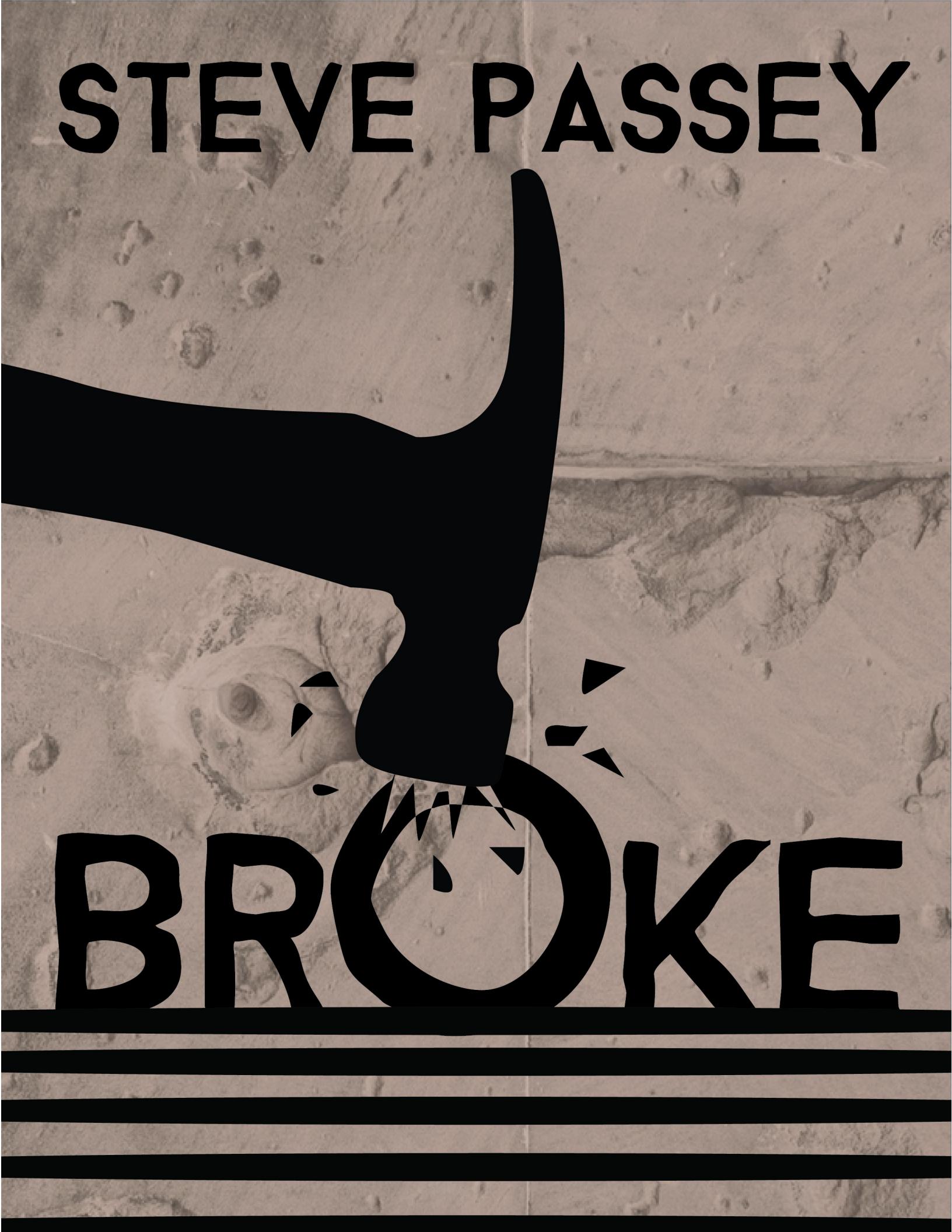
"Melancholy"



"Ksusha"



STEVE PASSEY



BROKE

Oil is around forty-dollars per barrel and I haven't worked in eight months. I'm driving to my parents' in a truck I'm ninety days behind on to borrow money from them.

I have four texts on my phone. The first is from my old boss getting back to me saying he doesn't have anything for me and doesn't know when he will and things are bad all over. The next three are from my ex-wife and all about money I owe her

- You owe me around three thousand dollars
- For Trina. The money is for Trina.
- Can you give us anything? It doesn't have to be all of it.

Trina is my daughter. Support is the entitlement of the child. I am not arguing. I'm just not responding.

* * *

I pull into my parent's driveway. They have a house and three acres that's been paid out for years. My dad has his teacher's pension. He always said he did okay for a cowboy's son. It is true. My granddaddy cowboysed on the Mackenzie Ranch. The Bar-Mack. Famous in its time and notable even now. My parents have a picture of him, on the bookshelf, with his horse and his dogs. It's an old black-and-white, and Granddad looks happy and his horse indifferent, dogs everywhere around their legs.

My mom asks me how I am doing. I know she is asking about money.

- I'm doing alright, I say.

Dad is in town, getting an oil change so I sit down and wait. I look up at Granddad's picture. All the dogs are greyhounds, except for one. It's an Irish wolfhound. The greyhounds all mill around Granddad, ears and tails up, looking at him, but the wolfhound is looking down and away, thinking about something else. He's with the pack, but not part of it. Different.

- I'd like to have this picture mom, when you're done with it.

- You can have it now. Just take it.

She seems irritated.

- I don't have to have it now, I say. It looks good where it is.

- I'm sorry, she says. It's not you, or the picture.

- What is it?

- Well, your dad isn't here so I might as well tell you, but you can't say anything to anyone. Least of all your dad.

I nod.

She goes on and tells me that a few days ago Dad had taken some old wood out

to the landfill and had come back, no fuss no muss. Well, a half-hour later he gets a call from Willard Frame saying Dad had hit his fence – what was Dad going to do about it? Willard lives on a country corner where you turn to go down the landfill road and damned if he hadn't built his fence out right to the road. It had been hit before by others. People pulling trailers or with stuff for the landfill hanging out the back of trucks, and Willard has made a supplementary income from getting money out of them for fence repairs. Move your goddamn fence back they'd say, but Ol' Willard kept it right where it was. There wasn't a by-law or statute that applied out there. For a time, Willard ran the landfill too, but eventually the county contracted it out to some big company and all Willard has now is his fence.

- Did Dad hit the fence? I ask.
- He says not, Mom answers.
- Tell Willard to go pound sand then.
- He says he's got estimates, written estimates. \$2900 dollars for repair and replacement.

- That's not proof Dad did it. Tell him to go to court.

Mom cocks her head and looks at me with one eyebrow raised.

- Your dad already told him that.

It's true. Willard doesn't ever go to court. You can stare him down that way and see what happens. There will be sugar in your gas tank, or antifreeze for your dog. Have you ever seen a dog die after drinking antifreeze? It kills their liver and then kills them three painful days later. They look at you the whole time.

- Do something, do something.

They say it with their eyes.

- Do something. Please.

They don't understand why you can't do anything. It won't cost \$2,900 to have the vet put your dog down, but Ol' Willard will have got his.

- Willard called six times yesterday, Mom says.

I look at my granddaddy's picture. He never owed anyone anything and never missed a bill. Same for my dad.

- Have you got any blank envelopes? I ask her.

She gets me a blank envelope.

- What's that for?

- Can I use the phone?

She hands me the phone.

I look through the caller ID and see all the calls from "W. Frame" and hit call.

Willard answers.

- Yep, he says.

That's how he answers the phone.

I tell him who I am, that I am calling on behalf of my dad about the fence.

- \$2900, he says. I got estimates. Written estimates. You and your dad are welcome to read 'em over.

- Yeah, we could do that, I say. But why don't I just cash you out and we'll call it done.

- I'm listening, he says.

- \$1,500, I offer.

- No way, he says.

- Look Willard. You and I both know you ain't gonna get the fence done. You need the cash. If you want to get it done you can buy the materials then wait a month or two. Once the harvest is in you can get some Mennonite kid, some farmhand, to do all the labor for you for \$250 and a case of beer. Everything else is money in your pocket. \$1,500. Either that or don't fix it – Keep it all. I don't care. I got \$1,500 to do this. That's what it is. \$1,500.

Willard waits a bit, as if he wants me to think he's seriously debating it.

- Deal, he says.

Like a deal was ever in doubt. I could have made him go away for a grand. It isn't Willard's first rodeo.

- You know my dad's place, I say. If you can be here in a half-hour, I'll hand you a check.

- I'll be there, he says.

He hangs up without another word. Mom opens up.

- I can't write Willard a check for \$1,500 without your dad here.

- I don't want you to.

- You can't write him a check.

She knows I'm broke. I know I'm broke. Everyone knows I'm broke. I'm so fucking broke.

- I am not writing him a check.

- What are you going to do?

- Stay inside.

- What are you going to do?

I stand up and fold the envelope in half, put it in my back pocket under my empty wallet.

* * *

My parents have a long driveway that can hold four trucks or six cars. My dad's garage is at a right angle to the house. I go in through the door and then raise the garage door farthest from the house. My dad has a little workbench in there where he works on his odds and ends of projects. He is not a finishing carpenter, not at all, but it gives him something to do. Right now he's building a little melamine shelf. What for,

I don't know. But there it is. I take his claw hammer from where it hangs from the peg board. It's one of those thick foam-handled ones, a longer handle than most. I think it's actually a framing hammer, but I'm not a carpenter either. When you get older you need a little more leverage to drive a nail, the longer handle of the framing hammer gives you that much more leverage, a little more applied force. You can drive a three-and-a-half inch nail with one tap with a framing hammer. It's easier on your wrists and hands over time too. I take the hammer and the melamine shelf my dad is building and go outside the garage door and sit on the shelf and set the hammer by my side and wait for Willard to show.

There's a story about Willard, how about one time he went into the Co-op to dispute a bill for seventy-five dollars or so – he brought in a receipt for payment for the amount he'd been billed. This was back when the Co-op still hand-wrote all receipts. I forget her name but someone's grandma worked the counter there – and she was a tough old bird. She took the receipt Willard brought her and was pretty sure it had been altered. She pulled down a calendar off of the wall and spoke to Willard matter-of-fact.

- Now see here Mr. Frame, you have a receipt here for the 24th of the month in question but that can't be, the 24th was a Sunday. We aren't open Sundays. Do you want to address this with Clark, the manager?

Willard asked for his receipt back, and she gave it to him. He walked back out and never mentioned it again. Still buys from the Co-op. Some people think she should have turned over that receipt to the manager and then he to the police, but I think giving Willard his receipt back saved her dog. And you know it isn't the first time, or the first place, where Willard took a ball-point pen and changed a "1" to a "4" or something like that.

Sitting on my dad's little melamine shelf with the folded envelope in my pocket and the framing hammer beside me I take out my phone and text my ex-wife:

- I'll have it for you by the weekend. Tell Trina her daddy loves her.

* * *

Willard pulls up in his old two-tone Chevy pickup. White and blue with a topper. Have you ever noticed how every crook – and every guy over sixty – if they've got a truck, it's got a topper? He's been running that truck for twenty years. His kind of small-town graft must not pay all that well. I see he's got one of his kids in the passenger seat. He's a little blond guy who doesn't look anything like Willard. I wonder: Why would he bring his kid along to cheat another guy out of money? But as soon as I think that, I think: Of course he'd bring his kid along. That's Willard.

I stand up and take the folded envelope out of my back pocket and hold it in my left hand. I pick up my Dad's hammer with my right. Willard gets out of the truck.

Willard is one of those guys who is around five-seven and runs a deuce-and-a-half minimum. He's built a lot like my ex-wife actually. He's almost perfectly round, as wide as he is tall. One of those aggressive bellies – all fat but firm, hard even. Pushy. He's wearing jeans with suspenders because guys with that build can't fit a belt right. He has on a black t-shirt, ball cap and sunglasses. He always wears sunglasses. He's got construction boots on but no laces. Men shaped like Willard need something they can slip into. He isn't made for tying up laces.

- I hear you got a check for me, he says.

I hold out the folded, empty envelope with my left hand. He reaches for it with his right and then holds it up to pull out the check he thinks is in there. I hit him with the hammer – sidearm swing – quick as you can. He's looking at the envelope the whole time and I catch him right in the side of his lying liar mouth and a handful of his teeth fly like hail against the wall of my dad's white stucco garage, chased by dark red blood thick like cream. The teeth rattle on the wall but the blood is too heavy and falls short and onto the little melamine shelf in an un-pattern like those strange paintings rich people call art.

Willard's lost his sunglasses now - and his hat. He looks at me and I can tell he's surprised. I jack him again – overhand this time – that long handled hammer with its titanium striking surface leaving a perfect round impression in the dead centre of his forehead and he's down, falling sideways and then rolling onto his back. He keeps his left hand on his mouth. I don't stop. Twice I swung that hammer like an anvil on a chain, picking my spots, and I break up his face. The strikes, at first perfect circles – dents of crushed bone – are starting to swell, to hematoma - and he looks like a Hollywood horror. He's bubbling up, changing color. The whole goddamn time he kept that envelope in his right hand. Even now, with him unconscious on his back, out of his boots and breathing out bubbles of blood from the shorn off roots of his teeth, he holds on tight.

- Willard, you crooked piece of shit, I say. There's your fucking check.

I wonder if Willard even knows that my parents don't have a dog.

* * *

I look up from Willard and see his kid, open-mouthed and wide-eyed, staring at me from the truck.

- You. Get out of the truck. Now, I say.

He dives down and I can hear him locking the doors. I walk over and look through the window and see him curling up in a ball on the floor.

- Open the door, I say.

I'm not yelling. I'm not loud.

- Just open the door. I won't hurt you.

He doesn't open the door, so I swing hard and fast with my dad's hammer and I smash the window out. If hammers have souls, somehow imbued by being a thing made, a thing created like we are, my dad's hammer is having the best day a hammer ever had.

Willard left the truck running and there is country music on the radio. Country music is for non-Catholics, people without truth and reconciliation. It's full of bad behavior and self-righteousness. Y'all go on and do bad things but keep your chin up because hey, you love your country and other people done treated your tender little heart bad. It gives you a license to be a shit. I know. I grew up listening to that stuff, and you know what? Some of it I don't even mind.

The kid whimpers the whole time. I unlock the door and tell him to get out, but he just stays in a little ball and whimpers. I drag him out by the arm, but when I let him go, he just falls to the ground in a little ball. Poor kid.

- Stand up, I say. I'm not going to hurt you.

Somehow he stands up.

- Stay right here, I tell him.

He stays, looking down at the ground and shaking. It isn't cold out. After laying about Willard's face and neck with two-plus pounds of framing hammer, I'm getting a bit sweaty. The kid's just scared. I understand.

I set the hammer down on the bloody melamine shelf and go on and get the little jerry can my dad keeps for the lawnmower. I pour some gas over the kid, over his head and shoulders and then set it back down. He's making odd sounds now. He's choking with fear.

- Look, I tell him. I said I wasn't going hurt you, and I'm not. Not now. But you know gas burns right? Gas makes fire?

He stands with his arms crossed and shakes. He doesn't say anything. The tears, big tears, they come down off his cheeks and hit the ground like his daddy's teeth. His little shorts are wet, soaked. I didn't pour that much gas on him.

- Again, I ain't going to hurt you. Not today. I know you understand me. I know you know that gas makes fire.

He's moaning a bit now. Mm-mm-mm-mm-mm. Like that.

- Your daddy is going to wake up in a bit. He's not going to feel real good. I'll help you get him into the truck, and he's going to drive you home. When you get home your daddy is not going to say anything to your momma. He's just going to go lie down for a few days. Your momma is going to ask you what happened. She's going to ask you why you smell like gas. She's going to be scared too.

I stop for a moment and take a deep breath. I like the smell of gas. Always have. Octane is good. The more the merrier. People should buy more. I take it all in. The kid is breathing heavy too. He's soaked in enough gas that you can't even smell the urine over it.

- You tell her that your daddy tried to steal something. I caught him doing it. And that if ever I see your daddy again – even once - I'm going to set you on fire. I'm going to set you on fire. I'm going to set your momma on fire. I'm going to set your brothers and sisters on fire. I'm going to set everyone on fire, from the oldest to the littlest ittiest-bittiest baby in the house. She'll smell the gas on you, and she'll know I mean it. Do you have a dog?

He still won't talk. I give up.

- DO YOU HAVE A FUCKING DOG?

He finally looks up at me. He even stops shaking. We see eye-to-eye.

- Yes, he says. Yes, we do.

- I'll set the dog on fire first. You can all watch before I set you on fire. Now get back in the truck and wait for your daddy.

He gets back in and curls down on the floorboards again, the country music on the radio singing songs about bad men and good women, or vice-versa, or flags on the porch or the cousin you lost your virginity to or who the fuck knows.

Willard doesn't look to be coming around anytime soon so I go back into my dad's garage and wipe down the hammer and put it away. Wipe down the melamine shelf. And lastly, take a push broom and push Willard's teeth out onto the road. I should have made the kid do it, but he smells like gas and he has already peed his pants.

Everything done, I sit back down on the shelf and check my phone. No new messages. Nothing to do but wait for Willard to leave and for my dad to come back so I can go sit down with my parents and beg them for money.

I can't imagine my dad, or my granddad, ever asking anyone for money.
I'm so broke.

* * *

I drive away from my parents' home with a check and the picture.

When my granddad cowboys for the Bar-Mack, it was back in the 1930s during the Great Depression. No one had any money. Wages were hard to come by, and even when you had paying work, the wages might keep you fed and housed or they might not. But they paid a bounty on coyotes in those days. Five-dollars per pelt. That was good money then. That's why my granddad got his pack. He'd run coyotes from horseback with that pack of greyhounds, and they'd run the coyote down, pin it in a gully or in some scrub, something like that, and hold it at bay. Coyotes are what I call stupid-smart. Can't stay away from the calves, but they'll run along the fence line and under the barbed wire and slalom through the fence posts. The grey hounds will run along either side of the fence and take that away, but they can't kill a coyote, not one at a time or even all of them at once. Not easily anyways. Coyotes will kill. Cornered, they grow fiercer by despair, and it's a real fight. That's where the Irish wolfhound came in. That

wolfhound could run with the greyhounds and run with the horse - all day long. When the pack brought that coyote to bay the wolfhound would move on in and kill it, take it by the neck and hold onto it until it was dead twice over. Granddad would get down from his horse only once he was sure the coyote was dead and skin it in a flash before the rest of the dogs tore it to pieces and rendered the pelt unsalvageable. He needed the five dollars and it was paid only on the whole pelt. He called the wolfhound his "Killing Dog." It knew how to kill. It was bred in him. I think that's why he stands on his own in that picture. Set apart as it were, in the pack but not of it. He was something else. ☺



GRANDDAD AND HIS PACK

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Vyacheslav Nesterov is an artist and illustrator from Perm, Russia. His work is heavily influenced by surrealism, which results in his signature “mind-bending” illustrations. He commonly employs cold color palettes, and the characters of his works live within existential situations, often giving rise to profound commentary on themes ranging from love, politics, religion and institutions.



“Wonder”



“Self Portrait”

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