

2024 / ISSUE 03

REBELLION/ CONFORMITY

REDROSE THORNS MAGAZINE

**HISTORICAL DISCUSSION
ON REBELLION**

Featured article by
Fatima Jha |
pg. 08

**REFLECTING LIFE
THROUGH ART**

Featured artwork by
David Boyle |
pg. 47



"Conformity may give you a quiet life; it may even bring you to a University Chair. But all change in history, all advance, comes from the nonconformists. If there had been no trouble-makers, no Dissenters, we should still be living in caves."

~ *A. J. P. Taylor*

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about redrosethorns magazine



redrosethorns magazine is an annual publication, featuring work by our global community of authors and artists. Our magazine is a publication of redrosethorns Ltd. Liability Co., a feminist educational publication company designed to provide educational resources around mental health, gender & sexuality, and empower others through self-care practices. Founded by Kirsty Anne Richards, who believes that the art of expression is the most powerful tool we can use to build our self-worth and self-esteem, which in turn creates a society that is inclusive and fosters equality.

To share our human experiences through writing and artwork, *redrosethorns magazine* was created to provide others with a platform to share their work and to demonstrate the diversity found within our global society.

We wanted our magazine to be the reflection of the diversity actually found within our global community. To honour the voices of our authors, we have deliberately kept American and British English spelling, as well as unique dialects found within each persons work.

Kirsty Anne Richards
Creator & Editor-in-Chief

**redrosethorns
magazine**

REBELLION/ CONFORMITY

Embracing feminist ideals of equality, equity, diversity, & inclusion.

We hope our publication can bring us closer together, if not through action, then through the stories we share.

Our third edition of *redrosethorns magazine* discusses the meaning and interpretations of rebellion and conformity.

Content warning: pieces included in our publication do speak of themes that may be triggering to some readers. Some stories contain themes of violence, war, racism, sexism, and death.





Editor's Letter

When I first began the magazine publications, I drew inspiration from my life when selecting a theme. 'Community/Connection' was born at the tail end of the pandemic, during which I met dozens of people worldwide through social media. 'Home/Belonging' stemmed from my moving to another country yet again, where I wandered (not a typo) about what it means to belong to a place. In this third edition of redrosethorns magazine, I chose the theme 'Rebellion/Conformity' based on the significance of this year being a heavily political year globally - approximately 49% of the world's population have, or will, head to the polls in 2024.

It is the biggest election year in history, and with deep contentions spread across borders, we mark a global change in our future. I knew that I wanted this theme to be around something political, but I didn't want it to be centred on politics alone. Since this election year seems to be a deciding factor in which direction our geopolitics will turn, I thought why not select a contradictory theme or something to represent the opposite, or conflict, of each other? Our theme picks at this idea: to rebel from old narratives or conform to the beliefs hindering our progress.

But our publication is not about me, it is designed for others to interpret the meaning of the subjects we put forth and decide for themselves what our discourse will be about. Many pieces spoke of empowerment, or rebelling against the stereotypes, the institutions, and the hate perpetuated throughout our societies. Some spoke of war and the hope it brings when the conflict reaches its conclusion. Others talked about their

defiance against the status quo; their persistence in being their authentic being is the resilience in a society which pushes us to be complicit, and, I would argue, homogenous.

Regardless of one's political ideologies, there is something to be said of our innate attraction to rebel against wrongdoing, or to reject the elite's persistence of subjugation - films, TV shows, books, and more all perfectly capture this concept. We have all found a way to carve out a space for ourselves in our personal lives. We are all resilient in adversity and with societal changes. Yes, we are also subject to conform in many aspects, our survival often depends on it. But deep within us, we somehow manage to navigate our paths, reflected in our expressions through our art, our work, through how we raise our families and interact with others. Our individuality makes it impossible for us to truly conform.

In my editor's note for the first edition, I reiterated the concept that our stories are our power as they reflect societal and personal struggles; they connect us, and build the world we want to live in. Our stories are a mirror of ourselves, our society and our politics. They have the power to hold us to account and heal the wounds embedded within our history. I am deeply proud that each of these stories reflects that inner power. They took the personal and made it political; more importantly, they took the political and made it personal. And that is how progression begins: by conforming to our rebellion.



Rebellion and Conformity: A Complex Dance Through History and Society

by Fatima Jha

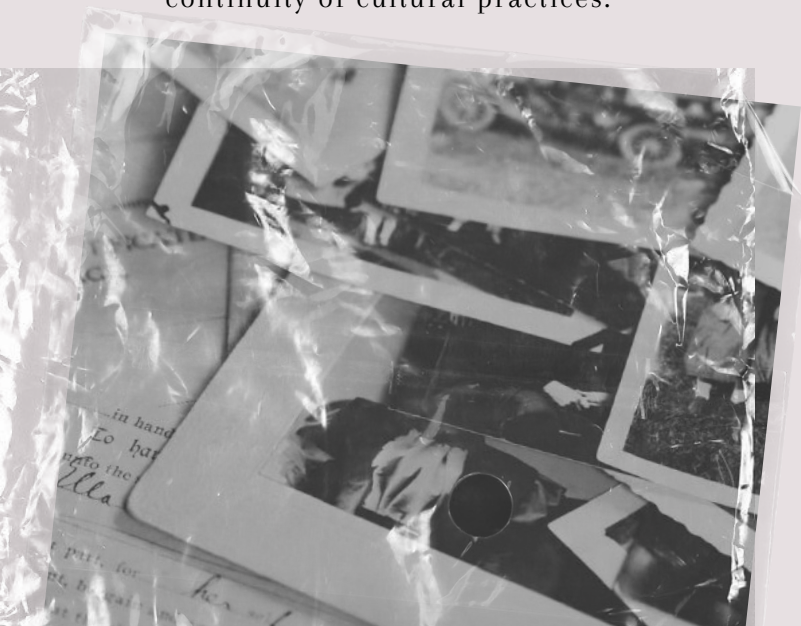
Introduction

The tension between rebellion and conformity has been a fundamental aspect of human society since its inception. Rebellion represents the drive to challenge, change, and deviate from established norms, while conformity embodies the adherence to accepted standards, traditions, and expectations. This intricate interplay shapes cultures, influences progress, and determines the trajectory of civilizations. Understanding this dynamic is crucial, as it reveals much about human behavior, social structures, and the forces that drive societal evolution.

Historical Context of Rebellion and Conformity

Throughout history, moments of rebellion have often marked significant turning points. Rebellions arise when individuals or groups perceive injustice, oppression, or the stifling of potential within prevailing systems. Conversely, conformity has been essential in maintaining order, stability, and the continuity of cultural practices.

- **Ancient Civilizations:** In ancient Egypt, strict conformity to social hierarchies and religious practices ensured the stability of the pharaonic system. However, periods of rebellion, such as the reign of Akhenaten, who attempted to shift the polytheistic society to monotheism, show the push for change against deeply entrenched traditions. Akhenaten's reforms were eventually reversed, demonstrating the resilience of conformity.
- **Medieval Period:** The Middle Ages in Europe were characterized by rigid social structures and the dominance of the Catholic Church. Rebellions like the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in England and various heretical movements challenged feudal and ecclesiastical authority, pushing for social and religious reforms. These uprisings, although often suppressed, planted seeds for future transformations.
- **Modern Era:** The Enlightenment and subsequent revolutions in America and France epitomize the clash between conformity and rebellion. Enlightenment thinkers advocated for reason, individualism, and challenging the status quo, leading to revolutions that sought to overthrow established monarchies and hierarchies. These movements fundamentally altered political and social landscapes, promoting ideals of democracy and human rights.





Psychological Underpinnings

The propensity to conform or rebel is deeply rooted in human psychology. Several theories explain these behaviors:

- **Social Identity Theory:** This theory posits that individuals derive a sense of identity and self-esteem from their membership in social groups. Conformity can reinforce this identity by aligning with group norms, while rebellion might occur when individuals seek to redefine or distinguish their identity from the group.
- **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:** Abraham Maslow's model suggests that individuals prioritize different needs at different stages of their lives. Once basic needs are met, individuals may seek esteem and self-actualization, which can manifest as either conformity (to gain approval and belonging) or rebellion (to achieve personal growth and authenticity).
- **Cognitive Dissonance Theory:** Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance explains how individuals experience discomfort when their beliefs or behaviors are inconsistent. This dissonance can lead to changes in behavior to achieve consonance, which might result in conformity or rebellion depending on the context.

Societal Influences

The balance between rebellion and conformity is influenced by various societal factors:

- **Cultural Norms:** Cultures with collectivist values, such as many Asian societies, emphasize harmony, community, and adherence to social norms, thus promoting conformity. In contrast, individualistic cultures, such as those in the Western world, celebrate personal freedom and innovation, which can encourage rebellion.

- **Political Systems:** Authoritarian regimes often enforce strict conformity through surveillance, propaganda, and punitive measures against dissent. Democracies, on the other hand, typically provide more space for dissent and protest, recognizing rebellion as a form of political expression.
- **Economic Conditions:** Economic stability can foster conformity by providing a sense of security and predictability. Conversely, economic hardship often leads to dissatisfaction and unrest, fueling rebellious movements. The Great Depression of the 1930s, for instance, saw a rise in radical political movements as people sought alternatives to the failing economic systems.


Case Studies

- **The Civil Rights Movement in the United States:** The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a profound example of rebellion against institutionalized racism and segregation. Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. advocated for nonviolent resistance, challenging societal norms and laws that perpetuated discrimination. The movement led to significant legislative changes, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, illustrating how rebellion can drive societal transformation.
- **The Counterculture of the 1960s:** The 1960s saw a widespread rebellion against conventional norms, particularly in Western societies. The counterculture movement, characterized by its opposition to the Vietnam War, advocacy for civil rights, and experimentation with new lifestyles, represented a significant departure from post-World War II conformity. This period of rebellion had lasting impacts on music, art, and social attitudes.
- **The Arab Spring:** Beginning in late 2010, the Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests and uprisings

"Conformity is evil when it distorts, flattens, and erases fruitful ways, strong ideas, natural identities; it is evil when it is a steamroller. But a man cannot escape being part of a milieu – and a recognizable part – unless he flees naked to a cave, never to return."

~ Herman Wouk





across the Arab world. Frustration with corruption, economic stagnation, and political repression sparked widespread rebellion. While the outcomes varied by country, the Arab Spring demonstrated the power of collective rebellion in challenging entrenched authoritarian regimes.

The Role of Technology

In the modern era, technology plays a crucial role in both fostering and suppressing rebellion. Social media platforms, for example, have become powerful tools for organizing protests and disseminating dissenting ideas. Movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter have utilized digital platforms to amplify their messages and mobilize support.

However, technology also enables increased surveillance and control. Authoritarian governments can monitor communications, spread disinformation, and suppress dissent through cyber means. The dual-edged nature of technology means it can be both a catalyst for rebellion and a tool for enforcing conformity.

The Balance of Rebellion and Conformity

Striking a balance between rebellion and conformity is essential for societal health. Excessive conformity can stifle innovation, perpetuate injustices, and lead to stagnation. On the other hand, constant rebellion can result in chaos, instability, and the breakdown of social cohesion.

- **Innovation and Progress:** Societies that encourage a degree of non-conformity tend to be more innovative and adaptable. Silicon Valley, for instance, thrives on a culture that values questioning the status quo and embracing novel ideas.

- **Social Stability:** Conformity provides the necessary glue for social cohesion. Shared values, traditions, and norms foster a sense of belonging and mutual understanding. In multicultural societies, finding common ground is crucial for harmony.
- **Ethical Considerations:** Both rebellion and conformity raise ethical questions. When should one conform to unjust laws or norms? Conversely, when does rebellion become destructive rather than constructive? Ethical frameworks help navigate these dilemmas, emphasizing principles like justice, fairness, and the greater good.

The Future of Rebellion and Conformity

As we look to the future, the dynamics of rebellion and conformity will continue to evolve. Emerging technologies, shifting demographics, and global challenges like climate change and inequality will shape how these forces interact.

- **Artificial Intelligence and Automation:** The rise of AI and automation could lead to new forms of conformity, as algorithms increasingly influence decisions and behaviors. However, these technologies also offer potential for rebellion against traditional work structures and economic systems.
- **Global Connectivity:** The interconnectedness of the modern world means that ideas and movements can spread more rapidly than ever before. This global exchange can foster both conformity to global norms and the rise of transnational rebellions.
- **Climate Change:** The existential threat of climate change may necessitate unprecedented levels of both conformity and rebellion. Conformity to sustainable practices and international agreements will be crucial, while rebellion against entrenched interests and harmful practices will be equally important.

Conclusion

The interplay between rebellion and conformity is a defining feature of human society. This complex dance influences cultural, political, and economic landscapes, driving both stability and change. Understanding this dynamic helps us appreciate the forces that shape our world and the balance necessary for a just and progressive society. As we navigate the challenges of the 21st century, embracing the positive aspects of both rebellion and conformity will be key to building a resilient and adaptable future.



The Righteous Keep Calling

by Bart Edelman

The righteous keep calling,
But I won't answer the phone—
Not yesterday, today, or tomorrow.
I can find better things to do
Than engage with the sacred,
Leaving the profane behind,
Begging for a spare bible or two.

It's a fool's game, at best.
All this continuous jibber-jabber,
Back and forth, year after year,
As if my soul were on the line,
And I had no time to smoke
This dead cigarette in my pocket.

Let's keep it real here.
Only demand what waits
On the other side of a place
Angels couldn't properly furnish,
If their lives depended on it—
Eight miles east of Eden.

No, throw the next old girl
A rope once intended for me.
I've no desire to be saved,
In this church or the next;
Nothing personal, mind you.
Just a pet peeve of mine
I carry around each century.



When We Were Rebels

by Eileen Nittler

We were all rebels. We were 16, obedient, church going, good students. We listened to Judas Priest and wore pajamas to school. We shoplifted, dyed our hair the colors available to us in the 80s (black, red, not much else), smoked clove cigarettes and drank wine coolers. Just like everybody else.

We were all conformists. We were 18, went to college, used birth control, smoked pot and protested apartheid, contemplated death, watched *Star Trek* and listened to *Public Enemy*. We studied late, and worked at the library, fell in and out of love and worried about the future. Just like everybody else.

And we grew up to carry both of these identities with us, tucked into our pockets and pulled out for reference when useful. Talking to a potential employer? Conformist card comes out. Impressing a stranger? Rebel all the way. Maybe we all feel like rebels, though social sciences prove most of us aren't.

In college, we learned about the Milgram Obedience Experiments, where people were told to shock another person when they answered a question wrong. Although any one of them could have said no or walked out, most people continued to push the shock button (it was fake), until the person on the other side of the glass was silent. We think, not I, I wouldn't push that button, but 61% of people did.

We want to think we'd have hidden vulnerable people from the Nazis, of course we would have. We would have staked our lives to be a part of the Underground Railroad. We aren't like everyone else. We are on the right side, always.

We wear pink hats and march on the mall.

We storm the capital building to show our displeasure.

We refuse to vote because we are angry with The System.

We call it self-care when we disengage from doom-scrolling, because we are exhausted, because even rebels have to rest, because nothing seems to change.

We get comfortable with what we have and who we are, and we stop seeing the discomforts of others, what others lack.

But in our hearts, we are still rebels, just like everyone else.





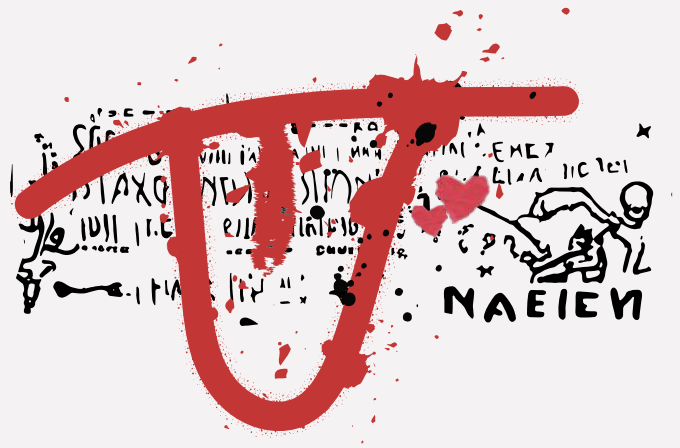
Kiwi

by Dr Matteo Prebianca

Italian-born Australian and currently based in Scotland, Matt Bianca is a linguist, lecturer, and translator whose work is enriched by his extensive travels across Italy, Switzerland, Russia, India, the USA, Australia, Mali, Mexico, China, and now the UK. Fluent in Italian and English, he infuses his dual cultural identity into his diverse artistic and professional pursuits. Matt's portfolio includes published poems, experimental music albums, and two novels. Discover more about his multidisciplinary journey at <https://mattwhitestone.wixsite.com/mprea/>.

Freedom

by Esther Bewaji



"The power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants."

You are:

a naked page, smooth as an oiled head, heavy
as a lifeless one/
uprooted, like the sinewy roots of a burning bush
never consumed or a consumed bush never
burnt/
alight like smiles of caped and capped youths
trailing with the stench of educated uneducation/
our minds go up in flames as a torch to read, a
freedom fighter to lead the next generation into
an allusion of hope dripping at the edges with
honey/
you see,

I cannot be free because our mother's mother's
mother decided to be a god, to graze
the needle and feel the oozing blood/ she says,
there is freedom in going against one's will; in
knowing the feel of restraint and the thrill of
rebellion/

I cannot be free because my creativity is trapped
in a straitjacket, my body in a cola bottle, my foot
in a sandal that will not fit/
even my wrists feel too light without the shackles
pulling them down,
they move in suspicious, contorted motions that
I don't recognize/
and I recognize that even bliss has a sour
aftertaste, like lemon in a glass of wine, it
smacks your lips, tells you of your 206
reluctant bones, your flickering voice trapped in a
throat with no oxygen/

I cannot be free because I do not know who I will
be when I am.



Leaving the Garden

by Sydney Correia



Eternal paradise was warm.

It had to be, things must grow and be birthed there. The birds, the bees. The apple trees.

The sun shone during the day, warming the skin, and rubbing it raw. Sometimes it rained, and the air afterwards felt so cool you might be tempted to try and drink it, it's so refreshing.

It was not a problem that paradise was warm. It's that he was hot, and so was I. Red blood, hot and new like fire, running through us.

But at night, limbs entangled, rest was not to be found. I ran hot, but Adam ran hotter.

You would think that because we're made of the same thing, by the same creator, we would feel the same. We should be mirrors. I am half of him. He, half of me. Then why, I would ask, does Adam stand taller than me? Why does Adam tell me what to eat, when to lie down, when to shut up and be grateful? *Be thankful, Lilith*, a common refrain in the garden. The butterflies didn't have to be thankful. Only me. Why? I spent most of my days wondering about that. I was content, I suppose. But, never happy. Never thankful enough.

I got my answer one restless night, watching the stars and the moon turn.

The moon, while bright, will never be brighter than the sun. It's its nature. It was, by design or by some cruel twist, my nature to hold Adam up.

Adam slept peacefully, as he always did, undisturbed by my thoughts and musings. I was as still as I could be. One hand on my throat, the other on my stomach, trying not to run away as this truth washed over me. I pressed my lips together, tight, and breathed slowly.

I did this exercise every night when Adam was asleep, and I could not.

Because every night, when he fell asleep, it felt like he also stopped existing.

So, the whole world might as well stop existing.

Lying there, trapped under his arm, nothing existed except me, and his heat and his breathing.

"I would wander in the garden, some days, not too far from him, to try and find something to give."

Early on, maybe from the first night, I felt compelled to count his breaths. Counting the moments until he would wake and fill the world with life again.

And sometimes, the breath doesn't come fast enough. Those moments lasted an eternity. The air in the garden would disappear, and cause my heart to race, to

pound like a pack of deer were running right next to me.

So, I place my hand on my throat and feel my worry. It's like a sphere of nerves-nervousness and worry. But also, bad feelings, ones that fester and rot. They don't have names; I don't think they exist in the garden. I wasn't sure where those came from, at the time, but there they were.

I imagine all these things are like a bubble of clear water, caught right past my tongue, trembling against the muscles that want to swallow it down. I press on my throat and force myself to hold it there. To not let the bubble burst.

It was then that I felt something in my chest move for the first time.

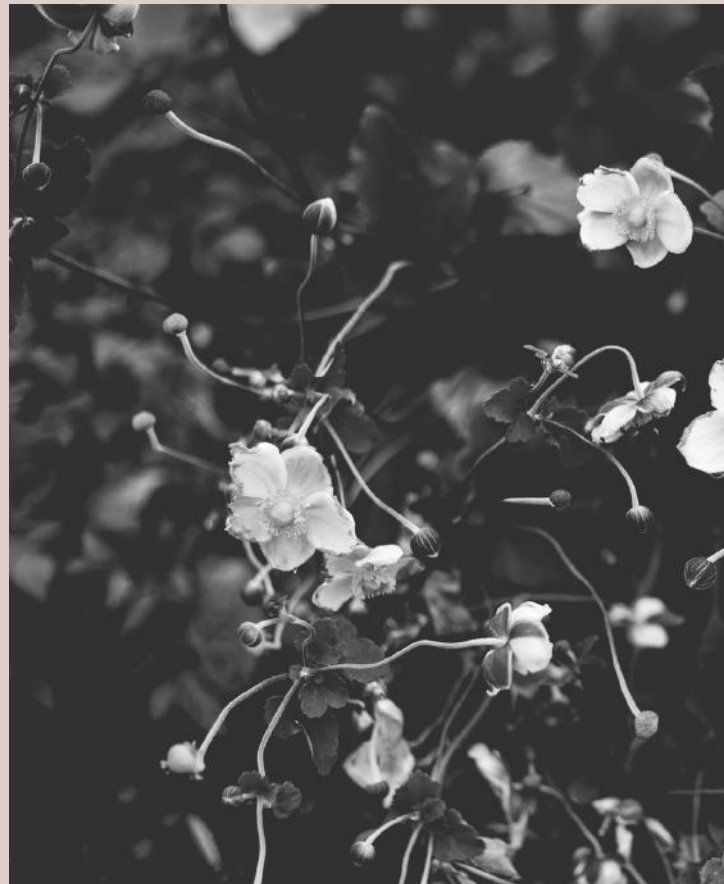
I ignored it at first. I had never felt something in my body move like that. Like pressure on my ribs but coming from inside. Like my ribs wanted to lean towards one another and knit together. I thought it was the earth below, some mole wandering by, brushing against me, or some line of ants, wandering too close.

My skin didn't bend like that again for a long time.

Why did I sleep next to Adam every night? It was too warm in the garden. Sweat would pool in the spaces where our bodies were joined, and my skin felt like it would crawl off my body if the sweat was not removed.

Now I know, thanks to the moon, thanks to the stars, it was not my choice. It was Adam's. Because I always did what Adam asked. I wanted to make him happy. And that was true, and that was enough.

The bubble was there every night now. It was also there in the mornings and afternoons. But it was the worst at night



when I was alone and had nothing to give Adam.

At least in the light of day I could give him my company, my words, my kindness, and my body. I could give and give as much as he wanted. I wondered then if I could ever give him enough. Because the only thing I could give him that the garden could not was companionship.

I would wander in the garden, some days, not too far from him, to try and find



something to give. Something new. Everything I found and surrendered to Adam though, was never enough.

I've already seen this color of rock, Lilith.

I already ate honey from that hive, Lilith.

Yes Lilith, I've seen this bird. Listen! I've already copied its call.

But then there was the apple tree.

There were plenty of apple trees in the garden. Greens, yellows, pinks and deep reds. Apples as small as my fist and so large I would need both open palms to hold one fruit.

I almost passed the tree by, because it looked so much like the others. I had forgotten it was off-limits until the snake told me so.

The bubble in my throat trembled like I had swallowed it. And an ache pulsed through my ribs. Pain, I found out moments later. The feeling was called pain.

First though, before I could hold that word in my mind, all I could think about was how I needed the apple. To give Adam the apple. It was so simple; I couldn't think of why I had never thought of this apple tree before. Something to give Adam, that the garden could not provide him itself.

I cannot tell you how the apple ended up in my hands. It was heavy for its size, a glossy bright red where the sun had kissed it, and dull green and yellow where it had hidden in the shade. I can't say if the snake put it in my hands, or if I reached up and plucked it from the low boughs, so heavy with the fruit.

What I can tell you though, was there was something in my chest, pushing against my ribcage again and again in time with my heart. It filled me up so much, almost like if I opened my mouth, it would crawl out.

This thing, I named myself.

I named the feeling *WANT*.

I had never wanted anything before. Or maybe I had, but never like this. What could I want, in eternal paradise?

I unclenched my jaw and slowly opened it. Like the snake had done when it called

for me. At first, I wasn't sure what I was doing. I knew I wanted, but I wasn't sure what.

I started by pressing the skin of the fruit to my lips, kissing it. It was warm, and sweet. I wanted more then, in that moment. The want pulsed through me; I thought I would crack in two.

Gently, with my teeth, I pushed into the flesh. It did not yield at first. So, I pushed down hard. And with a snap, the deed was done.

Knowledge was sweet. It was everything. So craveable, and so easy to consume.

I ate half the apple, lost in everything and nothing and the concept of pain and loss I was already feeling before I thought of Adam again.

I did not feel the bubble of worry, thinking of Adam then. But I felt something else, pressure behind my eyes, in my nose.

I think it was grief.

Because now, having eaten the apple, I was the sun. Two suns were not meant to sit in the sky together. What was I to do?

My knowledge was too new. I was scared. I called for him.

Because it was scary, to lose the only person I knew.

As Adam came for me through the brush, I wondered.

Was all my time with him a waste?

Was this meant to happen?

Should I be learning something from this?

Or was this moment in time like the garden—where things died and rotted with no rhyme or reason? Nature, taking its

pound of flesh from my heart for wanting. Nature punishing me, for going against its wishes, its design.

Two suns cannot sit in the same sky.

And above all that noise in my head, a question.

Would I give him the apple?

Would I allow him to eclipse me again? Would I sleep better this time, be comforted by his presence, be content with curling up between his arm and his chest, like a piece of him?

In a way, I did give him the apple. It wasn't my intention.

I dropped it as I ran away. I dropped my name too. Because I knew, there was no room for me anymore in the garden. Maybe there was never any room for me in the first place.

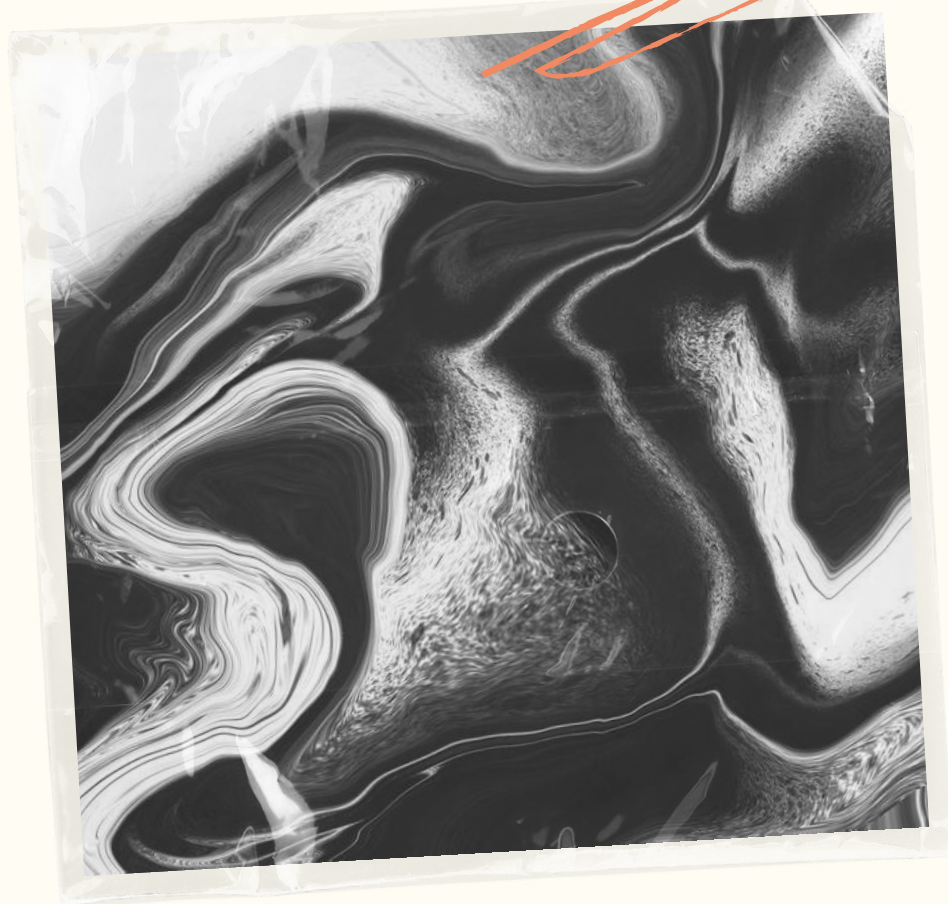
I took nothing from the garden as I ran. And beyond the gates was an endless scarlet desert. And it was hot, my children, yes.

But it was the same hot as me. And for the first time in the history of the world, I was happy. I named myself Eve.

The Believer

by Gordon Brown

As a Virgo, she does not believe in astrology. She believes in Rosa Luxemburg, corgi butts, equal pay, and the Descendents' early albums. She believes that *no-gods-no-masters* is about as fine a slogan as any, and she has it tattooed on her bicep. She believes her tattoo wasn't caught on the CCTV cameras. She believes she was justified in splashing red paint on that congressman's summer house. She believes his mistress saw her from the upstairs window. She believes his mistress looked scared but also jealous. She believes in leading by example. She believes a better world is possible. As a Virgo, she does not believe in astrology but *does* believe in the moral arc of the universe. She believes that it's long. She believes it bends towards justice. But only when everyone pulls, and with all of their goddamn might.





Reinventing

by Marilia Angeline

I'm reinventing myself, she said.

She had lived the entirety of her life
under shadows
of expectations, and pre-determined
courses in invisibly numbered steps
with certain comforts that come
if you reach them

and never show the greatness
of the pain it caused you, standing
still with perfect posture
despite the crushing weight of being

a tethered elephant— a life
in the circus is a life without freedom.

But from the audience,
it all looks so beautiful
you could cry.

The Rose Knows

by K.M. Kramer

to blush for your offense.
The purple tulips stand sentry
against real reflection.
Sunflowers seek to distract.
Baby's breath tiptoes.
The poppies proclaim too much.
White lilies invite surrender.
But I have deeper roots myself.

The rose knows
to blush for your offense.
You arrive late
but expect to impress,
flourishing a bouquet
of thoughtlessness. I say,
Thank you, for thinking ...of me?
But I have deeper roots myself.

The blushing rose knows.
Plucked smooth,
thorns removed. Clipped
and stripped from the wild,
just to be showcased
in a pink vase?
But I have deeper
roots myself.

The rose, red-faced,
confined by the hedge.
Disallowed to cross the edge.
Told to: behave; line up;
avoid the risks
of dangerous disorder.
But freer and
deeper roots I have myself.

Flushed, the rose knows.
Knocked down
on a card. Hallmark's favorite
shard. Stripped
of context. Pulled. Slapped.
Flattened. Glossed over.
No—
myself, I have deeper roots.

Self-Love

by Mona Abdel-Fadil



Ricardo was gorgeous, he knew that. Frankly, he pitied everyone who hadn't had a chance to be in his strong muscular arms or caress his eight-pack. He was god's gift to all, and ready to share his affections with anyone unable to suppress their adoration for his good looks. Ricardo's looks were genetic. Not that others' looks weren't, it's just that Ricardo was genetically engineered to have the best physical traits from all ethnicities.

The Lab Coats were pleased with their efforts. Ricardo was very striking. He had the highest muscle mass possible for a human being. His eyes were wide and dark brown, and he was ripped. Of course, Ricardo didn't have a regular job. But he did work hard, especially during some of his workouts. On average, he spent about six hours in the gym a day. But you had to subtract, at least two to three hours, for self-admiration. You see, Ricardo knew he was gorgeous, and he needed time to absorb and appreciate that fact.

He needed time every single day.

You could say that self-admiration was both Ricardo's job and favourite pastime. It seemed to be a self-addiction. The Regime ordered a team of specialists to look into it. The Lab Coats wondered if perhaps, Ricardo was in love with himself. His self-obsession went beyond the usual gym buff's "Ooh I am hot, Mmmm, hell yeah!" when facing a mirror. It was a lot more than that.

The Lab Coats had decided on a kind of generic Latino-sounding-name because Ricardo was medium dark-dark, and that seemed to be the right fit, although he

could've had a Sri Lankan-sounding name too, as one of the Lab Coats argued, but nobody listened. Well, one out of them had listened, but she'd argued that nobody knew how to pronounce Sri Lankan names while Ricardo was an easy name for everyone to both remember and pronounce. Still, the Lab Coats had not been counting on the extent of Ricardo's self-admiration. What they had been aiming for was to create a most beautiful, but humble man.

Men needed a genetically superior prototype, to aspire to. It was part of The Regime's New Gender Equality Policy. The Regime deemed it 'a corrective and affirmative measure for gender equality.'

Ricardo didn't care much about the political side of things. He was just happy that he was featured in glossy magazines and had a big following on TikTok. Ricardo was less thrilled about being in newspapers, not just because no one reads them anymore, but also because without vivid colours and videos, you couldn't see how breathtakingly gorgeous he really is, which he found unfair and possibly unethical according to The Regime's ethical guidelines for journalism.

One of the Regime's marketing plans was to set up huge billboards, featuring Ricardo lying on one side, in package-hugging, bright yellow speedos, while casually flexing his biceps and flashing a Colgate smile. Needless to say, Ricardo was entirely hairless. This way all men could aspire to be as impossibly tall, hairless, and as muscular as Ricardo was, while at the same time getting a good look at his impressive bulge without it being too obtrusive. The

Colgate smile was just a feature the Lab Coats had thrown in at the end, for fun. It was a little 1980s, but they were feeling nostalgic.

Ricardo, in all his glory, was meant to motivate all men to look their very best in every possible way. The Lab Coats had hoped that the bulge in Ricardo's speedos, and his laying on the side, with that big suggestive grin, might send subliminal messages that Ricardo was always hot and ready to go, unlike your regular Joe or Ali. The Lab Coats knew for a fact, that Ricardo's eight-pack and bulge were unattainable without genetic manipulation, which is why they were the perfect fit for this assignment.

Another feature the Lab Coats had been working on, was having people ignore the words that came out of Ricardo's mouth. He had to be so bedazzling, that his appearance overshadowed whatever he said. Without this feature, Ricardo would not meet the exact specifications The Regime had been very specific about. This was affirmative action, and Ricardo was to receive affirmations that were entirely based on his looks.

Alas, neither The Regime nor the Lab Coats had counted on the Love Bug, Ricardo's incessant self-adoration. It was obvious that Ricardo just couldn't get enough of himself; in mirrors, in the sheets, or through the 101-selfies-a-day limit that the Lab Coats had to impose.

A typical day at the gym for Ricardo consisted of four hours riding a stationary bike, but being constantly distracted, by his need to take a new selfie. Ricardo would pretty much exhaust every possible pose that was humanly possible to do on a gym bike, but he still couldn't get enough of himself. A few hours in, he would stop pedalling and devote all his attention to getting the perfect selfie with plucked-up lips. You could tell Ricardo wanted to kiss his own lips.

It was kind of creepy but also very fascinating, from a scientific perspective that is. The Lab Coats could not fathom what had gone wrong with Ricardo. With this large genetic pool, there shouldn't have been any kinks. They tried to introduce all kinds of lovers to Ricardo.

He seemed interested at first. But, when the dates came over for steamy rendezvous, he spent most of the act admiring himself in the life-size ceiling mirror. Ricardo was, if nothing else, consistently into himself.



It was a massive headache for the Lab Coats. The Love-Bug was at great odds with the 'I'm never enough', 'I'm too fat' and 'I'm ugly' mantras that were supposed to be subliminally instilled into all men through Ricardo. Sadly, the mantras didn't work or have the desired effect when coupled with the heightened self-infatuation Ricardo displayed 24/7.

The Lab Coats tried their best to tweak Ricardo's composition so that he'd be less self-absorbed, all to no avail. They orchestrated several alternative addictions (sugar, cocaine, sex) to see if they could distract from his primary addiction of self-love. But it simply didn't work. The Lab



Coats even went to a bit of an extreme measure and blinded Ricardo. They'd anticipated that if Ricardo couldn't see his beauty in the mirror, he wouldn't be so infatuated with himself.

Sadly, that did not work either, because Ricardo could still see himself, so to speak, by running his hands over his body. The result was simply Ricardo, getting turned on and mumbling self-love affirmations like 'Mmmm. Oooh-yeah baby, I am so hot. I wanna make love to me until the end of time. Mmmm. Yeah. Hit me, baby.'

This wasn't exactly the tweak the Lab Coats had been aiming for.

Finally, the Lab Coats had a breakthrough. They opted to make a series of newer versions of Ricardo, which were designed to fix the self-love bug. The idea was that the preceding Ricardo would always admire the newest Ricardo so that the current Ricardo, would always feel inadequate and less hot than the previous one. Except, unfortunately, the Lab Coats' scheme didn't go quite to plan.

Instead, each new Ricardo thought he was the hottest thing on earth. And no matter how many Ricardo's or times the Lab Coats tried to tweak the programming, there seemed to be no way of getting a Ricardo to feel inferior to the previous one. The cause

of all of this remained a mystery but in the one billion and one prototypes the Lab Coats produced, each Ricardo was more and more in love with himself.

Despite having invested trillions of euros in gender equality corrective actions, The Regime had to concede that it was genetically impossible to produce a Ricardo without an ever-growing self-love, unless, of course, one manipulated the gender. But that would defeat the purpose of Ricardo, in the first place. This is how The Regime came to inadvertently inflict humanity with a billion and one Ricardo's who all suffer from an ever-growing self-infatuation. Ever since, The Regime's 'gender affirmative action' has come to mean ensuring that each Ricardo has food, a roof over his head, and plenty of privacy. The Regime has no option but to consider Ricardo's' self-infatuation a full-time job and pay accordingly.

Today, all the Ricardo's of the world spend most of their time with one hand firmly on their bulging packages, winking to their reflection in the ceiling mirror, saying self-affirmations like, "Hey there, hot stuff, hit me one more time!", before seeing the stars (again) and falling into a sweet slumber with a sheepish grin on their face.

What You Agree To

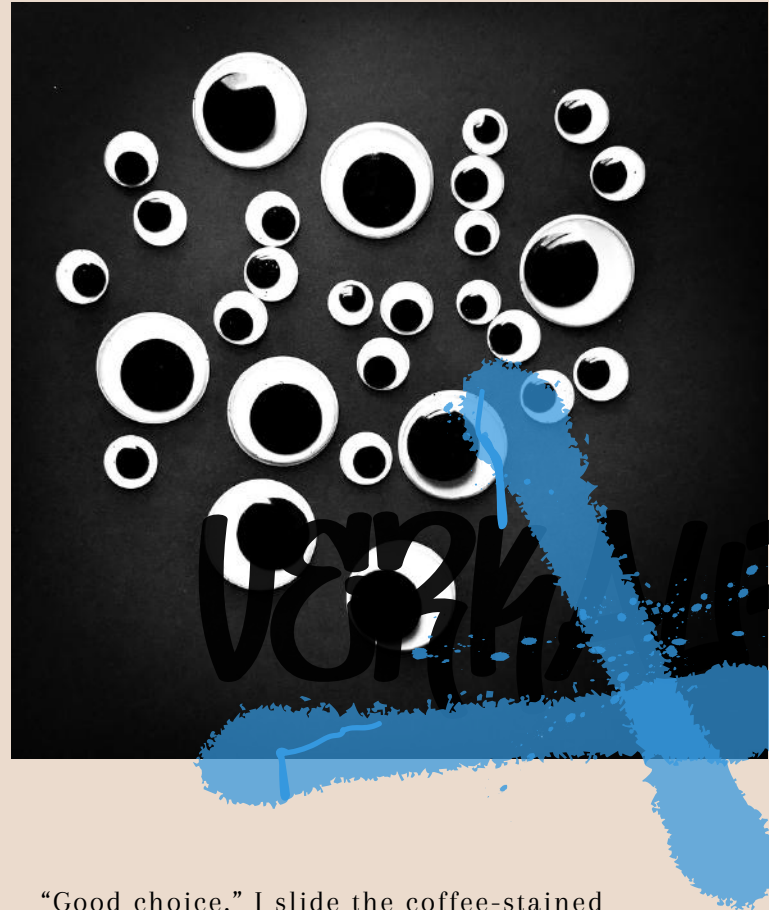
by Leslie Teel

The young woman...who can't be more than twenty...chooses the name Lucy. I can't help thinking of the TV show I used to watch with my grandmother, about the zany housewife who does all these hilarious things but is always getting yelled at by her husband. Punished. Controlled.

This Lucy, frowning down at the brochures fanned out on my desk, is wearing a pink Halloween wig that she keeps scratching. My scalp itches sympathetically. I got tired of dying my mousy gray so I bought this blonde-streaked bob and I hate it, but no one has gray hair anymore. Or normal eyebrows. Or wrinkles. It's exhausting, but I suppose externalities help keep us alive.

Lucy pokes one of the brochures. "Buccal fat removal, I guess." She slumps in her chair, crosses her arms and legs, and glares at me. I get it. I'm the one sitting here making her decide on a procedure she doesn't want or need. Unfortunately, that's part of the bargain. Some women take it in stride, even using it as a mini vacation. But not everybody lives up to their end. Just recently this woman signed up for weight loss, stayed the required three weeks, and left without dropping a pound. It looks bad for me and my colleagues. The state is always suspicious, ready to pounce on a reason to shut the whole thing down.

At least Lucy's chosen one of the less intrusive procedures...no stay required, and the follow-up visit won't trigger unwanted attention from authorities.



"Good choice." I slide the coffee-stained laminated statement across the desk. It's on a chain, one of two copies. It can only be read in my office. Phones are confiscated in the waiting room so no one can take a picture.

"So, I need you to understand what you're agreeing to."

Lucy chews her bottom lip. "Can't you just, you know. Without..."

“If you're having second thoughts it's OK. But if you have one procedure...” I tilt my head toward Lucy and raise an eyebrow; a foolish gesture but I can't exactly say it out loud. “...you need to have the other. For our records.”

How quickly it disappeared, the concept of women's health that isn't about childbirth, weight loss, or beauty treatment. The latter two, at least, give us our precarious front.

“Afterwards, can you give me...” Lucy mouths the words “the Pill.”

I shake my head. Pills are way too easily discovered.

“This is bullshit,” she mumbles.

“Yes, it is.”

The thing about that other Lucy is she had the black-and-white apartment, the wacky neighbors, and the husband who kept her out of his show. But in reality, it was all her. Her show. Her iconic lipstick and red hair. Her millions of fans. Her name. Her TV empire.

We have to pretend and lie and sneak around but they can't keep us out of the show forever. We're fighting, even if the fight is now hidden behind glossy before and after ads for body sculpting.

“But here.” I slide another pamphlet over to Lucy.

“You might want to consider this.”

“Collagen?”

I do that head tilt thing again. “We provide injections.”



Vortex of Satisfaction

by Chris Wardle

Come, dance...

In menstrual colours,
unsubservient to men,
dance for your own joy.

Escape, liberate,
transubstantiate,
but wait...

What's the point, if you...

Enjoy your subservience.
Enjoy your married-chattel status.
Enjoy your incarceration
within the strong walls
of weak men's fragile insecurity?

Why dance, if you...

Don't question.
Accept your fate.
Dominate. Culturally indoctrinate
your daughters,
your granddaughters
Perpetuate the myth of male superiority.

The myths of inadequacy
of singularity,
of sisterhood,
spinsterhood,
widowhood.

Hoodwinked,
your cognitive dissonance
a disservice to your womanhood,
and our common humanity.

In menstrual colours,
unsubservient to men,
dance for your own joy.



(for SK and EA)

On Staying Single

by Maria Gelabert Artiles

It's always been this way: the intrinsic feeling that a love relationship is the thing that defines my life.

Not intrinsic. Learned. From a very young age of girlness. Crushes. Jealousy. Dances. Flirting. Love notes. Making out in a car. All these normal aspects of growing up were overshadowed by the life Requirement to be married.

Not Requirement. But strong, cultural, conventional, something-is-wrong-otherwise construct. Things not stated, but emphatically implied, the ever-present gorilla in the corner of the room. The unnecessary expectations are mixed with the earnest desire for mutual love and commitment, the unreasonable morphed with the reasonable into one great ball of relationship delusion. This gorilla doesn't directly communicate; rather, it has a sorcerer's wand and knows only a single spell: Requirement.

I've given up trying to release it completely. My latest goal has been to make it smaller – convert the Requirement Gorilla sorcerer to a mini version that sits on my shoulder.

The gorilla doesn't need to be tiny. I'll settle for mid-size, occasionally bouncing on my head, exclaiming, "Ooo, ooo, aah, aah...(Requirement), ooo, aah!" – then scratching something. I can lovingly shake my head, "Oh, you again, you fun, curious creature!"

I did what was Required, and upon the disaster of divorce, I plunged into a period of single motherhood, self-help books, therapy, exercise and yoga. Through the

20-plus years after separation, many generous people have acted as stable pillars, helping me establish my foundation in emotional independence.

But, ultimately, the most important person had to be me, extending generosity and care towards myself. After one additional partnership and several budding relationships, I've stayed unmarried. Because when Requirement screams that something is wrong, inside, there is another voice, quietly asserting that nothing is wrong.

That voice stems from Spirit – the smaller gorilla. Intentions are in check. I am taking care of myself and the people and tasks I am responsible for right now, the things I have chosen for my life. Chosen. The Requirement is Optional.

But back to my gorilla. An irrational concern stems from the *possibility* that I might never partner again. This drives the Requirement Gorilla into deep internal distress.

But Spirit Gorilla sets the condition: any future partner must be in a space where desires, behavior and communication are clear. Dating is no longer a chess game where each person moves carefully, circling what they hope to gain and exactly how much to reveal. Dating is no longer about the exhaustive upkeep of walls with moats, where hearts remain closed until the end of dating *détente* – when bridges over the moats are finally extended and the "real reveals" are safe to explore.

I am not talking about rushing intimacy, invading basic privacy, or not letting depth



grow at a comfortably slow rate. I'm referring to the generosity of heart-space, and the reveal of exactly *who we are* from the very beginning: fundamental personalities not changing as a relationship progresses. I can no longer be with people who don't know how to be themselves around strangers.

Yoga practice and training have enabled a major shift of consciousness. There is no more role-playing, hiding myself to please others, subconscious behavior designed to feed the original Requirement or even the pretense of a moat for basic defense. This way is refreshingly simple, an investment in the future – saving energy and time, promoting flexibility and responsibility, and preserving peace.

In my yoga practice, I have always found one-leg balance poses challenging, such as Tree, Warrior III and King Dancer. During balance poses, I've learned to accept the possibility that I will lose my balance. I tell myself, "I might fall...I might not...I might fall...I might not..." I'm more likely to stay balanced if I release the need for a specific outcome.

As it is with lifelong singleness; it could go either way. Requirement Gorilla still has trouble with this concept. She spends time hemming and hawing, grumpy as ever. But when she's not too hot and bothered, she sits. She eats. She serves others and receives support from her community. And the softer voice of Spirit Gorilla states clearly that all possibilities are okay. Overwhelming evidence supports the claim that the Requirements are nothing more than words that carry very little weight on the scale of happiness.

The amount of weight is inversely proportional to the aggression of the gorilla. The Requirement is constructed rigidity that grows and growls, wails and whines. The Spirit is deconstructed flexibility that evolves and enriches, reasons and rhymes.

Spirit continues on a path of growth, while Requirement is loosening its hold, coming to realize who she really is: an option. Requirement and Spirit are both me. They know about each other. They're getting to know each other, discovering the timeless intrinsics of self.



Pisces

by Michele Anne-Marie Dickson

Michele Dickson, a disabled artist, writer, and poet, uses her creativity to overcome chronic illness, mental illness, and past trauma. Despite being bedridden, she creates art and advocates for healing. A published author and grant recipient, Michele finds inspiration in her experiences and her journey to walk again.

Girl

by Pat Saunders

hello it's nice to meet you let me introduce myself i am she/her
i am wo-man/fe-male i am mother, daughter, aunty, gran i am
that ugly dyke that fat cow the old bag, blonde bird, bimbo bitch
the lying cheating whore i'm the better half, ball 'n' chain, she-
who-must-be-obeyed, wearer of the pants. i'm that weird chick,
strange sheila, cheeky slapper, dirty slag, dumb slut trouble with
a capital 'T' i am, make no mistake a short-arse chick in a big-
bloke's world i'm your worst nightmare i'm the pretty face, nice
caboose, great rack i'm totally fuck-able (that's what they all
say) pinch my butt, grab my tits, jab my cunt like jelly i'll make
those noises you love to hear trapped beneath you, yelping. i am
the bruised arm torn skin, split lip, black eye i am the face that
launched a thousand blows beaten bloody, lids closed i'm legs to
here walking to there as far from you as they'll take me i am after
all just a girl



I Refuse to Rust

by Blair Martin

I refuse to breath in the corrosive
oxygen of a stagnate identity.
I refuse a fixed address for my gender.
Do not send letters unless they're to them.

I refuse to move according to the melody
of pastel wallpaper, to sing notes
of forgotten stereotypes that seep
like cigarette smoke into the carpeting.

I refuse to allow natal well water, tinged with
the same patterned dresses, pastimes
& crushes, to flow until a circle of self-censorship
clings to the bottom of the bathroom sink.

I refuse to die looking out at the pine
tree in the backyard where the male
& female cardinal, adorned in their highly
distinct feathers, nest from May to September.

So, I rent windowless studios. I wander the streets till dawn
& singe my fingers burning the relics of my indoctrination.
I dream of open prairies, deep forests, the Boxcar children
& I hope we who refuse find each other again, far away from home.





Handwritten pink text, possibly a date or time, including "FEB 13" and "11:11".

Large, stylized pink handwritten text, possibly a name or signature.

Currere Cursus

by Kristal Eckhardt

Walking through an antique store, I came across a section devoted entirely to old photos. Some were in ornate, gilded frames made of wood and plaster. Others were in desktop or easel frames; the size and shape of the photos were as varied as the frames. Round, square, oblong, rectangular; the standard sizes of eight by ten and five by seven were reserved for the more “recent” photos – those taken within the last seventy-plus years.

But what grabbed my attention were the bins and boxes full of loose photos. They were grouped in their various holders by size – small – wallet-size, notecard size, and the like. Next was medium – five by seven to eight by ten and then large – eleven by fourteen and larger. My eye was drawn immediately to a photograph glued on thick cardboard and an odd size – somewhere between five by seven and eight by ten. It depicted a group of eight young women in long-sleeved blouses tucked into almost skirt-like culottes. Dark hose and high-topped leather shoes with no heel. The hair on each girl was long and pulled back into a large, dark bow. They are standing outside in a fenced field with rows of trees on the left – maybe an orchard? The date written on the back, in that gorgeous script that belongs only to bygone eras, read: 100 Yard Dash - Field Day - May 28, 1901. No names. No place noted.

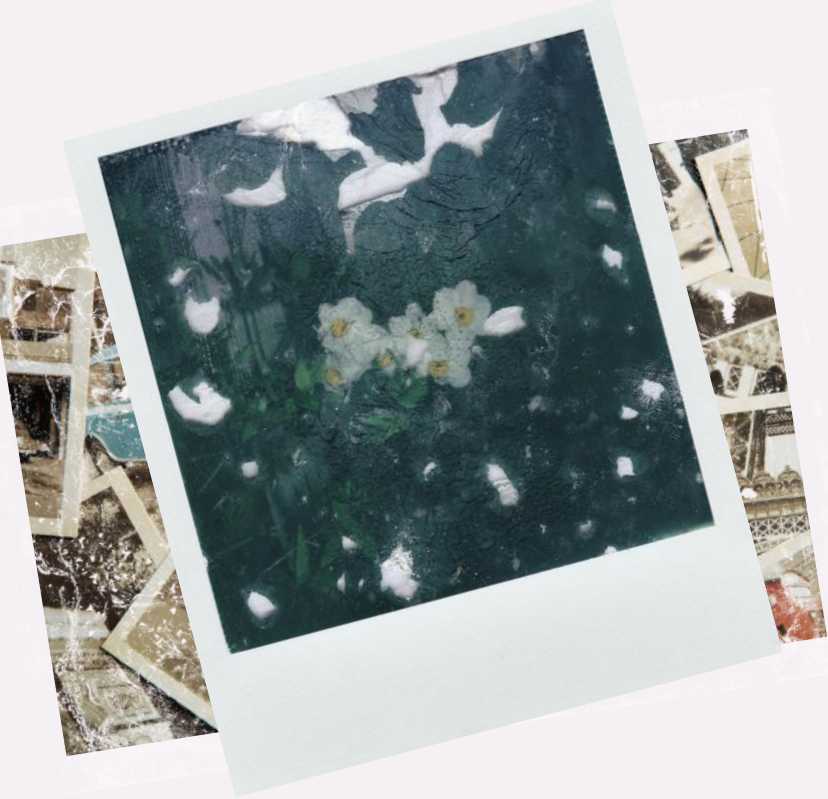
One of the girls was smiling demurely and holding an ornate cup.

The others behind her were showing various facial expressions – everything from the same shy smile as the cup holder to a rather vapid stare.

Every time I see these photos, the same feeling comes over me. A feeling of enigmatic precariousness. Who were these people? What is the story I’m seeing in this millisecond of a life?

And the biggest question of all – Why would anyone just dump photos off at an antique store? Are there no family connections to any of the girls in this photo? I started trying to fill in the blanks with speculations. The girl holding the cup became my focal point. I decided this photo was kept, at least for a while, by her family. She won the cup in the 100-yard dash. She was a champion in this race, on this day in May. She raced on a hot day, in an outfit that covered almost every part of her body except her head and her hands. She ran. She ran in a time when women didn’t do such “masculine” things. And she ran fast. Faster than everyone else. At least, everyone else in that photo. I kept staring at the photo. What’s her name? How old is she? How did her family react to the win? To the race? To her desire to run. As the questions arose, I answered them:

Her name is Pauline Bartlett. Why? Because I like how it sounds. ‘Pauline’ has that turn-of-the-twentieth-century feel. And Bartlett? I’m not sure. Her face is a bit pear-shaped, so maybe the name of a pear popped into my head, unduly influenced by the rows of trees I assumed to be an orchard. I pegged her age between 17 and 20. Though the photo is in black and white, her hair appears a light brown or dirty blonde. The afternoon sun shines through and offsets a texture of thick, wavy curls. Her eyes are light – either hazel or blue.



I am aware that I have placed Pauline in the present tense. My reasonable self knew that this young woman grew old and died long ago, probably in the late 1950s or early 1960s, going by most actuarial tables. But in this photograph – she lives. She ran a race and won.

The population of the United States in 1901 was approximately seventy-seven million. Pauline is one part of seventy-seven million. She is still almost twenty years away from the right to vote, over thirty years away from any kind of legislation for equal pay, and long after her childbearing years have passed, would Pauline see legal methods to control how many, if any, children she would have.

I picture her on the day of the race. I want her parents and siblings to go to cheer her on. How many times has she run down the road to meet her father's carriage? Her younger brothers, struggling to keep up, yelling – "Slow down, Leeny!" I have a feeling at least one member of the household was opposed to her entering the race. I picture a stern aunt – her mother's older sister by ten years. Aunt Marguerite, known to the family as "Auntie." Auntie never married nor ventured more than twenty miles from where she was born.

Pauline is a constant source of irritation to Auntie who feels she is "wild" and "unladylike" and never misses an opportunity to tell Pauline and her sister just what happens to wild and unladylike girls.

But Pauline's mother, Bess, who, while her husband was away at the Spanish-American war, had to handle the household and the farm, always encouraging Pauline. "The Ancient Romans had a saying, Leeny", she whispered out of Auntie's earshot, "Currere cursus. Run the course."

There were many such mothers at the turn of the twentieth century. Mothers who saw the country changing, driving forward, running its race to fulfill an optimistic destiny. Those who pushed their daughters into making changes for which they toiled to clear the path and lay the gravel for the road ahead.

What happened to Pauline after that day and that race? That's another story. This is about a photo in an antique shop. I bought the photo. People ask who it is all the time. I say, "That's Pauline Bartlett. She won a very important race." "Really?", they say, "Which one?"

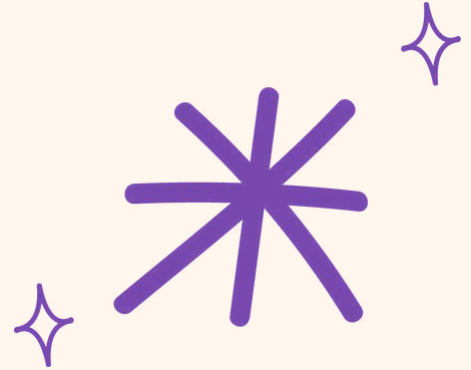
My answer is always the same – "The one we're still running."

Currere cursus, sisters.

School in the South

by Deborah Showers Kelly

They say you are not smart enough for the sixth grade.
Just moved from the North.
From the city to the country.
Mama tells them, "Try her first, if she cannot do the
work, then put her back."
I have a secret...
School in the South
Does not know that I have done sixth grade work
last year in the North.
I am smart enough.
Usually, I love school, but Not, NOT
in the state of Crooked letter, Humpback I.
Everyday, the teacher would call on me to answer first.
Wanting to show the whole class that I was not smart enough.
I am a Northerner, a city black,
Therefore, I must be behind.
Didn't she see my school records?
Gifted classes.
Assumed. Wrong.
I would give the answer.
Reluctantly, the teacher says correct in a surprising tone
Simply, I smile.
Assumed.
WRONG!
I am smart enough.
Oh, how dare I do not respond with, "Yes, ma'am and No, ma'am."
My responses are Yes and No only!
School in the South
Continues to think I am dumb or slow.
I have a secret.
Mama says, "can't is not in your vocabulary."
With strength and fortitude,
And a head held high,
I silently demonstrate that I am more than smart enough.
School in the South
I am more.
I am Black and Brilliant!



Important Arguments

by Victoria Garton

Important arguments are with yourself,
or if you're religious God.
Little comes from engaging
with razor-sharp voices or tiptoeing
through shards of broken promises.

For storms within, read Job,
clearly the Bible's best man.
Better to sit in ashes and demand
to know why, than conform
to the blue sky of easy answers.

A woman can grow old
arguing with herself or God
and celebrating the devil in her
that speaks up, speaks out,
rebels, demands to know why.



If Only Just to Be Forever Free

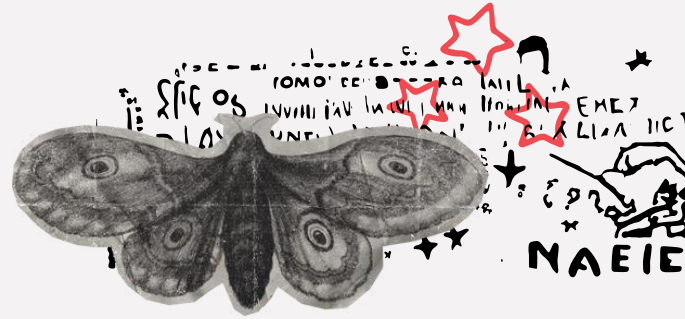
by H.L. Dowless

There once was a little whirling girly with a pretty pearly grin. She swished so sleekly sweet when she walked, that many swore she could never sin. But one warm day when the wind puffed enough to make a great snake spin a sightly spin, that little girl decided to up and disappear for quite a long while, only to return again wearing her darling little pearly grin.

“Well now, dear Allison, shame on you!” cried all the townspeople throughout the little village. “Oh, do tell us all now, just where is it the likes of you have been? We are so sure you have been acting like a crazy ole-doped-up clown throughout our happy little town again. Oh dear! Oh my! Oh, how this matter is such a terrible messed up sin!”

“Well now, oh my dear ones,” replied little Allison, “I’ve been around the whole wide world and back again! I hopped a great big blue bird and dared to fly with all the angels on high. I sat down for soup with ole King Cole, which is worth far more to me than anything money might buy. Why, I even danced until I got all grimy and dirty in captivating Oberstein, with a jolly ole elf playing the hurdy-gurdy!”

“Oh yes, and I shall never tell a lie! Well, I have traveled to beautiful Spain and played inside all her massive mountainside crystal castles, I can’t complain! Well now, for gracious sake, I’ve even ridden inside her enchanted choo-choo trains! What? Hear me, now, when I say, if I am not standing here telling all of you the honest blessed truth, then right now I shall snag my front tooth, and probably go totally insane!



“Yes! I even sailed a sail across that broad deep blue sea, only to come back here again, and with absolutely no welcoming cheers, to this boring little waste-town called Stenzil-land!” screamed Allison in streaming tears.

“Oh, my dear!” gasped all the townspeople, as they grasped their searing ears “Me oh my!” how they did cry. “Now just please tell us why, oh why, that it is always you who expects us to believe in these crazy munked-up lies? What is it that is wrong with the likes of you? Can you not ever simply tell us all the truth? Do you really think we are all *so bumble-dumb* because we have all lost our youth? Oh please now, thy integrity ye dare not forsooth!”

“Oh no, no, no!” cried little Allison, that gorgeous little girl, with a pretty-pearly grin. “How it is that I can never tell a lie, see? I have been around the whole wide world, and back again! For me to tell anything else, would be such a terrible munked-up sin. I say, it is all true! It is all so true! I shall yell out these infernal words until my face turns all blue! How else may I explain this honest fact to the likes of dark hounds like you?”

“Well then, go quickly into your room over there inside the old stick house. Now, you can take this straw broom, and get to work, and cheerfully shut up your deceiving little mouth, and be ever as quiet as a scampering mouse. Just get to work now, and work until your skin turns all blue. Yes, that is what you can bloody do, so here!”

And the townspeople shoved before her the tightly tied yellow straw broom.

So, they bound her in chains, dragging her mercilessly toward that old stick house, locking her up tightly inside that cold dark musty room. She continued to smile, even though they tried to kill her precious little heart with such deep despairing gloom; by locking her up so tightly inside that smelly old room, with only a single silly mouse and a yellow straw broom!

***"I say, it is all true! It is all so true!
I shall yell out these infernal words
until my face turns all blue!"***

Poor little Allison cried, and she cried, as those townspeople so cruelly shoved her aside upon that disgustingly filthy dusty floor. That heavy wooden door seemed to rumble as they heaved it shut across the entrance, causing her cute little flaxen head to roar and bumble. Her chains only rattled when she moved. Since she was now all alone, there was no one present unto whom to tattle, to tell the world outside of her horrible miserable circumstance.

All 'tis so sad, now, ever so sad, that the only crime she was ever guilty of, was that of spending so much precious time in a dying town among such envious, spiteful, narrow-minded people, who were such a dreadful bore; yes, I say, only this sole crime, and absolutely nothing more!

Through her streaming tears, she vaguely saw the mouse scampering about as she continued to cry, running to and fro through that old stick house. Then once again she heard a gentle tapping, and her now tearful heart suddenly felt very happy. There was simply no real explanation as to why!

“What is your name?” suddenly asked a cheerful voice on her right side. “My name is Milton Mouse,” announced the happy little voice. “I am the owner of this house.”

“Oh, you, the owner of this house?” asked Allison, while straining through her tears again, sniffing them down as she spoke. “Well, my name is Allison,” she replied with another sniffle.

“Now cheer up, ‘cause I have some good news,” declared in joy, the owner of the stick house. “I can get you out o’ here, just as quickly as a luscious lick, a hard sniff, and a whiff! So please, do tell me, if you were free again to choose, wouldn’t that get rid of those awful infernal blues?”

“Oh me, oh my!” the gasping little girl replied, “Oh, indeed so, and may God bless! Why, I have been so sick inside here, outside is sure where it is I am most free. It is there where I wish to abide, so far away from this town forever more, where all the people behave like such silly dumb clowns! The truth can never hide. All do know this now, we live in a mighty pathetic place that is such a depressing, despairing, persecuting, envious, mucked-up bore!”

“So there,” with a snap the mouse said, “just watch me!” then he raced through the locks like a latch key, causing those old iron clips to snip and snap, and finally lose their tight grip. The antique chains did clink and clatter as they so reluctantly fell. Then that poor little girl suddenly felt well again, for behold unto all, it was now she who was forever free! Most surely, she had the energy to race like a silver zip.

The mouse then stood cleverly by saying, “Just watch me again,” He then gazed out toward the densely wooded thistle, now placing two fingers upon his lips, making a

shrill whistle. Out from the thistle now did run a thousand mice, not townsmen. The thousand mice were really nice, much nicer than all the women or men of Stenzil-land had ever been to poor little Allison.

Upon that great wooden door, they did swarm and chew, until the wood was all tattered, in pieces, and unglued. From its rusting hinges, it finally fell, even though all those townsmen had put it together very well. Into the sunny outside now did little Allison run, never to be bound in locks or chains ever again.

So deep into that misty wilderness did that little girl run, that she could romp and play with jolly elves, bouncing rabbits, and racing deer just for fun. She swam across the deepest river with prancing leaping fish; for in her cute little imaginative mind, she held to only one sole motivating wish, and that was simply to be forever free.

One cold, dreary, misty day, the townspeople solemnly arrived at that old stick house, sitting ever so quiet and still, with only one mouse. They were all so greatly shocked to hear from poor little Allison, not a single weeping peep. For when they peered deep inside, they found where now she did truly abide forever free, as she lay all frozen perfectly still in a deep eternal sleep.

So now an endless perpetual sadness settled upon that town of such dark, terrible, most dishonorable sin-like somber mist; for the people had forever lost little Allison, who was to never ever return there again. Now the timeless judge determined them all to be guilty as the most horrible of men, and as to the day of prosperity and peace for them, why, they would never know of, let alone when. So now it was that they were forever doomed to only begin again, indeed repeatedly making the same old foolish mistakes for a perpetual infinity. Then finally the holy cherub in heaven did boldly say,

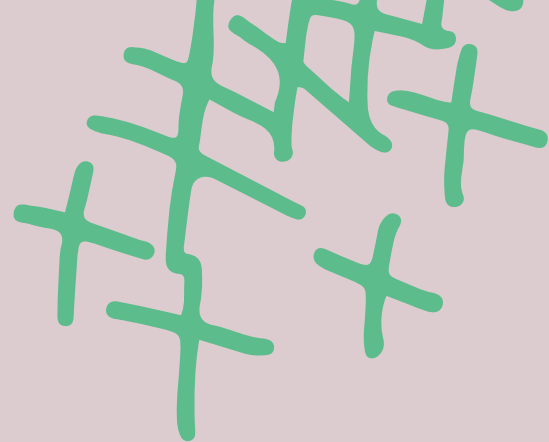
“Let the eternal flame be the fate for all those narrow-minded, rude, spiteful people of Stenzil-land, who were determined to be such a spiteful sore.”

In finality, the horrible penalty was so for all infinity and more. They were doomed indefinitely for the sins of lashing out upon innocents, and for being unto all others such a dreadful, mind-numbing bore.



Ruffian

by Karen Walker



For the pastry of her home pies:

- 500 g bread flour. Bread flour because it's strong. Mrs. Arthur Lockhart—Clementine—marches, carries The Vote for Women banner for miles in corset and petticoats.
- 120 g lard or shortening. A politician calls out, *Ladies, please disperse. Return to your husbands.*
- 125 g butter. A smooth politician. *You are the flower of England.*
- 1 tsp salt.
- 175 ml cold water. *Do not risk your health in this rain. Your skirts and lovely curls are sopping. Do not risk incarceration. Disperse at once.*

For the home pie's filling:

- good quality beef skirt, cubed. Astride Clementine are square-jawed prison matrons in dusty skirts.
- 4 big potatoes, peeled and diced. Hands holding Clementine's arms, her head. Dirty fingers in her mouth.
- 2 turnips, peeled and diced.
- 1 onion, minced. A young nurse smelling of sweat.
- 1 egg. The nurse cries when one of the matrons shakes Clementine, yells, *Answer the doctor. Will you cease this insane protest? Will you eat?*

Method:

1. Add salt to flour in a large mixing bowl. The doctor pouring a gruel mix down a rubber hose.
2. Work lard and butter into flour until it resembles breadcrumbs. The young nurse, swallowing hard, rubs Clementine's throat.
3. Add water and knead until pastry becomes elastic. A necessary step to fortify the pastry and fellow sister-soldiers.
4. Cover. Leave to rest for 3 hours. The matrons release, follow the doctor out of the cell. The nurse pulls a rough blanket over Clementine.
5. Roll out pastry. Cut into circles the size of a small plate. Clementine's mother made dainty home pies.
6. Layer potatoes, turnips, and beef on top of pastry circles. Salt and pepper to taste. To your husband's taste, of course. A wife serves. She does not begin eating first. Avoid, Clementine's mother taught, topics of worldly consequence at the dinner table.
7. Bring edges of pastry together and crimp. Clementine clutches the sides of the cot, fingers cramping. She coughs up gruel.
8. Beat egg into milk and brush pastry with mixture. A sharp slap on Clementine's cheek. Her glazed eyes open. *Mr. Lockhart has come for you.*
9. Bake in moderate oven for an hour until golden. *I am a progressive man, you must agree. A good husband. His strong arm is around her waist, her broken feather hat in his hand. Women should vote. But, my dear, jailed like a ruffian? Demanding to be declared a political prisoner and, if not, to starve? Your daughter and I hunger at home.*

Perch

by Laurie Didesch

A tiny nest of eggs sways in a tree
that overhangs a busy street. Twigs,
feathers and cloth: wind or rain could
sweep the tiny pieces away. If a bird
can build and sing and hunt and fly
and mate from here, then what can't I
do from my own perch in this world?





Jumping Girl
by David Boyle



Bear in Forest

by David Boyle



Boudicea
by David Boyle

This Edition's Featured Artist:

David Boyle

Art has the power to teach us to view things from a different perspective. To challenge our perceptions, beliefs, and social mores which force us to question the reality we live in. We selected Boyle's body of work as we saw each of these pieces and thought about their meaning. We are not going to interpret our opinions on any of our contributor's work, but we do want to encourage you to not merely look at the art, but rather view it and find the story behind the image. There are no right or wrong answers. There is, however, a message hidden in plain sight in all art which provides us with a reflection of the values we hold, and the person we truly

are. The feelings or thoughts that arise within us when seeing an image, offer a glimpse into the fabrics which not only determine who we are as individuals, but that which make up society as a whole.

We felt that each of the pieces we selected from Boyle's submissions, as well as all the work we selected for this year's publication, reflect a story of our current society, where rebellion is more than a trend, it's a movement. And conformity is neither negative nor positive, it's an opportunity to determine what we are willing to accept and what we are not.



David Boyle has painted many oil paintings since the mid-nineties which have sold well in Wellington, Palmerston Nth and has sold sculptures from Hastings City gallery New Zealand. David has t-shirts featuring his works and makes sculptures from found objects. David's art has been seen in online magazines and paperbacks such as Last leaves, The Woodward Review, Five on the Fifth, Radar Poetry, Mollusk Lit., Thimble Lit., Creative Mag, Club Plum, Thimble Mag, Zoetic Press, Two Hawk Quarterlys, Poetry Pacific and Backwards Trajectory with more coming.

Website is boyleswellington.blogtown.co.nz

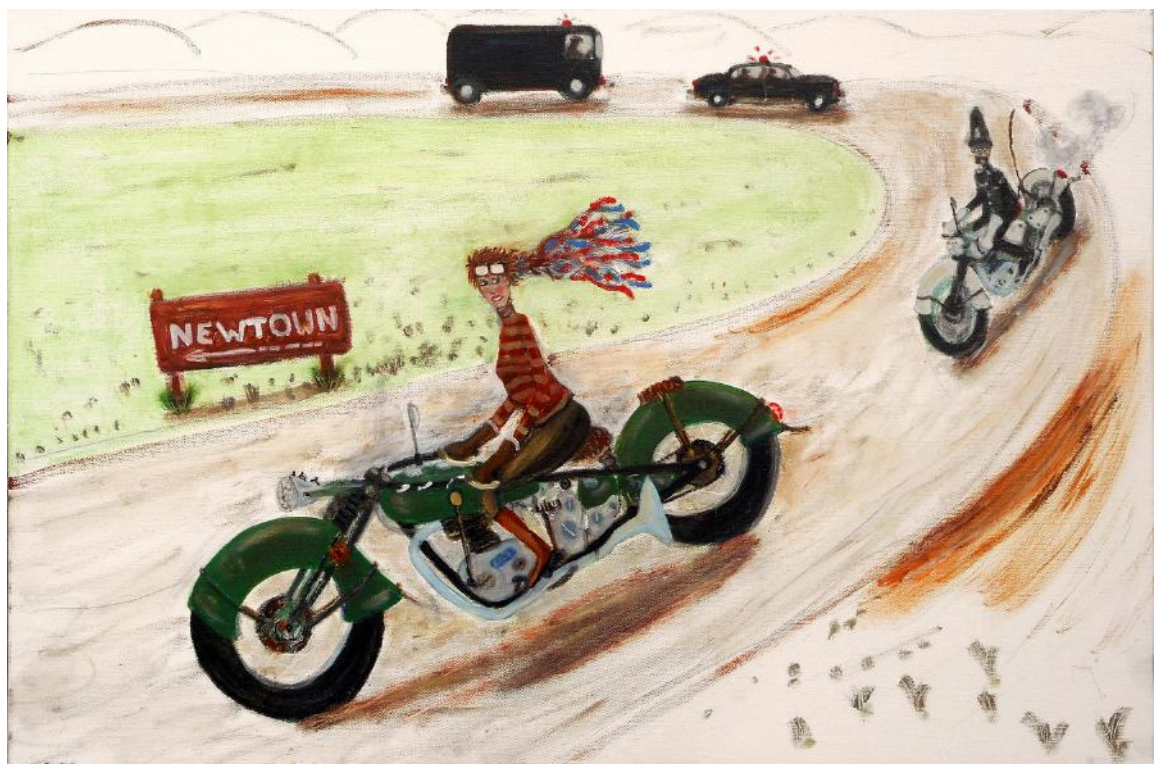


Nuns and Wickerman

by David Boyle



Convicts
by David Boyle



Kirsty
by David Boyle



Desert Patrol

by David Boyle

rebellion

/rɪˈbɛljən/

noun

noun: rebellion; *plural noun:* rebellions

1) an act of armed resistance to an established government or leader; violent action organised by a group of people who are trying to change the political system in their country

Similar: uprising; revolt; insurrection; mutiny; revolution; insurgence; insurgency; rising; rioting; riot; civil disobedience; civil disorder; unrest; anarchy; fighting in the streets; coup; regime change; coup d'état; jacquerie; putsch

2) the action or process of resisting authority, control, or convention; action against those in authority, against the rules, or against normal and accepted ways of behaving.

Similar: defiance; disobedience; rebelliousness; insubordination; mutinousness; subversion; subversiveness; resistance; dissent; nonconformity; heresy; apostasy; schism; recusancy; contumacy

Opposite: obedience



Blendings

by Joseph Kenyon

I waited in the shadows of the stairway to the fourth floor. Carmike - Mr. Carmichael is what I'm supposed to call him - came out of his third-floor apartment with his folding chair and one of those really old cloth bags that kids used to deliver newspapers with back in the day. The bag had something bulky inside, and the orange strap lay over his shoulder crosswise along his chest. Carmike started his wheezy way down the stairs, and I went along after him. Quiet. Like the girly-ghost all the tenants said I was.

The first one to meet Carmike was Mr. Delp, blocking the hallway with his huge upper body. Mr. Delp was all smooth-muscle and flow versus Carmike, who was wrinkled, shuffley and round. But Carmike just pointed to his dogwood-white hair and said, "We both know you ain't going to bloody this, so just move on out of the way there, young man." Mr. Delp called him an old fool. But he moved.

Paul the Scrapper, on the second floor, where Mama Lu and I lived too, was next. He let Carmike have it from the moment the old man clumped down the first step till he set down his folding chair and took a rest. Curses, swearing, insults, all the things whites say to blacks and each other, poured from Paul the Scrapper all over Carmike, who puffed them aside with his heavy breathing. When Carmike finally got to taking something like a normal breath, he looked Paul straight in the eye. "What're you so riled up for, son? You don't even like black people."

"I don't like black people. I don't like white people neither. But you," Paul nearly put his square finger on Carmike's nose, "you, I know. So, stay the fuck inside this

building!" Carmike hefted his chair. "Unless you got a hunk of iron to make me do otherwise, I'll be getting on."

More insults and swearing about how Paul wasn't going to scratch an itch to help Carmike if the old man went out into that street. Mama Lu was in our doorway, but she said nothing, and Carmike nodded to her as he kept walking. I paused on the steps. Mama Lu knew I was there, but knowing and being seen were two different things. I waited to see if she stepped out and gave me a stare. Mama Lu didn't talk much, but her stares said plenty. Unless I was of a mind not to listen, I usually interpreted her stares rightly enough. I'd heard everyone talking about today all week, and I'd told Mama Lu last night as she was sending me to bed that I wanted to watch.

She said I wasn't to leave the building, and gave me her new stare, the one I started to get just before my twelfth birthday. It was a stare for making an adult decision. Adults have three choices, she explained: "Be" (a definitive yes or no), "Maybe" (needing time to think about it more), or "Baby" (wanting someone else to decide).

Mama Lu had been giving me that stare more and more, and I knew my choice. But if she sent the "no" stare my way, I knew I'd let it go by like I missed it. Because I really wanted to watch.

At this moment, Mama Lu's stare was following Carmike as he started down the landing to the first floor. That look I got right; she wanted Carmike to stay put. But even if she had the right, Carmike wasn't looking back at her. When he disappeared,



*"He and I didn't have to wait long.
The sound of the parade could be
heard coming from the east to our
right. "*

Mama Lu took a deep breath and gave my position the side eye, just enough to let me know she knew I was there but without any message. She looked both sad and nervous as she went back into our apartment and closed the door with a soft snap.

I hurried after Carmike. Two down. But the third was the worst, and they were waiting on the ground floor: Miss K'wanda and Miss Julie.

Unlike Mr. Delp and Paul the Scrapper, the pair of them talked in low voices with Carmike listening, then responding. The ladies talked, then Carmike talked, like I see the referees do in football games, all close in, urgent, and private. For the first time, Carmike looked thrown, then angry, then just sad. But when it was done, he picked up his chair and tottered toward the door.

"We told him, we did," Miss Julia said, the first words I could make out. And I wondered why she said them since Miss K'wanda had been in on the conversation. "We told him everything. No sense and no reason to hold back. And he heard. He heard every word. But a man like that, set in his own way as men are, can't be reasoned with. And can't be let to do stupid things alone."

Miss K'wanda responded but in her private voice, and Miss Julie replied again

the same way. I started to fidget on the stairs but stopped myself so they wouldn't hear me and suss me out. Miss Julie turned and started for the door, but Miss K'wanda took her arm. More whispers, then Miss K'wanda said in a tone that was loud for her but conversational for anyone else, "I can't let you. I can't bear it. Do this for me, please?"

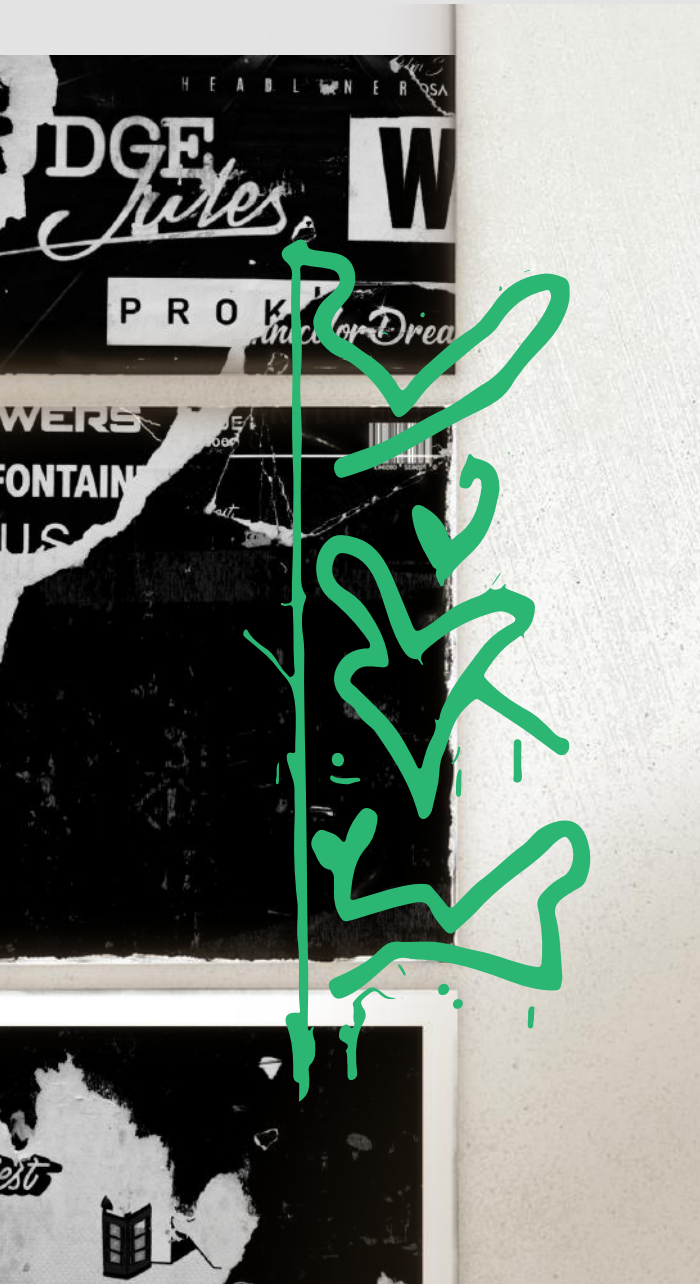
Miss Julie didn't react for a few long seconds, and if I hadn't been staring at her through the gap in the railing posts, I'd have missed the abbreviated nod behind her closed eyes. She let out a hard sigh, but she took Miss K'wanda's hand and let Miss K'wanda lead her back into their apartment.

I decided on my watching place last night before falling asleep; I'd land back of the bushes beside the front door. There was a gap between those bushes and the cement steps where I could sit and video the goings-on or run inside if it came to that. With all the adults cleared out of the way, I scurried down the hall, out the front door, and jumped behind the bushes under the window of the vacant apartment where Mr. Mbuti had died a month ago.

Carmike was unfolding his chair under the big elm tree that lined up with the space between the Victorian house that gave us our apartments and the saggy duplex next door. He took off the bag to sit down, putting it carefully beside his chair, one of those plaid, all-weather fabrics with a hollow tube frame and wooden armrests. But the bottom rungs were curved, and Carmike began rocking.

He and I didn't have to wait long. The sound of the parade could be heard coming from the east to our right. Carmike kept rocking, and I tried peering through the branches to see the group. I saw the flags first. The American flag was upside down, and Confederate flags were between them like they were intertwined. I counted three





of each, and they were being carried down the center of the boulevard. The group was singing. And I saw police walking between the group and the sidewalk, at least on this side of the street.

The flag-bearers reached nearly level to where Carmike was sitting before he stood and bent toward the bag. When he straightened again, he was holding a big coil of rope that he tossed up and over a thick branch of the elm. The rope fell down the other side, ending in a noose. With a smile made of years, he set the rope to swaying.

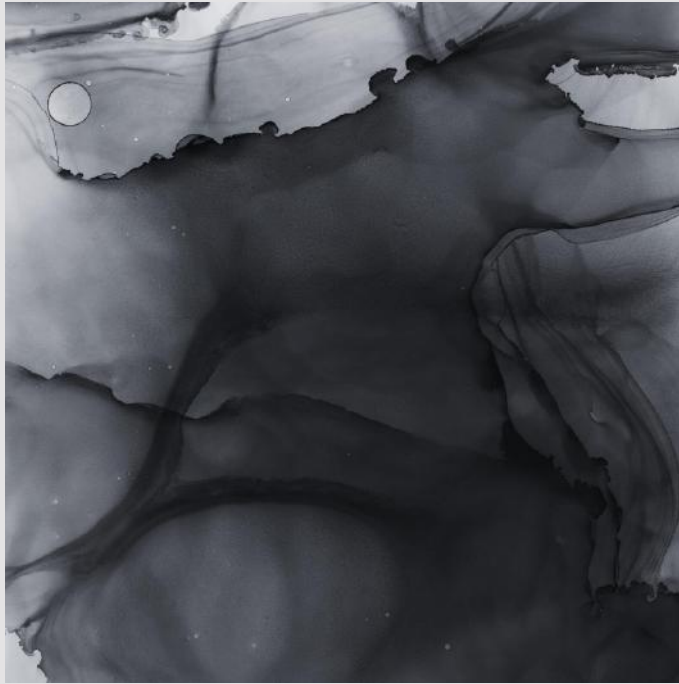
One man broke away from the lines of the parade. Now, you wouldn't think one man leaving would have an effect, but the music slowed down as if he pulled it along behind him. The marchers paused, stepping in place for a time. One of the cops broke away, too, following the man who looked familiar to me. I kept the phone on him, watching his face, which had the same look my teachers got when someone in class stepped out of line. I tried to pull his face out of this scene and put it in other places I know, smoothing out the man's anger into a flat calm, and that did it. It was Baldy Edinger who used to live in Mr. Delp's apartment. It's been over a year, and Baldy's face looked heavier and a bit more sunburned. He was a nice man who always talked to me, to everyone. He even once helped to fix Carmike's broken wheel on the trolley Carmike rolled to the store on Wednesdays.

But now he was coming hard, and he didn't look like he was coming to ask after Carmike's trolley. The noose had stopped swaying, but when Baldy was a yard away Carmike set it to swinging again. Something about that swing must have registered because Baldy pulled up just on the other side so the two men were staring at each other with that noose swaying between them like a pendulum.

The cop arrived, calmly saying something to Baldy, but his hand moved to the gun side of his belt. The video started to get shaky. When I looked, I saw my hands shaking, and then I felt my whole body shaking. All the sounds in my head turned off. I felt sick in the bottom of my stomach. But I couldn't take my eyes off the screen.

Until the front door opened.

Mama Lu stepped out onto the landing, followed by Miss Julie. Slowly, as if she wasn't sure where the concrete was, Miss K'wanda appeared, holding the hand Miss Julie had stretched behind her. They didn't say anything, and the cop gave them a glance and a shake of his head. He turned back to Carmike and Baldy, but I kept



staring at the ladies on the landing, the one who raised me and the others who helped. All three, even Miss K'wanda, stood with what I could only call attitude, and they were thrusting that attitude down toward the street with an energy that felt like it was rippling the air. A sensation like a voice inside my torso and brain urged me to join them and I started to rise and lean toward the landing, even as my legs remained firmly planted in the dirt, like an anchor or a warning. Mama Lu turned her face toward me, took in the all of me within that micro-second glance, and gave me her new stare. That feeling in my legs, what I recognize now as fear, forced its way up to my face, and I sent her my "Baby" look. But Mama Lu shook her head.

In the year since she started giving me that look, she never took an option away, and her doing it now made me feel self-conscious and curious. For the first time in my life, I wondered how Mama Lu saw me, how they all saw me, this gangly redhead with freckles and pale skin that Mama Lu had taken on years ago, like an errant drop of white paint on a black canvas that,

except for Paul the Scrapper and Baldy before him, was this house, these people.

The whole exchange couldn't have taken more than a couple seconds, and then there I was, up on the landing, phone up and videoing. But I was looking through the screen out into my street like I had never seen any of this before. Carmike, Baldy, the cop, the rope, the marchers, the women on the landing, all blended into one, and the entire scene came through the phone like a swarm, flowing in and occupying the whole of me with contradictions.

There I was standing against this parade filled with anger at everyone involved. I was the full threat of the noose and the defiant swing of the rope. When the cop glanced back to the landing to discover a white girl taking a video, his face registered that the situation had become more complicated, and in his face, I saw my face. And I saw the beginning of my own endless line of powers and complications mixing up to blend in me. Forever.

This Woman

by Patricia Nugent

There was this woman. This woman who bugged me. I didn't know her well, but I did know she was annoying as hell. I didn't encounter her often but, when I did, I found myself irritated. She was outspoken and deliberate, obsessed with peace and justice issues. She always found a way to talk about something she'd done or not done for "the cause." I'm pretty sure I was rude to her - at least I intended to be.

We both ended up on the Social Concerns Committee at church. I was less than thrilled to have more exposure to her, certain she'd ruin the experience. And sure enough, there she was, always talking about peace and justice. No matter the topic, she found a way to bring it back to peace and justice. Peace and justice. It was maddening! She brought articles for us to read and announcements of opportunities to get involved. She read snippets from the Bible and the Quran, verses about peace and justice. She quoted Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, and other prophets. She took Hebrew lessons and befriended Muslims. She pushed. She pushed for peace and justice. Relentlessly.

She made me uncomfortable. *Shut up! Just shut up!* I screamed inside. *Take it elsewhere.* I didn't need to hear it. I already consider myself an activist.

At one committee meeting, a straggly-looking man wandered in off the streets and asked where he might get food and gas money. We gave him a few suggestions but made it clear we had work to do. Church work. We put our heads back down, staring at our agendas, hoping he'd get the hint to leave. *How did he get into the building, anyway? And how do we get him out?*

This woman, however, jumped up, grabbed her car keys, and said to him, "Let's go."

Most of us were annoyed she left the meeting because we had important topics to discuss. But no one else had offered to help him - not me, not the clergy. Just this woman. The rest of us simply cautioned, "Be careful," and let her go. Alone. With a strange man. On a cold January night. We later learned she'd taken him to get food and gave him gas money.

As her strategies became more visible, the minister had to field "concerns" from the congregation about this woman. "They" wanted her to not talk so much about peace and justice issues and her related activities - and certainly not in church! They wanted her to stop getting arrested for civil disobedience and stop inviting others to join her next time. After all, her antics were costing taxpayers money; it was a waste of public resources.

She acknowledged their perspective without rancor and became less vocal about her mission. But it caused her to question whether the church was the right spiritual home for her.

This glaring contradiction between faith and action heightened my awareness of the value of deeds over words. Issues became more three-dimensional for me; injustice and strife were suddenly everywhere! People were losing their homes and sleeping in the streets. Women were assaulted. Children were being gunned down in school. Our climate was changing. No wonder this woman kept pushing a peace and justice agenda! She was a missionary living her faith, which for her meant talking about it, doing it, and talking about it again. She was witnessing on behalf of the oppressed, those not seen or heard.

President Lincoln is quoted as saying, “I don’t like that man. I’ll have to get to know him better.”

This woman became emblematic for me of what we could change if we were truly committed. Instead of resisting and resenting her, I became inspired by her – inspired to speak my truth even when unpopular in certain circles. Inspired to take more risks on behalf of peace and justice. Inspired to show up and show my face. Inspired to defend this woman against those sputtering in the pews when she stood to call out injustice.

Although the possibility of arrest scared me, I attended a civil disobedience training she’d arranged with Frida Berrigan, Philip’s daughter, both of whom she knew through peace and justice actions. Berrigan, a former priest, was best known for his anti-war activities, including destroying military draft records. He also vexed his church, accusing them of silence and cowardice. The training made me bolder as I marched down the streets against women’s eroding civil rights.

One morning, this woman showed up at my door to invite me for a walk. “We have to do something about book banning in this country,” she casually said as we strolled through my sleepy neighborhood. As a reader and an author, I was aware of the significant uptick in book banning but hadn’t yet identified a direct role for myself in the battle. Until she made it clear there’s a role for everyone whenever civil liberties are threatened. Together, we arranged for a *Little Liberty Library* exclusively for banned books and organized annual readings from those forbidden tomes.

When I’d confessed to her my reluctant conversion from detractor to admirer, she was quick to self-deprecate. “There’s so much more I could do. I’m really a Quaker – but a lousy one because I swear too much!” She admitted to battling depression when nothing seemed to make a difference. She said she talks about her work because she wants others to know there are ways to fight back against injustice. There are ways to protect marginalized groups and this planet. She doesn’t expect everyone to do it – but wants us to know we can if we so choose.

On any given day, she can be seen standing in front of the post office with a sign calling out injustice. Sometimes alone, sometimes with a few friends she roused. And sometimes wearing an RBG costume.

Reverend William Sloane Coffin told us it’s our job to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” This woman’s single-mindedness afflicted me for a long time. Until I found it comforting that there are people out there like her. Like Linda.



Classifications

by Joan Mazza

Don't ask me what's my sun sign or rising sign
or the house of my moon.
I don't fit into any of the three doshas
of vata, pita, or kapha. I'm not obese,
not ectomorph, mesomorph, or endomorph.
You won't squeeze me into Myers' Briggs
or the Enneagram. On any day I might fit
the archetypes of Mother, Crone, Goddess,
Slave, or Villain. My worries and anxiety
don't line up with DSM or the Chinese
zodiac, aren't explained by my meals eaten
with meat, dairy, or nightshades. You'd like
to fit me into a slot, or, as you said, to get
a bead on me, but I'm mercurial, murky.
I might be silent as a stone or tree,
and as steadfast, rooted where I am,
but I morph and shapeshift into wolf,
raven, dragon breathing fire. Your desire
to label me as water, fire, metal, wood, earth
shows you don't want to take the time
to know me. There is no one else like me
or you, and never will be. You say I've become
an extroverted introvert and optimistic pessimist,
a spiritual atheist, and psychic healer.
Don't take out your list and prepare to check
the boxes. I can't be boxed or stamped.
I'm fluid, flexible, flimsy as lace, solid
and dense as granite. I think and feel, intuit
and sense. I judge like everyone does.
I look for evidence and can amend
my conclusions. I have boundaries
but I'm not fixed. I seek intense intimacy
with moderation. I'm durable. I change.
Always, everything changes.



Elara

by Plamen Vasilev

The air hung heavy with the scent of ash and fear. Elara, her face grimed with soot, stared at the blackened sky, a single tear tracing a path through the grime. The once vibrant city of Atheria, a jewel of the Empire, now lay in ruins. The Rebellion, a whisper in the shadows for years, had finally risen, and the Emperor's iron fist was met with a storm of fire and fury.

Elara, a weaver of whispers, a teller of tales, had never envisioned herself as a rebel. Her life had been a tapestry of silken threads, each meticulously woven into a portrait of quiet contentment. But the Emperor's reign had choked the life out of Atheria, suffocating its dreams with the weight of his tyrannical laws.

The rebellion had begun with a stolen whisper, a whispered rebellion against the Emperor's ironclad rule. It started as a spark, ignited by the fire of injustice, and quickly spread into a raging inferno. The whispers became cries, the cries became roars, and the roars thundered through the streets of Atheria, shaking the very foundations of the Emperor's power.

Elara, a silent observer at first, found herself swept up in the tide of rebellion. She witnessed the Emperor's forces, clad in gleaming armor, descend upon the city, their swords glinting like death in the sun. She saw the fear in the eyes of her neighbors, their hope extinguished by the roar of cannon fire.

But Elara, unlike many, had seen the flickering flames of defiance in the eyes of her fellow citizens. In the rebellion, she saw a tapestry of courage and resilience, a thread of hope woven into the fabric of despair. Her heart, once quiet and content, now beat with a fervent rhythm, fueled by the fire of resistance.



She took up arms, not with a sword or a bow, but with words. Her voice, trained to weave intricate tales, became a weapon, a tool to ignite the flames of rebellion. She spoke of freedom, of hope, of the dream of a world without the Emperor's tyranny. Her words painted vivid pictures of a future where the air was sweet with the scent of jasmine, not the acrid stench of fear.

Elara became a beacon of hope, her stories echoing through the crumbling streets of Atheria, fanning the flames of defiance. She spun tales of brave individuals who stood against the Emperor's might, their actions were a testament to the indomitable spirit of the city. She sang songs of rebellion, her voice a siren call to those who had fallen silent, urging the rise and fight for their freedom.



The Emperor's forces, initially invincible, began to falter. The rebels, fueled by Elara's words, fought with a ferocity born of desperation. They fought for their homes, for their families, for their right to breathe freely. Elara, standing amidst the chaos, became a symbol of their struggle, a testament to the power of words in the face of tyranny.

One night, amidst the smoke and dust of battle, Elara found herself standing before the Emperor's palace, her voice ringing out like a clarion call. The air crackled with anticipation, the city holding its breath. Elara raised her voice, weaving a potent tapestry of rebellion. She spoke of the

injustices the Emperor had wrought, of the dreams he had crushed, lives he had stolen. Her voice reached the hearts of the enemy, shaking their resolve, exposing the cracks in their armor.

The tide of battle shifted. The Emperor's forces, once invincible, began to waver. The whispers of rebellion, once stifled, roared through the streets. The city, once a symbol of oppression, transformed into a crucible of defiance.

As the sun rose, casting a crimson glow over the ravaged city, the Emperor's palace fell. The rebel flag, a symbol of hope and freedom, fluttered in the wind, a testament to the power of the people. Atheria was free, her chains broken, her spirit unbroken.

Elara, her voice hoarse from speaking for the voiceless, stood amidst the rubble, her heart filled with quiet pride. She had never sought to be a leader, but the rebellion had chosen her, her voice becoming the catalyst for change. She had learned that the power of rebellion lays not in brute force, but in the power of words, the strength of spirit, the unyielding belief in a brighter tomorrow.

Atheria, once a silent city, now hummed with the energy of freedom. The scent of ash had given way to the sweet aroma of hope, and the whispers of rebellion had blossomed into a symphony of liberation. Elara, the weaver of whispers, the teller of tales, had played her part in the grand tapestry of rebellion. And as she looked upon the city, reborn in the flames of defiance, she knew that the story of Atheria was far from over. The embers of rebellion still glowed, waiting to ignite the next chapter in the fight for freedom.

xxx

by Julie Allyn Johnson

The stockinged chatter behind the curtain reminds me of my mother's secret stash. Not so secret, perhaps, since I'd once divined its existence though she must have suspected my perusal of its yellowed, jaundiced pages as only a determined vengeance to continue reading drove me to find its new hiding places time and time again. Her wrath in later years scolded and chastised the young woman I wasn't sure I should be. Not that I would have had any idea how to become whatever *woman it was* that I aspired to. The titillating "true stories" I pored over in the dim illumination of my closet, door open just wide enough to allow a stream of southern daylight, taught me all the wrong ways a girl hoping for admiration, respect and — dare I say it — love, should pattern her style of dress, her demeanor, her choice of words. I was doomed from the get-go. My shoddy reputation was never due to her lack of guidance or nurturance. No. It was all on me. And she's not ever let me forget it.



Here I Am

by Susan Shea

I am on my hill listening
to the news telling me that
another hill is hungry

so I grab my go help bag
with apples from my tree

and hear that another hill has anger
burning buildings, and another is
so frozen it cannot think through
the ice, and another is down and out
piled in garbage, and another has
crying children who are left alone

and my bag is not big enough
and my legs are not long enough
and I don't know what to do

until someone on the news
points to a man and says
it's all his fault

so I sit down, and start
watching people who are all
dressed up in cities, growling,
pointing fingers in all directions
and they all want all the power

and I feel legless, caught in their chaos

forced to pray my heart out



From the Chrysalis Falling

by Marchell Jefferson

I am a woman who in my stumbling found God's grace.
From the sky I fell long before Icarus did.
My eyes blinded by sunlight my wings made of wax.

I am often without a compass to show me the way.
Although, I have paid my dues to be heaven bound
I have evicted myself from among the stars.
I am content to stretch my wings, but never to soar

I am a caterpillar still clinging to my tree.
A seed still dreaming delaying spring,
And from the chrysalis falling

A woman postmenopausal is a moth
I arrive at a second life.
I become a new silken serpent.

Still myself, although, I wear a new armor.
I am delicate, rising from the ash, a little less melancholy,
Each step I take is enough to avoid all flames.

Always on the watch for a green place to land
When I find none. I settle for a swanky retirement village
Near enough, but not quite out to shore.



If

by Mary Janicke

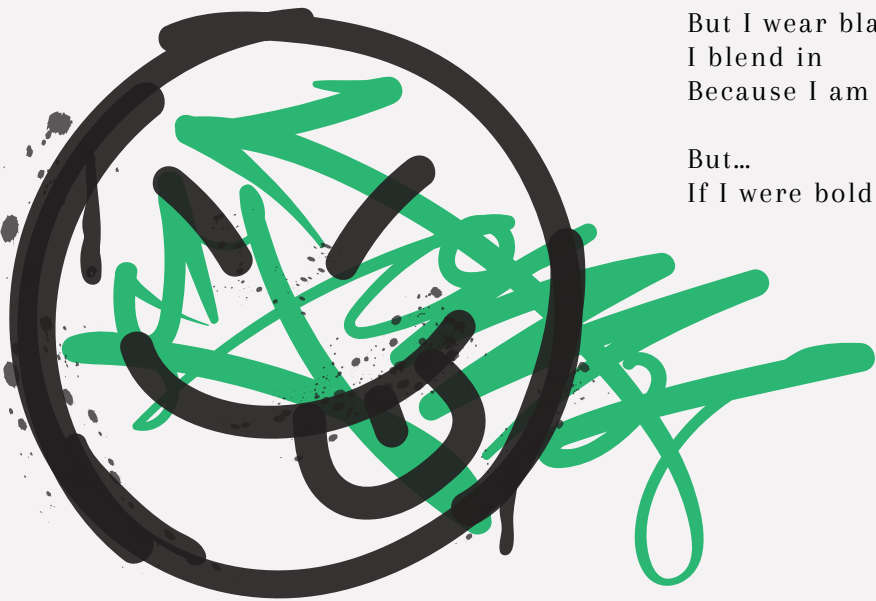
If I were bold
I would wear vivid colors
Bright sparkling jewelry
Flash
Everyone would notice me

I would dye my hair purple
Paint my nails green
Have huge fluttering eyelashes
Bright red lips
Rouged, rouged cheeks

Wear dangling earrings
And four-inch heels
And tight, tight pants

But I wear bland
I blend in
Because I am not bold

But...
If I were bold



Bad Seed

by Michele Markarian



“What’s the matter?” asked my mother absently, looking at my sullen and disbelieving face. Her sister-in-law, Aunt Jane, was visiting. Jane was not her favorite person in the world.

“Miss Ciesla called Mrs. Brandi and said, “If I were you, I wouldn’t let my daughter hang out with that Talanian girl. She’s a bad seed.” Miss Ciesla was my sixth-grade gym teacher.

A bad seed? I was in all honors classes, got good grades, sang in the chorus. As far as I was concerned this was one more slight from gym teachers, who for some reason, had taken a dislike to me since elementary school. There was Mr. Fredericks, who took my asthma personally, and the doctor’s note that sometimes came with it. “I wonder if Miss Talanian’s asthma affects her aim,” he’d sneer when I missed a basketball shot. Then there was Miss Troop, whose sadism I could hardly take personally, as it extended itself to *all* her students. We’d show up for gymnastics class, and she’d point to the highest of the parallel bars. “Last period, Elaine Dimmock

fell straight down on the top of her head and had to be rushed to the hospital,” she’d announce. “Who’s up first?” Or when we were learning lacrosse, “Be careful with the stick. You could get the end jammed right up into your crotch.” It never occurred to me that the end of a lacrosse stick could get jammed up my crotch. It did not enhance my love for the game.

But Miss Ciesla had taken things to a new personal low. Bad seed? Was it because I was small and dark, of indeterminate ethnic origin? My hometown in the 70s was populated with Irish and Italian families, but Armenian was not something they were familiar with. My first-generation parents, like the hero in Kafka’s “The Castle”, kept trying to figure out the rules of fitting in. A Mercedes? (*Showoffs.*) White-collar success? (*This is a blue-collar neighborhood, ethnic weirdos.*) Second home on the Cape? (*Where have you been? Swimming pool, not Cape house!*) They’d veer back and forth socially between the neighborhood *odarts* (non-Armenians) and their Armenian community, where they’d retreat for safety.

Aunt Jane was an *odart*. She had met my Uncle Avedis at college. Tall, blonde and beautiful, Jane belonged to a generations-old Minnesota family who fit in just fine. Jane didn't care about fitting in and was madly in love with the mustached and exotic-looking academic she'd bagged. She researched everything she could about Armenia. She was a Titan amongst our tiny people.

"What did Mrs. Brandi say?" my mother asked anxiously. As part of their quest to fit in, my parents did not like making waves. Any altercation with a teacher, no matter how unfair, was always assumed to be my fault.

Aunt Jane looked at me in the direct way that she had. "You tell that gym teacher to fuck off."

"Jane!" gasped my mother. "She will NOT tell her gym teacher - "their voices floated away from me.

My mother was right. I would not tell Miss Ciesla to fuck off; I wouldn't have the guts. But Aunt Jane had spoken of a possibility that wasn't based on fear and fitting in. It was the beginning of a new seed.



Emily Dickinson — Haiku Life Artist

by Regina Dilgen

Amherst poetess
sir-Rounded by normies
knew to stay inside

origami poem folder
creased each page
to pierce

sumi-e ink painter
let the white space
speak





Sheep

by KJ Hannah Greenberg

KJ Hannah Greenberg uses her trusty point-and-shoot camera to capture the order of G-d's universe, and Paint 3D to capture her personal chaos. Sometimes, it's insufficient for her to sate herself by applying verbal whimsy to pastures where gelatinous wildebeests roam or fey hedgehogs play. Hannah's poetry and art collections are: *Miscellaneous Parlor Tricks* (Seashell Books, 2024, Forthcoming), *Word Magpie* (Audience Askew, 2024), *Subrogation* (Seashell Books, 2023), and *One-Handed Pianist* (Hekate Publishing, 2021).

In the Raw

by Heather D Haigh

We rode naked through the towns, some on horseback, others riding pushbikes, motorcycles, electric scooters, rollerblades. Others walked. Some pushing wheelchairs, pushchairs, prams. Wives boasting red hair, green hair, grey – as spiky as their fingers to the catcalls. Mothers with shaved heads and *We don't owe you pretty* scrawled on ramrod backs. Maidens cloaked in hair extensions – neon nylon bright – which they snip-snip-snipped as they rode – wielding scissors pointy-sharp. As their wispy mantles fell – rainbow feathers in the wind, their tattooed flesh revealed them to be skeletons, zombies, ghouls, and across their breasts: *Climate change does this*.

Chemo patients let ribbons trail from the ends of wigs – stock modacrylic. Or baldly proud, they marched as living placards: *Save our NHS. Cut corruption, not budgets*.

Matrons armoured in sensible shoes, tweed skirts, and tight-lipped grimaces raised neatly penned signs. *Cover your shame. Down with Harlots*.

The whores joined the march. *Up with Harlots. Up yours, Missus. Keep us safe*.

Grandmas, with skin, bearing folds of weariness and wisdom, balanced empty boxes on their heads. *Fair shares - not food banks*.

The police arrived, armed with water cannons.

An explosion of gleeful newspaper headlines and titivating photographs led to the game shows. *Ten points if you soak Godiva, fifty if you send her sprawling*.

Still, we marched. A brown middle-aged woman with an artificial leg walked hand in hand with an aged black sister on one side and a white gap-toothed teenager on the other.

Our causes were many, but at last, we'd realised, we were united in anger at being pushed into division, in our desire to change the world before we tore it apart. We were ready to show the world our naked truth, to turn from the messages that told us we were not good enough. Too fat, too thin, too old, too young, too tall, too short. Buy this. Too dull, too awkward, too stiff, too malleable, too weird. Buy this. Too masculine, too feminine, too slutty, too frigid, too real. We'd planted beans and tomatoes, adopted rescue chickens, baked bread, sang folk songs, and joined another forum. We'd talked and talked and talked. Then we listened. Then we began to walk together. To ride. To march. We carried one banner. *One World - One People*.



They halved our pay and scattered coins upon the floor, exhorting us to scramble for our portion of charity. Scramble we did. With dignity. We had children to feed, and we shared the pickings fairly. They raised the price of food higher and higher. Doubled the rents. We toiled endless hours. Some had no choice but to stop marching. But those that could, marched on.

Politicians conferred with business leaders. More arrests. Harsher punishments. They turned our nakedness against us as they told us to bend and spread. They forced us into uniforms. Hard labour. Corporal punishment.

Still, we marched. Our menfolk cast off their clothes. Brothers and sisters strode side by side.

The men in long grey coats swept into our schools. Our children were taught shame by rote. Shame in their bodies, shame in ours. They were taught to notice their differences, learn to keep them covered. They came home with star charts, certificates and chocolate bars in the shape of children – colour-sorted, segregated, none smiling. Then, the punishments started.

We stopped marching.

We worked with bent backs, giving only sideways glances to our neighbours until the men in grey coats began to drift away. We kept our heads down, kept working.

When we saw the little brown boy slip a piece of candy to the little white girl, and the girl with braces slip a note to the boy with a limp, we smiled silently and went on with our work.



Milk on the Grass

by Nicola Kearns

Bare feet, a blue dress with daisies, A cut on the knee, and my brother clings to me. The bullet missed us both, the milk spills free, A white stain blooming on the emerald lea.

Their laughter echoed, a chilling refrain, As Mother hurried us, safe from the rain of gunfire and hate. Childhood, once plain, Fractured like glass, would never be the same.

The nights hummed with fear, a constant drone, My father, a sentinel, shotgun held close. Wooden floorboards became our thrones, A refuge from shrapnel and shattered repose.

My baby sister's scream, a piercing dart, As fists pounded the door, tearing it apart. 'Fenians!' they roared, venom in their heart, While Mother trembled, torn in every part.

But anger, a seed, took root in that night, A rebellion kindled, a fierce, burning light. No longer a child, I rose to the fight, For in the face of darkness, we choose what is right.

They may try to confine us, to clip our wings, But the spirit within, untamed freedom sings. We'll fight for our voices, the stories it brings, And wear our blue dresses, defiance on wings.



Every Woman is a Potential Witch

by Charlene Pierce

which means every woman has the power
to be a witch. Which is the same
as every woman having the power
to be a saint – or a god.
Every woman has the potential
to be it all – No –
even God can't do everything,
can't control everything
can't even kill Lucifer,
His own creation.
But woman changed the world
with just one bite.
Forbidden by who?
Who made this story
wanted to blame Woman
and even then, couldn't deny
Woman's power.

*After [every woman is a potential witch] by Raena Shirali.



Mind Your Bedside Manners!

by Sheryle Cruse

Is being rude a matter of life or death?

“First, do no harm.”

What a loaded statement, with a smidge of campaign promise attached. Over-promising and under-delivering happen way too often within the medical community.

Hello, pleased to meet you.

I’m a breast cancer survivor with, yes, a scalpel to grind against some of you medical experts who specialize in breast cancer. Indulge me in my tirade against you. I’ve indulged YOU enough in your thoughtless, insensitive, and harmful attitudes. I’d like to, therefore, diagnose *you* with malignant bedside manner.

Are you willing to go through treatment?

Yes, I know you have been to medical school for many years. I know you have studied, trained, sacrificed, and dedicated yourself to the study and the healing of cancer. You have read and written medical journals. You have pulled multiple shifts and have experienced loss of sleep. You have made your profession, your calling, your *raison d’être*.

All noble, in theory. Yet, I cannot help but notice how often and significantly that thought stops short of humane communication *with* your actual patient.

Yes, in this case, *me*.

Ah, the power of words. Cancer is a scary enough word. And here is where the medical community did some harm.

After much fear, and after engaging in many tests over weeks, I finally decided to have a bilateral mastectomy. I had to come to terms with reality; I would no longer have my breasts. I had made whatever peace I could with my decision.

I had surgery. The next morning, I felt good about my decision. I felt relieved. As I was lying in my hospital bed, my surgeon swung by to check on me, and proceeded to tell me about the previous day’s surgery...

“Your breasts were *really* floppy.”

Um...okay?

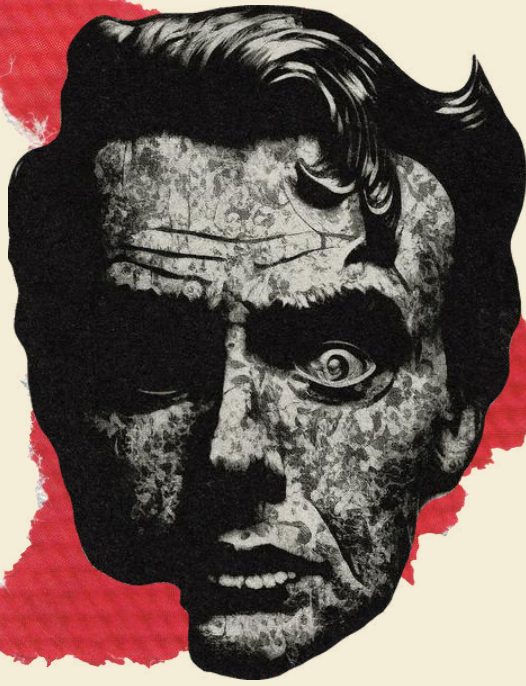
Stunned.

Keep in mind, that I was still groggy. It was early morning. I’m in my hospital bed and gown. I was recovering from, well, major life-and-body-changing-*and-IMAGE*-changing surgery, but *sure*, I would LOVE to hear my surgeon’s opinion about my body parts, formerly known as my breasts, my, apparently, *floppy* breasts.

Bedside Manner 101:

Don’t comment on the physical appearance of your patient, *especially*, using words like “floppy.” What benefit could such a comment possibly have for your patient?

“Floppy” does not speak to “tumor,” or “malignancy,” or “health.” It’s an *appearance* adjective, not a prognosis adjective. And, maybe, to your freshly operated-on patient, whose body has now been changed, it’s *your* responsibility to provide healing bedside manner, steering clear of such appearance adjectives altogether.



I was in limbo about knowing if “we got it all.” I was in limbo about knowing what my body and life would be, from here on out. I was in no position to deal with “floppy.” I didn’t *deserve* to have to process that word, even if it came from a medical professional who came highly recommended.

I don’t understand why that comment was uttered, and I didn’t deserve to be left uncertain. I will never know my surgeon’s motives.

Do your words harm or heal?

If there’s any question that your comment may be appearance-related, don’t say it.

Ah, but there are still *more* fun bedside manner kinds of words for me to endure, at the mouths of the medical community.

Just in time for physical therapy and radiation, I heard this *gem* opinion come hurling my way...

“Your breasts were HUGE!”

We’re back at the image again, *aren’t* we?

Who said it? Once again, it was a member of the medical community. I was put through the gauntlet of specialists, all, supposedly, coming from a place of healing, restoring, and pain-relieving. I had exposed my torso, with and without breasts now, to rooms full of medical teams, all weighing in on what was the best course of action for me. And *this* was what I heard.

“Your breasts were HUGE!”

Again, it was about appearance, nothing about margins, tumor removal, scorched skin condition, physical comfort, *or* restored mobility.

Big boobs. A formidable rack.

Attack of the fifty-foot cleavage.

Bedside Manner 101:

Again, Medical Community, *why* would you say this?

What *benefit* did you think it would serve the patient to think about, once more, the state of their appearance, especially if those attributes, via a bilateral mastectomy, were now gone?

Did you give any thought to how those body parts were now medical waste, in a landfill, somewhere? More importantly, did you stop to consider how these body parts were no longer a part of the patient’s body? Did it *occur* to you that this was a mourning process, a loss, a death?

Treat the weight of your words within the context of death and a funeral. What would you say? How much would you comment on the appearance of the corpse’s body parts?

That’s what you have here. Perhaps, your patient is attending a memorial service or a funeral, all without you knowing about it. All you *see* is that they are in a hospital room, an exam room, a waiting room, or



within the confines of a million-dollar piece of medical equipment.

But they are grieving something *lost*. Maybe it has less to do with their physical body and more to do with their current lives.

Whatever the case, Bedside Manner 101: pay your respects, as you would at a person's funeral. And keep appearance comments *out* of those paid respects.

Harmful comments, long after my surgery, I still was not done encountering them.

I was in an exam room, going over the procedures, treatments, and the state of my post-surgery chest. And here was where I experienced some coercion to "get with the program and do your treatment MY way."

Ah, medical opinion. It's usually couched in pressure to conform to the "experts" way of doing things. When that *didn't* happen with me, when I resisted the pressure, I got this patronizing response *instead*...

"I know you've been through a lot..."

Really? You know I have been through a lot, huh? Do you know my backstory, my personal issues, and my life experiences, that have led to this point? Your years of training, internship, and specialized cancer focus have made you an expert concerning *me*?

When this specialist said this I felt no compassion, only judgment, only irritation, that I didn't do things *their* way. I was supposed to cooperate, and I didn't.

And *that* was unacceptable.

Bad patient! Very bad!

No lollipop for you!

Bedside Manner 101:

Empathy. Maybe there should be an "A for effort" at the medical community's stabs at compassionate humanity. Give 'em a break.

Still, I believe so many of you miss it.

Science, as wonderful, healing, and as restorative as it may be, does *not* trump the human individual. Yes, you can have your opinion regarding a patient's treatment. You can present every option, in detail. But doing so does *not* cover the individual patient, in detail.

I, the cancer patient, am *more* than a birthdate or a patient case number. I am more than a subject, on which to "practice medicine."

Don't *assume* that you know your patient inside out and completely, simply because you are an expert on the human body and the disease of cancer. Don't *assume* you are entitled to pressure or to force your patient into a decision you believe is right; it may be completely *wrong* for *them*. This is about more than just your results or your "perfect winning streak." This is about another human being, who will experience the fallout of what is done to them.

You get to walk away from your patient's cancer experiences without permanent changes to your life; they do not.



Before You Speak at the Bedside...

Perhaps, you've come across this sentiment concerning communication...

Before you speak, *THINK*...Is IT...

...True?

...Helpful?

...Inspiring?

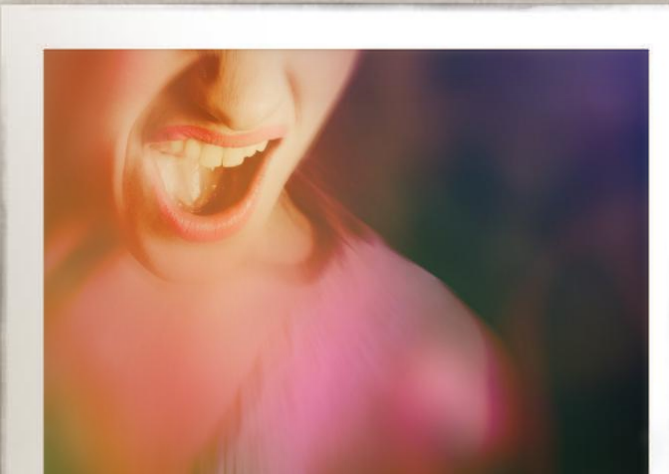
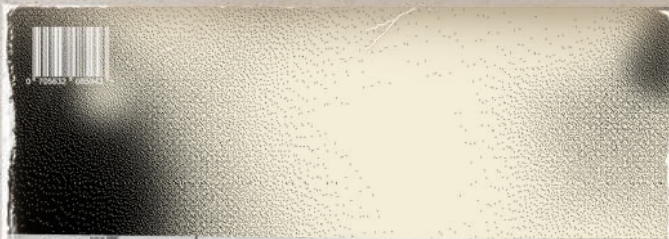
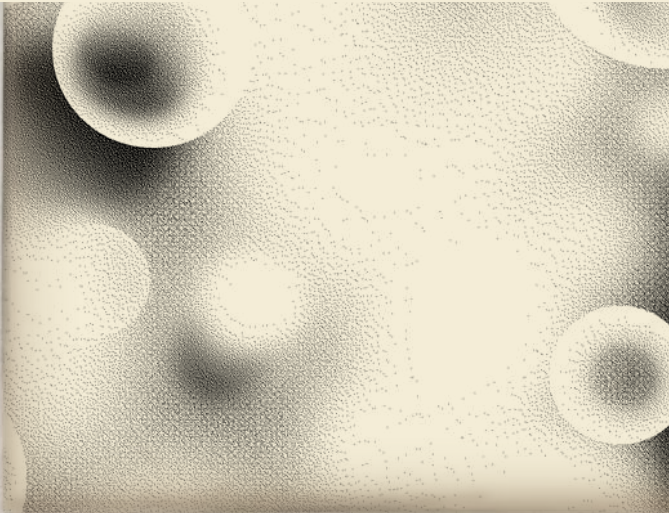
...Necessary?

...Kind?

Your expertise matters little if your patient's psyche is eviscerated in the process.

"First, do no harm."

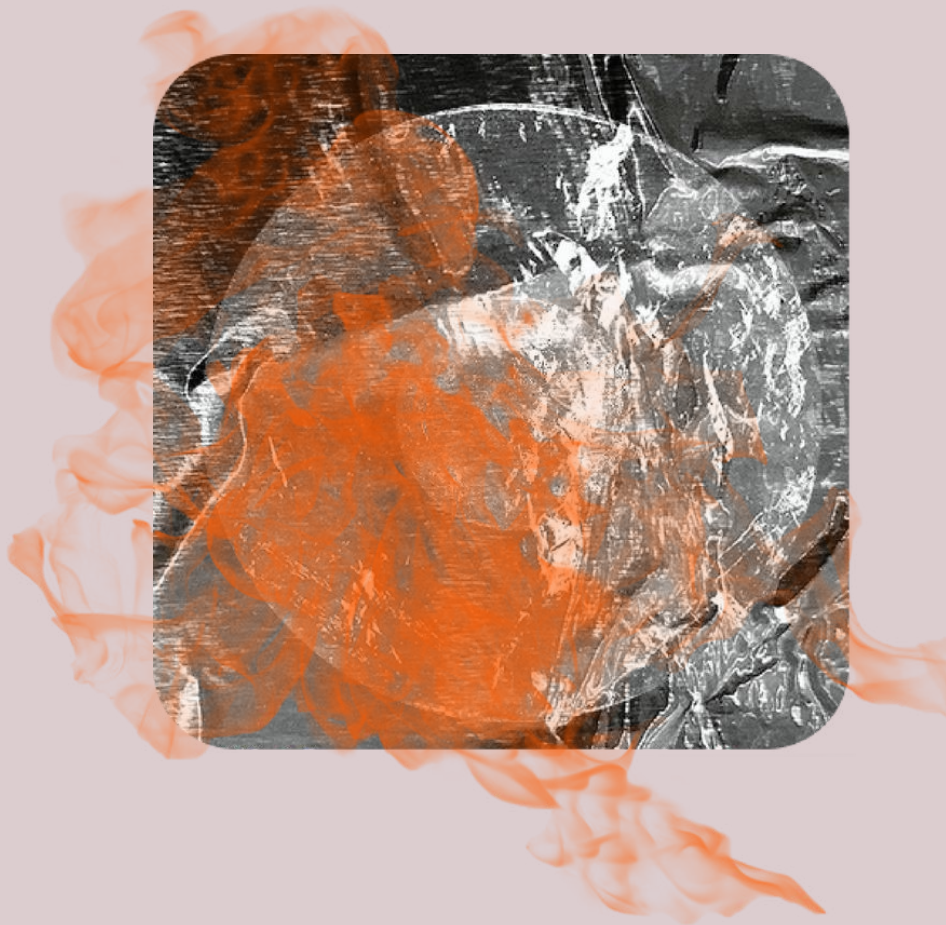
Dear Medical Community, your words matter. Study that all-important bedside manner as much as you do in treating cancer.



Elements of a Fire

by Mona Mehas

Ignited by the spark of dry tears on sharp stone, the girl froze like solid steel. The strike came quickly, well placed, the perpetrator practiced. The reverberation set her teeth on edge. Flames of anger caught the dry tinder in the girl's chest. Fuming, she formed a ball with her fist. Her first response was to react, but it was a losing battle. In time, she gathered the kindling of her life and pounded clean what she needed for survival. One evening she slipped away under a pink sky at dusk like an ember disappearing in flight.





conformity

/kən'fɔ:mɪti/

noun

1) compliance with standards, rules, or laws.

Similar: compliance with; adherence to; accordance with; observance of; observation of; obedience to; acquiescence in; respect for; adaptation to; adjustment to; accommodation to; abidance by

Opposite: flouting

2) behaviour in accordance with socially accepted conventions.

Similar: conventionality; traditionalism; orthodoxy; fitting in; following the crowd; running with the pack; swimming with the stream; conservatism; formalism; reaction

Opposite: eccentricity; rebellion

Body Radical

by Jenny Morelli

My body holds scars
that speak my truth, that tell
my story
like the claw marks
of a bear; like the small white teeth marks
I left
on my kindergarten frenemy, the one
who made fun of my
wet pebble eyes and the glasses
that framed them.
My body
says

*Be human!
Tell your story! Show your skin -
scar-thick.
Coated with confidence.
Coarse
with caution.
Meant to be seen like a neon sign,
like a tank on the battlefield.
My body
will not hide, forgotten,
neglected and desiccated, lest it crack
like the fragile eggshell
I no longer
am.*

I never saw myself
as a radical, not like those from history
not until a writing prompt
forced the issue.
Radicals
are outcasts and misfits who think, who theorize
who question everything long after
they've outgrown those
precocious toddler
years.





Radicals
are those who never backed down
when told they should be
seen and not
heard.

I
am an outlier, an outsider.
Quiet. Observing. Rejecting.

I
am a non-conformist.
A game-changer who makes her own rules,
who shirks the shoulds, who thinks
outside the box.

I'm a quiet leader,
oft-overlooked, who teaches
from her heart, not from the textbook.

I listen
to my gut and not
my supervisor. I swim against
the tide. I'm the pebble in the shoes
of those above me; the pebble that ripples
the stagnant pond,
that breaks the surface
of the lake of complacency.

I
am the change I wish to see in the world.
I am my body's scars, my body's
history, my body's future.
I am body
radical.

Still Standing

by Jonathan Chibuike Ukah

I'm the dust that was trampled upon,
With feet dirtier than a pig's sty;
I'm the road that was travelled upon,
And forced to yawn hapless at the sky.

When the rain falls it drenches me,
The sun will show me no mercy,
Wet and beaten, I find no tree
Under which I will hide this extremity.

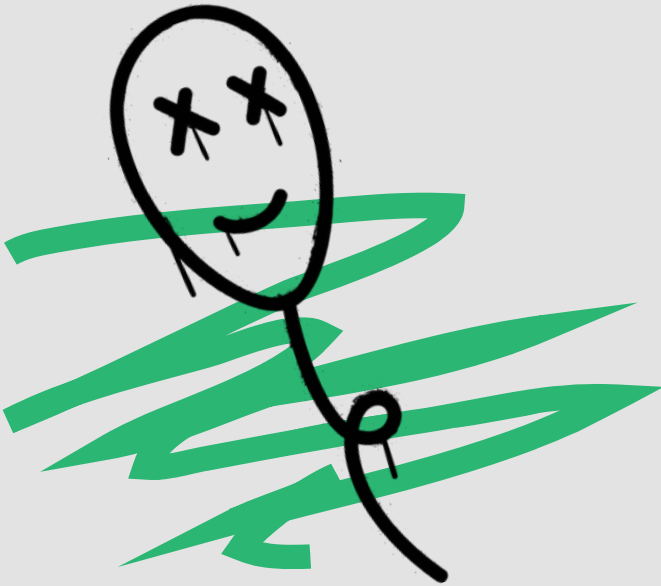
I wander sombre under a clueless cloud,
My dangerous thoughts hidden in my head,
I dare not shout them aloud,
Else I would bite the dirty dust instead.

I'm still standing; I am still standing,
In God's subtle Grace I shall live,
Neither death nor pain shall be landing
At my steel, wired door and survive.



Teen Spirit

by Ruth Smith



My lungs hurt as I complete the last turn around the track. I can't believe how much they hurt. Coach says it gets better as my body becomes stronger, but I think she's lying. And, as usual, I am the last person over the finish line.

The other cheerleaders sit at the picnic table, talking and drinking water from their designer water bottles as I walk off the track. One or two friends encourage me as I drag myself slowly to my backpack and grab my water bottle. My heart is pounding hard in my chest.

I have wanted to be a cheerleader my entire life. People told me and my parents I wasn't physically capable of doing it, but this is the third year I've made it on the squad. I practice harder and longer than everyone else. And I am one stubborn teenager.

Living with Down Syndrome can be a challenge. There are some benefits as well. I am more flexible than most people, but I don't have the muscle tone other people have. So, to gain strength I must work harder than my peers.

I have heard I am learning disabled as well. That's crap. I can learn anything if I repeat it more frequently than my peers. I memorized my home address in

kindergarten, the same as everyone else, my phone number, and even how to count to one hundred.

As I finish drinking some water, Coach has us line up in our formations. I am in the group off to the left. Once in place, the team captain demonstrates the cheer we are learning today. I already know it, since we used it last year. When it comes to doing it in the group I do it right.

In the off-season, I practice my cheers. There are videos of each cheer on my mom's phone, and we watch them and I teach her how to do them. It's fun, and it helps me remember the steps so that I can do them right.

We work on this cheer for the rest of our practice. Mom is waiting for me when we are done, and I climb into the car after waving goodbye to my friends.

"Tough practice?" mom asks me as I put on my seat belt.

I smile. "Not as tough as me," I reply. I am tired but don't want to tell her that. "I'm hungry."

Mom drives me to the convenience store and buys me an apple. I'd rather have ice cream, but I know I should eat healthy foods. I munch on it while she drives us home.

My hearing aid begins to beep. The battery is running out and that bothers me. Mom used to change them once a week, but I told her I could do it myself. And I forget

to change them until they beep. I change out the battery myself once I am in my room. Then I take a shower. Good hygiene is important.

Another challenge with Down Syndrome is communication. There is so much I want to say, but it comes out of my mouth in simple terms. In my head, I may be thinking "I haven't seen my brother in ages, I wonder how he is doing?" and out of my mouth I say, "Where's George?" I know he lives in another state and has a job and a new house, but that's what I say. Mom gets frustrated with me sometimes.

I practice my drum lessons for an hour while mom works on cleaning the house. I then clean my room, with a little help from her. Next, we work on my reading. I am getting my reading level high enough so that I can get my driver's license. I want to be able to drive myself to school my senior year. Legally all I need to be able to do is read the written test and know the rules before I can take the behind-the-wheel. Well, that means practice, practice, practice. And, as I mentioned before, I am one stubborn teenager.

My dad comes home from work as Mom and I start making supper. I love to cook! Peanut butter cookies are my favorite thing to make. Right now, we are making tacos. I'm stirring the meat while Mom works on cutting the onions. They make me cry. I cut up the lettuce and the tomatoes, just not the onions. We have supper ready and it's time to eat.

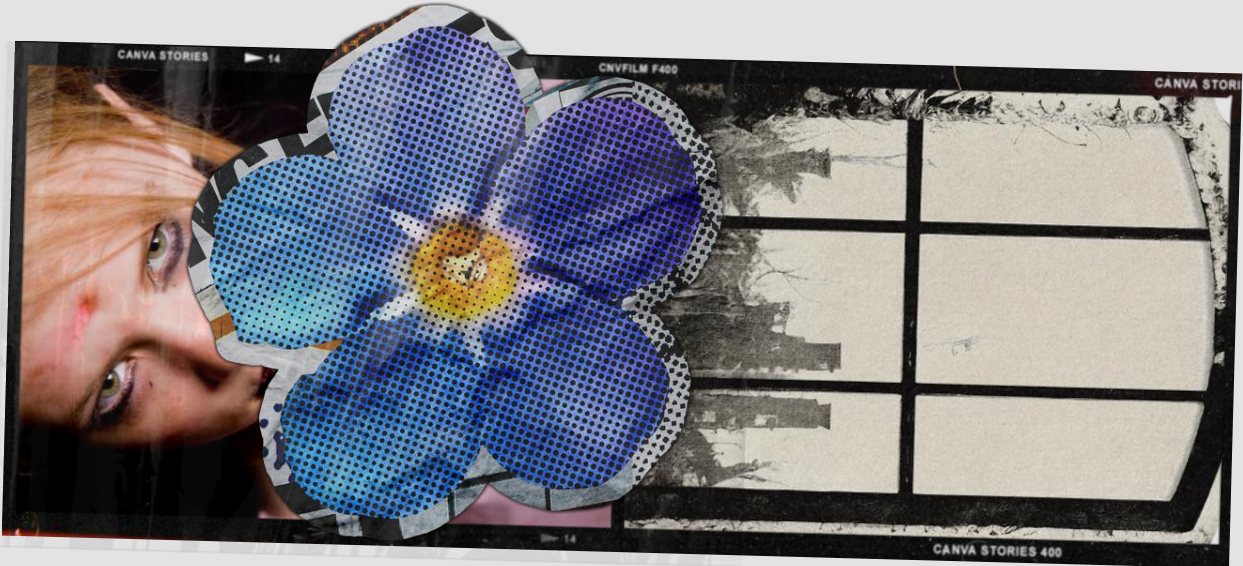
After we eat, I help Mom clean up the dishes and put things away. Mom says if I am to live on my own, I need to be able to do these things. I like being with my parents, but they can be stuffy sometimes. Now, when that is done, I can do what I want. I go to my room take out my computer and write emails to my friends and, my brother. I love emails! I write them every day to my friends and even some cousins. I tell them about my day and how close I am to being ready for my written driver's test.

My friend Diane has Down Syndrome too. She wants so badly to be like everyone else. She's told me she wants to have surgery, so she doesn't look so different. I told her she was beautiful just the way she was and surgery wasn't the answer. Right now, she is mad at me. That makes me sad.

Oh No! Diane just sent me a nasty email. She said I'm a hypocrite. I had to look that word up and it makes me sad that she thinks I tell her one thing and do the opposite. She said that I want to be the same as everyone else too, and that's why I am a cheerleader, in the school plays, and why I am involved in 4H. Well, if having fun and doing things you like makes me the same as everyone else, then I guess I am a hypocrite. She is too afraid to do extracurricular activities. She thinks people won't accept her because she looks different. I look different and I've managed to be accepted. I don't let things get in my way, and I try my best at everything I do. I think that is the reason I am accepted. Maybe she should try that.

"I look different and I've managed to be accepted. I don't let things get in my way, and I try my best at everything I do."

Suddenly I get an idea. I run downstairs to talk to my parents. I tell my dad I need to talk to Diane right now. Mom suggests I call her, but I tell them I want to talk to her in person. Dad grabs his keys and says he will take me.



We arrive at Diane's house and Dad walks with me to the front door. Diane's mom answers and says my friend doesn't want to talk to me. I beg her to let me try and her mom lets me into the house.

Diane is in her room, crying. She lets me into her room. I hug her and we cry for a while.

"Why did you come to my house?" Diane asks me.

"I think I have an idea. Do you want to hear it?"

Diane wipes her face with her sleeve. "OK", she says.

I take a deep breath. I want my friend to understand what I am telling her. "You speak very clearly," I said.

A puzzled look crosses Diane's face. "Yes?"

I continue. "And you are really good at memorizing things."

"Yes?"

"I am part of the Forensics club. Would you like to join us?"

Diane looks conflicted. "I don't know," she says. "What would I do in it?"

I laugh. "Anything you want!" I say. "One of my friends reads poems. Some read parts of a story, and some recite lines from a play. Your voice is so clear you could do anything."

Diane smiles. She gets up from her bed and runs to me. She gives me a large hug and we cry again.

We walk downstairs to talk to her parents. My dad is sitting with them at the dining room table, and they are drinking coffee. We informed them Diane wants to join the Forensics club and that the next meeting is tomorrow at school during lunch. Diane needs a note from her parents letting our teachers know she wants to join. Her parents think it's a good idea, so they write a note for her. I give her another hug and Dad drives me back home.

Today we have a Forensics meeting and Diane can join. The other kids are kind to her and help her pick out the dramatic reading she will be doing at our next competition. She is excited, and the happiest I have seen her in a long time. It makes my heart feel warm.



Virgin on the Impossible

by Janina Aza Karpinska

Janina Aza Karpinska is a multidisciplinary artist from the south coast of England. Her collage–icons, a blend of the ancient and contemporary, are made from scraps of reclaimed materials, otherwise thought of as 'trash', as an act of creative redemption. Her work has featured on the covers of: Chichester Magazine, and Heart of Flesh Literary Journal; and in: The Third Way; Shanti Arts; The Methodist Recorder; and Foreshadow Magazine among others.

"The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion."

~ Albert Camus



The Black Man That Speaks

by Thomas Beckwith

Revered by few when he uses his voice.
Chastised by some for his speech.
Ridiculed by most for what he says—
Rules only apply when he talks,
who knew he needed a license to speak.

He expresses himself with his twang,
not to be ghetto or out of malice or ignorance,
but as a form of communication.

Never white enough to communicate.
Never right enough to enunciate.
Never given the rite of passage to articulate.

Muted by the majority whether written, verbal, or non-verbal.
It's funny how this mostly happens only when the Black man speaks.

Seething in silence and not sharing emotions.
Tough as nails in these streets
Guarding his feelings—to protect himself he must be discreet.

Cautioning himself for the inevitable,
Forbidden to just be himself because of his speech.
He wonders if this happens because he is a Black man that speaks.

Manipulated and not free,
a slave in the world due to the way he speaks.
Ostracized and unacknowledged—

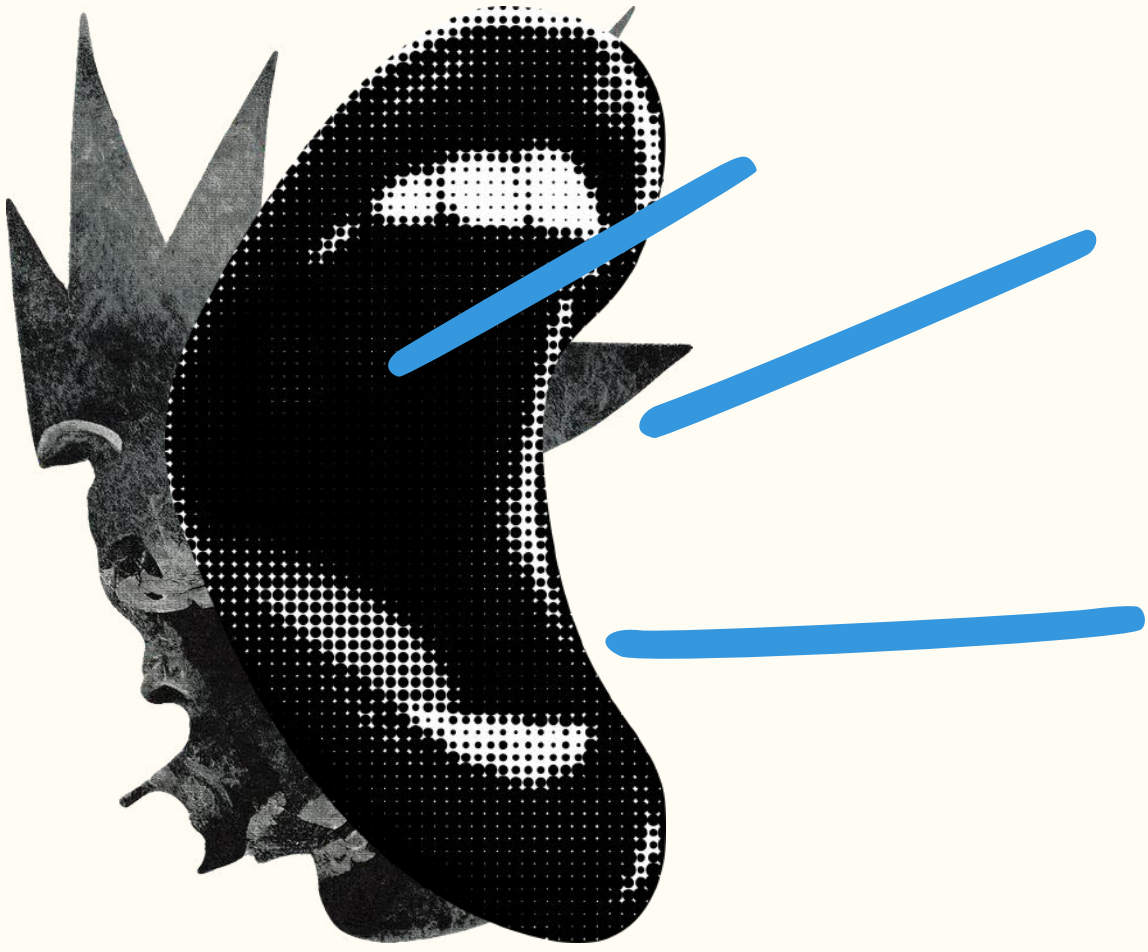
But is it really because the way he speaks?

A misfit in most spaces he speaks.

Again, is it about how he speaks?

Told to tone it down when he speaks,
Often, he is told to repeat when he talks.
It's a wonder he does not shriek in terror.

He is viewed as another Black man,
when he speaks.



Geezer Power

by Walter (aka Terry) Sanville

She felt safe in her zone, even though the thump of exploding artillery rounds echoed down the canyons of the distant urban core. Art created her refuge where she could leave her anger and fears behind, feel secure and paint for hours – deep-toned watercolors in the yellow Victorian’s garden.

Yolanda had found the abandoned house with its fully stocked pantry shortly after the war started between the Geezer Liberation Army (GLA) and the National Guard. She had watched the conflict tear families apart as members were forced to choose sides.

“You’re nuts if you side with Granny,” her brother Carl had told her. “Those crazy old bastards and their sympathizers will kill a few soldiers then get blown away.”

“But it’s Granny, for Christ’s sake. What are we gonna do, abandon her?”

“I say, we take her and Mom into the backcountry where it’s safe. All hell’s breakin’ loose here in Atlanta, and the north and west isn’t much better.”

“You know, she won’t go,” Yolanda said.

“Go where?” The grandmother had joined them on her apartment’s tiny balcony, perched seven stories above one of the many streets named Peach Tree.

“Nothin’, Granny,” Carl said.

“Don’t give me that,” the old woman snapped. “I heard you talkin’ – taking me outta town. No dice. I’m here to stay and help the cause.”

“That cause could kill you,” Yolanda said.

“Why should you care? You’re young and don’t even think about getting old and how precious those last years are.”

Yolanda sighed. “So the Feds cut Medicare and Social Security. There’s so many of you that the old are saddling the rest of us with higher taxes.”

“Then find a different way to pay for it. Tax the one percenters, tax the corporations and let the guys in the middle alone. They have enough to struggle with.”

Carl frowned. “We’d be in trouble if the rich went away.”

Granny scoffed. “Don’t give me that. Social Security had a \$70 billion deficit last year. That’s chump change for the feds – plenty of places to shave costs and raise revenues...buy fewer jet fighters and rockets and hire a boatload of diplomats.” Granny chuckled at her last suggestion.

RPG rounds striking an upper floor of a posh residential tower down the street had interrupted their conversation. A fire broke out and people jumped to their deaths to escape it.

Shortly after that attack, Yolanda had moved into the boarded-up and abandoned Victorian and set up her artist studio. Her mom, her children and her brother’s family had fled the city, leaving her and Granny to their own devices.

Yolanda woke at sunrise and put on jeans and a T-shirt she’d washed in rainwater collected in a barrel. Checking the street for anyone with guns, she hurried down the avenue littered with debris and burned-out cars and turned into the shopping center. She joined the

small group of stay-behinds huddled under the Piggly Wiggly's covered entry.

"You're up early," Leroy said. He wore a floppy hat brought home from Desert Storm and sported two canes.

"Yeah. Granny's out of coffee."

"She and the rest of Atlanta." Leroy's chuckles turned into coughing - something else he'd brought home from Kuwait's burning oil fields.

The rest of the group turned toward her, staring with sad eyes. *They've probably been waiting all night*, Yolanda thought.

"Did the Guard say when we'll get in?" she asked Leroy.

"No. But they're inside with guns drawn."

"I'll come back after I visit Granny."

"I wouldn't. They'll probably close up right after this group's done."



"Can you bag me some coffee, any kind, just not that decaf crap?"

"Sure, Yolanda. But you already owe me a painting for the last favor."

"Thanks, Leroy. I'll come by this afternoon." She handed him some dirty greenbacks, kissed him on the cheek, and hustled down the boulevard. She kept to the shadows, hoping the snipers would see the white patch of cloth sewn onto her backpack and another pinned to her shirtfront and hold their fire.

She walked for an hour then turned into a high-rise building, its upper floors smoldering from where drones had targeted a GLA position. The elevator didn't work. Yolanda sucked in a deep breath and began climbing, the stairs littered with garbage. The tenants dumped their trash down the stairwell, even their sewage when the water got turned off. She held her breath near the worst parts.

On the seventh-floor landing, she rested. A nearby door cracked open and a single eye appeared. Yolanda smiled. The door clicked shut. She hurried down the dark hallway and banged on 726's door.

"Who...the hell...is it?" a shaky voice asked.

"It's me, Granny. It's Yolanda."

"You bring my coffee?"

"Leroy's gonna get it for me this morning. Open up."

Chains rattled, locks clicked and the door cracked open. "You alone?"

"Of course. My boyfriend left with the rest of the cowards, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah. Can't be too careful."

Inside, everything looked normal, except for an old M60 machine gun on a tripod and boxes of ammo stacked in a corner.



Granny kept the apartment in immaculate order. Whenever she had electricity and water, she'd vacuum the rugs and launder everything that would fit in her Whirlpool. And every time an explosion shook the building, she would push herself up from her chair near the window and straighten all the paintings hanging on the walls, most of them birthday and Christmas gifts from Yolanda.

"So how you doing today, Granny? You got enough food and water?"

"Yes, yes. Just sit down with me and watch."

"Watch what?"

Granny pointed down the street. A convoy of National Guard trucks blocked the boulevard, one of them on fire. The soldiers had taken up positions in the back of the row of destroyed vehicles at the curb. Every few minutes the flash of an RPG gave away their position.

"They took fire from the roof of that building." Granny pointed. "The GLA set their truck ablaze and their snipers picked off the escaping soldiers."

Bodies lay in the street. RPG launches increased along with a concentrated volley of small arms fire from the company of soldiers.

Granny grinned. "They're wasting their ammo. The GLA guys parachuted out the back of that building minutes ago."

"Parachuted?"

"Yeah. Some of those old farts were Rangers in Afghanistan or the Palestinian War. They've still got their shit together."

"Where do they get their arms from?"

"Florida, ya know, Geezer Central Command." The old woman cackled and turned toward Yolanda. "I can offer you some tea I just brewed?"

"No thanks. Is there any progress with the negotiations in Washington?"

"NPR says the congressional budget committees have been meeting all week in joint sessions. But that tight-ass President says she'll veto any appropriations bill to prop up Social Security and senior benefits."

"Where is she?"

"Nobody seems to know; but not at the White House. Some claim she's holed up at her South Carolina estate. But I think she's cowering at Cheyenne Mountain, waitin' for the smoke to clear."

"Speaking of smoke, I'd better leave. Looks like the convoy is getting reinforcements and is moving this way. I don't want to get trapped here in some firefight."

Down the street, more dull green trucks pulled up, the new arrivals towing howitzers.

"Relax, dear. You're safer here than on the street. Those little white patches you're wearing won't stop a bullet - from either side."

Yolanda sighed and clasped Granny's withered hand. "Still, I gotta go see Leroy and get your coffee. You stay away from the windows and that machine gun...and for God's sake, don't go out on the balcony."

"Have you heard from your brother and your mom?"

"No. They're still camping somewhere in the backwoods of Tennessee."

"Good, good." The old woman looked at Yolanda, tears filling her eyes. "I...I wish you could all be here. I miss everyone."

"So do I. Hopefully, the fighting will be over soon."

"Hah! It's been six months. Maybe the Feds figure if they kill enough of us off, the budget problem will be solved."

"That's a terrible thing to say," Yolanda said to the laughing old woman. But soon she joined in the gallows humor.

Leaving the building, Yolanda turned down a side street to distance herself from the Guard. She moved quickly, the return

trip to her neighborhood taking only half the time as the trip out. Leroy's house was two blocks over from the Piggly Wiggly, a single-story stucco box in a row of partially destroyed homes. Leroy sat on the front porch, fingering a guitar and enjoying the morning sun.

As Yolanda approached, he called, "So how's that beautiful Granny of yours?"

"Stubborn. She has a front-row seat to the fighting. I'm worried..."

"Well tell her, she can always stay with me. I've got a spare room." Leroy grinned and used his canes to push himself up. "Let me get your coffee. I got one of the last bags. Better make this one last."

"Thanks, Leroy. I owe you."

"You gave me too much money...but I'm keepin' the change."

*"...dissatisfied, always dissatisfied.
She spent the afternoon painting,
lost in color."*

They sat on the front porch, not talking, just taking in Atlanta's skyline. Yolanda tried to block out the muffled sounds of distant explosions and visions of dead soldiers lying like fallen leaves in the street. Her thoughts drifted back to her garden. The hybrid Peace roses had started to open up, their petals velvety smooth and pink-rimmed with life. In her mind, she designed her next masterpiece - a mixed media painting with Joseph's Coat roses growing from cracks in a street littered with bodies, the flowers beautiful, hopeful, masking the sight and stench of the mutilated dead.



Back in her own house, Yolanda stared at the photographs of her children, taken right before the war started. The photo of her ex rested on a top shelf, his smarmy face smiling, his dress green Army uniform immaculate. She reached up and grabbed the framed image and stuffed it, face down, in a dresser drawer that she seldom opened.

In her garden, she peeled a blue plastic sheet back from the watercolor she worked on and sat staring, dissatisfied, always dissatisfied. She spent the afternoon painting, lost in color.

The next morning Yolanda wrapped the bag of coffee in a scrounged piece of Christmas paper and bound it with a ruby-red ribbon. The city center seemed quiet and the sky was mostly clear of smoke. She moved steadily down the main boulevard toward her Granny's apartment tower. As she approached, she noticed several blue tarps spread in the street and on the sidewalk. A single Humvee with two soldiers stood guard over the dead.

Looking up, her breath caught in her throat. A blackened hole had replaced what had been her Granny's balcony and windows. She dashed toward the building's entrance and made it inside before the soldiers could stop her. Taking the stairs two at a time she reached the seventh floor and stared down the hallway, partially blocked now with rubble. She moved to her Granny's apartment and looked - flash-burned paintings hung on the walls, everything blackened, blasted, the balcony gone. She choked on the acrid smoke still rising from the rooms and backed away. *No body. That's good. Probably took her to some detention center. I'll never find her.*

"Hey."

Yolanda whirled.

An old man clutching his walker had rolled up behind her. "Follow me."



They scurried to the end of the hall and pushed inside an apartment just as soldiers clambered onto the seventh-floor landing. The old guy closed the door silently and pressed his pointer finger to his lips. They waited in the living room until the commotion outside quieted.

"Do you know what happened to —"

"I'm right here, Yolanda. I'm okay." Granny entered the room, her left side blackened.

"Let me look at you," Yolanda insisted.

The old woman sat impatiently on the couch as Yolanda inspected the skin beneath the charred clothing. No burns.

"See, I told you it's best to wear layers in winter."

"What...what the hell happened?"

"The Guard kept comin' down the boulevard, poppin' away at these buildings with their 105s. I dragged my M60 onto the balcony and let 'em have it. Think I got a half dozen or more before..."

“They’ll know who you are, Granny. They’ll search every apartment in this building.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. We gotta go.”

The old guy smiled at Yolanda but said nothing.

“Thanks for your help. We’re outta here.”

The old guy nodded. “Take the back stairs. I think they’re still good.”

“Will do.”

They found the emergency exit, not much more than an enclosed fire escape. Granny made it down one flight and then shook her head. “I can’t do this. My back and legs...”

Yolanda nodded. “All right, climb up and hang on.”

The old woman grinned and threw her arms around Yolanda’s neck and wrapped her scrawny legs around her waist.

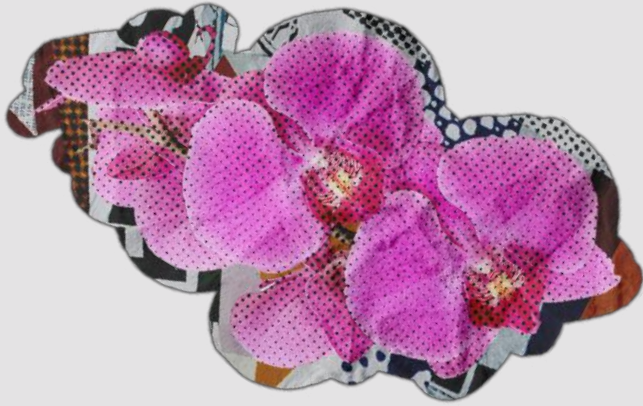
“I remember when I used to give *you* piggyback rides,” Granny said.

“Yeah. Just hang on.”

The stairway exited the building into the parking lot behind overflowing dumpsters. Yolanda picked up the pace and hauled ass away from the structure.

“Where are you taking me?” Granny asked.





"The old woman grinned and threw her arms around Yolanda's neck and wrapped her scrawny legs around her waist."

"I can't take you back to my place. The Guard and the Feds know both of us and it's the first place they'll check."

"Well, just drop me off at the Park. I'll figure something out."

"Forget that. I've got a friend..."

"It's not Leroy, is it?"

"Well, yeah."

"Simply great. You're ditching your own grandmother with a lecherous old gasbag."

"Hey, he's been kind to us - and you'll have your own room."

"But for how long?"

Yolanda heard her Granny chuckle in her ear and knew her resistance was all for show. They arrived at Leroy's place. He hobbled off his porch to greet them.

"You've met my Grandmother, Eleanor Johnson, before."

"Of course," Leroy answered, smiling. "Come sit on the porch with me and tell me what's been goin' on. I've got lemonade on ice. And your room's all ready."

Granny looked at Yolanda. "So you two have been planning this all along?"

Yolanda smiled and turned for home, heading for her garden and her half-finished painting of the Peace roses, in a sanctuary where war, politics, and budget crises are strictly prohibited.

That night, NPR reported that Congress sent an appropriations bill to the President. She immediately signed it from her hideout in Boca Raton. An anonymous aide told NPR that the bill had won the President's support after Congress threatened to defund the Secret Service's Presidential Protection Detail.

In Life as in Love, We Must

by Yuan Changming

Assist as we
Insist, persist or resist
To subsist







My Hope
by Kirsty Anne Richards

A Very Special Thank you!

First, we would like to extend our gratitude to all those who submitted to our third edition of *redrosethorns magazine*. This year we received 250+ submissions and, as always, are humbled by all those who trusted us with their amazing stories and artwork.

Second, we must thank all of those who shared our publication. Each time we do a Google search, we are stunned to find many people have shared our work with all those in their community and beyond. It never ceases to blow our minds how much support we have to turn this vision into a reality.

And last but certainly not least, a big thank you for the kindness we continue to receive. We are truly blessed to be held by so many wonderful people.

We hope that you have enjoyed the literature and art that gave a glimpse into what rebellion/conformity means to others.

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