

*Inter et Inter:
A Journal of
Possibility*



May 2023

Suggested Excuse

You might say that your taste for me
is like mine for out-of-the-way
classical music, vast sardonic
Bildungsromane from vanished
provincial lands, anarcho-syndicalism,
and sweetbreads – the definition
of snobbery, that accusation
without appeal, for all rebuttal proves it.
If you're afraid (as readers are), you
could claim an antiquarian
interest in how aware I was
of the inner flaw, the impending
disaster (answer:
not very). But don't be afraid –
remember what Haydn said
when Napoleon's cannonball
shivered the Konzertsaal:
"No harm can come to you while I am here,"
and they all
resumed their seats. Have the courage of
your lack of convictions. Show them this;
they'll think that something beginning
"You might say that your taste for me"
must be a love poem. It is.

The Ring

It has and confers powers.
A seemingly random gesture
will cast a lurid light on people
(which none will notice though some may blink),
revealing bad and good –
though only, regrettably, according
to standards so sublime you never grasp them.
(At most, encountering big peaceful dogs,
you can say "Good dog" with confidence,
extend that hand to them and not be bitten.)
It also can't be lost.
If you do mislay it, the next time
you're in a cheap motel, or squat,
the room of a late great-aunt, some place
so old-world that its world is gone,
open a dusty drawer and there it will be.
And when you slip it on again

it will fit, however gnarled,
swollen or tenuous your hand has grown.

Origin

So big and unsmiling
(wolves smile) that the question
of strength and courage never came up,
but there was something off.
Perhaps his inability
to tend and look out for
cubs, and he was banished from the pack
even before he had time
to challenge the old chief. He roamed
the steppes, the mountains of the Caucasus,
the meadows, marshes, and forests west
and north of there, and west again.
Waiting for illness or weariness
to weaken them, he brought down creatures
many times his size. Came to see
it all as his territory,
proportional to his rage. Where he pissed,
men later buried kings and worshiped
the gold-wrapped knucklebones of saints,
and built and burned down towns, and killed
with crossbows, gas, whatever came
to hand. He pissed and pissed. The sea
was another brackish pond; it scarcely
slowed him. He found
more forests (which vanished) and then
big interesting spaces he also claimed;
there were even early horses. Where
he ran, cities grew, and highways and fences
that followed his tracks, and vengeful
men who breathed as if always hunting;
and though they lived crowded and deeply subservient
each thought of himself as a wolf of the steppes.

Fred Pollack is the author of two book-length narrative poems, *THE ADVENTURE* and *HAPPINESS* (Story Line Press; the former reissued 2022 by Red Hen Press), and three collections, *A POVERTY OF WORDS* (Prolific Press, 2015), *LANDSCAPE WITH MUTANT* (Smokestack Books, UK, 2018), and *THE BEAUTIFUL LOSSES* (Better Than Starbucks Books, forthcoming 2023). Many other poems in print and online journals.

but nothing not even universes

happen without revision

~~earth was confusion~~

~~there was light~~

~~there was evening~~

with less than a second

to get it right —too tight

it tears apart, too loose

it balls back up —even

Wisdom had to practice in the

beginning

to even timespace

until a fabric

unfurled

perforated with

holes that explode

but hold

into shining orbs

we orbit

our bodies —but too close

we wither, too

far we wither

but together we

mesh as

connective

tissues

strong enough to grow

←---

universe our vessel a it
call dilation the bear to
unable

shattering light
of

shards into ---->

matter confusion call us vessels
to sink to evolving to bear the
contractions

of light pushing

until our bodies

breathe in vastness

Twice nominated for the 2023 Puschart Prize, Elder Gideon is the author of two poetry collections: *Gnostic Triptych* and *Aegis of Waves* (Atmosphere Press) and co-author with Tau Malachi of *Gnosis of Guadalupe* (EPS Press 2017). His poems and sculptures have appeared in dozens of journals. He is an alumnus of the 2022 Kenyon Review Summer Conference and the 2021 Community of Writers. A veteran English teacher-activist and faith leader of a mystical Christian tradition, Gideon lives to connect. Reach out to him @ elder.gideon or eldergideon@gmail.com

Callbacks

Daniel was surprised to find a horse in his jacket pocket. It was a little thing – just big enough to fit in the palm of his hand – made of brass with jointed metal legs. He hadn't seen it since he was seven, but the horse looked as good now as it had fifty years before when he helped it win the Kentucky Derby.

The jacket, barely heavy enough to be a windbreaker, was only about a year old. Daniel couldn't imagine how the horse had gotten into his pocket, or where it had been all those years. It was a thing from a different state, a different house, a different world, a different Daniel.

Another late entry on his timecard would mean another writeup, so Daniel couldn't afford even the small pause the unexpected weight in his pocket had prompted. He dropped the horse back where he'd found it, grabbed his work backpack, and headed for the garage.

Behind the wheel of his Prius and waiting for the garage door to open, Daniel got the horse out, bent its back legs, straightened its front ones, and put it on the dashboard, sitting on its rump. After a moment's thought, he turned the horse so it was looking out the windshield instead of into the car.

Carefully, so as not to send his new driving companion sliding across the dashboard, Daniel backed his purring hybrid into the street.

Summer in Indiana was equivalent to winter in California, so the weather on the day Daniel won the horse had been pretty much the same as the weather outside his car now.

He'd been seven years old, and his parents had taken him and his brother to the state fair for the very first time.

You could never really trust memories so old, but Daniel thought he remembered that day better than most. There were animals on display, cotton candy, and all manner of attractions. He recalled a few kiddy rides, a fun house, and his first bumper cars. He remembered being not quite tall enough for the Comet Hammer until his dad slipped the operator a few dollars. The safety bar only lowered to his neck level, and through the whole ride Daniel slid around on his seat like a piece of ice on a diner-booth table.

It was the games, though, that really called to him, and the loudest call came from the Kentucky Derby. The Derby consisted of sixteen stations, each of which had a seat in front of a box that operated like a pinball machine. You pulled a plunger and it snapped back, sending a little ball to the top of a maze of pegs and holes. The farther your ball got before dropping in a hole, the farther the light on the booth's backboard representing your horse moved. Whoever's horse got to the finish line first won, and the more people playing, the bigger the prize.

The big and medium prizes were trophies, but the small prize – the one you got if five or fewer people were playing – was a little brass horse with jointed legs. Each Derby station had a painting of its horse on the game field, and if you won a small prize, you got a little horse with the same number as the number on your station. From the moment he saw the tiny stallion with the number 7 on its side, Daniel wanted it more than he wanted anything else at the fair. He set into incessantly begging his parents to let him play.

Mom was less than keen, pointing out that Daniel had already thrown darts and baseballs with results that didn't justify the cost. Dad, though, had more of an ear for the

game's siren call. In the end, Mom agreed to let him give it a try – once! – while she took a look at the craft bazaar, so long as Dad and Daniel both promised that this would be the last game of the day. They'd meet again when it came time to start looking for dinner.

All agreements made and sworn to, Mom went on her way, leaving Dad and Daniel at the Derby.

The moment Mom began to walk away, Daniel tried to bolt for the game, but Dad stopped him with a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Hold your horses, boy," Dad said with no hint of irony. "We don't want to rush into this. You have one chance here, so I'm going to show you how to make the best of it."

That's exactly what they did. First, Dad instructed that they should watch the game played a few times, just to make sure they had the rules and strategy down. Daniel protested that he already had it, but Dad was insistent, so they started by watching three games through. In that time, Daniel noticed that people who pulled their plunger all the way back ended up with balls that slammed into the box's top pins in a way that made them tend to fall into the less valuable holes. This was worthwhile information that Daniel shared with Dad in a whisper, so as not to tip off the competition.

That done, Dad showed Daniel that he had been making notes with the little pad of paper and pencil he habitually carried in his pocket. On it, he had written the numbers 1 through 14, representing the Derby's stations.

At the end of each game, Dad crossed out the number of the winning station, ignoring stations that had won before. His plan was to watch as many games as necessary until only one station remained that hadn't won, indicating that this station was due for a win.

In later years, Daniel realized that this reasoning was faulty for random events and completely meaningless for games that had a significant element of skill, but Dad spoke with such authority that there was no questioning him. It was an unspoken truth in their family that Mom was the go-to parent for any complex discussions, but Dad was their expert when it came to games of chance. He might not be the brightest sign in Vegas, but he was definitely the one with the most references to gambling.

After eighteen games, three stations remained that had not produced a winner: 3, 7, and 8. It was getting late, so Dad told Daniel to pick one of those. When Daniel saw that 7 remained uncrossed on Dad's notepad, he could feel the goddess of luck wrap her arms around him and squeeze for all she was worth. Daniel nabbed the station-7 seat, cutting off a younger boy with popcorn in his hair in the process.

Despite the cool of falling night, Daniel could feel sweat beginning to give him swamp pits. There were twelve players in the game; it was going to be a real contest.

When the game's bell rang and the attendant yelled "They're off!" Daniel's hand was clenched so tight on the plunger that he almost couldn't let go after pulling it back.

He concentrated on always releasing the plunger at the exact moment the ball returned to the chute, so much so that he didn't notice that his horse had tied the lead with his first shot, taken it with his second, and never looked back.

When the bell rang announcing the game's end, Dad was whooping like they'd won Olympic gold. When Daniel looked up, his world became nothing but the light for horse 7 sitting on the backboard's finish line.

With that many players, Daniel's win entitled him to a medium prize – a little trophy on which a jockey stood proud – but he was having none of that. Daniel wanted the

articulated horse. The game operator was happy to give him the smaller prize, and Dad's protest that Daniel should get two small prizes in lieu of the medium prize fell on both Daniel's and the operator's deaf ears, though for very different reasons.

As they walked through the fair in search of Mom, Daniel rocked the horse in the air as if it galloped beside him. His grin was so broad it made Bozo look like Emmett Kelly in comparison.

In the craft bazaar, they found Mom hovering over a selection of crocheted teapot covers, scrutinizing in particular one that had the shape of a yellow hen. Some secret Mom-sense alerted her that Daniel was running up well before she could have heard him in the hullabaloo, and she gave a delighted little laugh as he reined himself in before her, sliding to a stop on the dirt floor just shy of collision.

"How'd you do?" Mom asked, as if she couldn't see the prize being held like an equine Hope Diamond before her.

Dad, arriving a moment after his speeding son, caught the question himself. "We were just horsing around," he said, closing the opening Mom was clearly leaving for Daniel to announce his triumph. The joke would have been bad even if it had worked – which it hadn't – but neither Mom nor Daniel commented. Dad's joke often had the appropriateness and subtle wit of a cannibal eating a man named Stu and were best let lie.

The rest of the fair was a blank space in Daniel's memory, having been erased to make room for the decades of birthdays, notable happenings, milestones, and random bits of nonsense that were meaningful only in their ability to avoid being purged from his store of recollections. The only other memory of that day that lingered was a moment when Daniel was lying in bed waiting for sleep and realized he couldn't recall seeing the little

horse since showing it to Mom in the bazaar. At some point he had set it down or it had escape from his pocket, and in the evening's flurry of raucous fun his treasure had been forgotten.

The fair was over. There was no going back. Mom and Dad could do nothing, crying would do nothing, so Daniel just lay in empty silence letting the reel of memory play over and over to its tail.

But then, this morning, he'd found the horse again. That had to be a good sign.

Through the window, the little horse watched the city roll by as they drove to the office. A grocery store, a coffee place, a liquor store, the boarded windows where the hobby store had been, a gas station across the intersection from another gas station, a bus stop, a man with a baby, a dog pulling the woman holding its leash – it all had to be overwhelmingly new for a little horse that had been lost for so many years after having only been to the fair before. As he drove, Daniel tried to imagine the passing world through its eyes.

The old family station wagon Daniel was driving – the same teal-and-white 1968 Chevrolet Impala Dad had driven when he dropped Daniel off at middle school for the first time – wasn't going to fit in any of the compact spaces in Fiscal Productions' parking lot. He went to the larger spaces near the back fence and backed the big car into one among pickup trucks and soccer-parent minivans.

After dropping the horse back in his jacket pocket and getting out of the car, Daniel hurried across the lot with his backpack over his shoulder. He wanted to hold the horse, make it gallop through the air, but worried about what his coworkers might say. When he was nine, a girl his age in the pediatrician's waiting room had teased him for reading

Highlights because that was for babies. In high school, his friends had ragged on him when he mentioned considering trying out for the school play, so he'd initiated a year of misery by going out for track instead. Those were the memories that clung when so many about hands held and simple pleasures washed away, so he avoided forming more.

"You just made it," Abigail said as Daniel walked in the building's rear entrance. As the office manager, she made sure clocking in and out went smoothly. Almost every other company in their industry had moved to an electronic timecard system and entry badges, but Fiscal clung to what worked.

Daniel smiled and nodded to Abigail as he passed her to clock in, not wanting to give her any excuse to comment on his recent issues with tardiness.

As if she was one to talk. Daniel had forgotten that it was casual Friday, but Abigail was taking full advantage as evidenced by the "Future MILF" t-shirt stretched over her pregnant belly. There had, Daniel knew, been grumbles about her various Friday shirts in the past, but she was in solid with the general manager and everyone knew she probably wasn't coming back after maternity leave. Why bother complaining when nothing you could say would make a difference?

That should be FP's slogan, Daniel thought on the way to the stairs. It was certainly better than "Leveraging Value for Superior Outcomes."

Five years back, the hiring of a consulting firm to modernize FP's business had resulted in converting the building's second floor into an open-plan office. At the same time, a hot-desk policy was implemented, meaning that nobody had dedicated desks anymore but instead just took the first empty desk they encountered. This would have made a certain kind of sense if the company had also implemented the flexible-schedule

and remote-work options the firm recommended, but they didn't. The result was an office where everyone had a desk they preferred to use but could feel no ownership of, and where they had no recourse if someone else was using their favorite workspace when they arrived.

The two dozen desks were identical – plain affairs with a pair of flat-screen monitors, a tower computer with corporate-standard software, a phone, and an office chair that met ergonomic standards to the satisfaction of Legal. Most desks were already occupied by workers silently going through email, flipping through a spreadsheet, or – in one case – just staring at their empty monitor, perhaps waiting for ennui to be overcome by the need to remain employed.

"Hey, Daniel," Dot said as he passed her favored desk. "Happy Friday."

"Happy Friday," Daniel said, but it was a reflexive thing. He wasn't happy.

So far as he could tell, none of them were happy. They didn't need to be happy. Happiness wasn't in the job description one way or the other.

An old boss had once said, "We aren't paying you to be happy; we're paying you to keep us happy." Another had said, "Work is something you do so that the lights are still on when you die." Those thoughts were true when the first boss turned to alcohol, and remained true when the second was found facedown at the bottom of his pool.

The desk Daniel liked best was in the far corner – nobody behind him, nobody to his right. It sat empty, which was good. Pretty much everyone respected everyone else's desk preferences, for the sake of preserving what sense of security could be squeezed from the situation.

Daniel put his backpack on the desk beside the keyboard, then got the little horse out of his pocket. He arranged it so it was sitting again, this time under his twin monitors, turned so it could watch him work. They weren't supposed to have personal items on their desks, but if you didn't leave stuff overnight, nobody said anything. Unless there was going to be a visit from the main office, in which case all bets were off.

"Hey, Daniel," Gene said, calling from the next desk over.

"Morning," Daniel said, turning to his coworker. Gene was a good guy. They'd gone for drinks once and after drinking too much Gene told him about how he was working on a novel about an undead ghoul-thing and a badass monster hunter, but was secretly inspired by his wife and her first husband. He never did clarify which person inspired which character.

"I think Quinn was looking for you," Gene said. "Did you get the Electra Spaces thing done?"

"Yeah," Daniel said. "Last night."

"You're a champ. Saved us from the frier."

The previous night, Daniel'd had to clock out and then come back up to the desk to finish the project. Not much else he could have done. Time for the critical project had been underestimated by management, he was the only person on the badly composed team that could finish it, and department policy strictly prohibited overtime.

At least Gene was appreciative. Nobody else was going to recognize Daniel's effort, although they all and sundry certainly would have recognized his inadequacy if the project had been late.

"Thanks," Daniel said and turned back to his desk.

Beneath the thirty-pound green-screen monitor, the little horse looked back at Daniel

You appreciate me, too, don't you, Daniel said to the horse, keeping his voice inside to avoid unwanted looks. The horse didn't say anything, but it didn't disagree, either.

The Apple II had been the family's first computer, purchased when Daniel was in college but still living at home. He'd taken classes on how to use it, and amazed Dad with his knowledge of the futuristic-seeming device. Dad had been excited to use it to manage their checkbook, and had promised Mom she could keep recipes on it.

That it still worked well enough for Daniel to have produced the Electra Spaces reports was a testament to its engineering. Daniel slid the boot disk into the drive, closed the drive door, and turned on the power. He went to work.

Hours went by in a blur, just as days did when one was stamped out by the same die as the next. Somewhere in there Daniel had lunch, going with Gene to the deli, eating from the brown bags they had brought from home, talking about girls and sports on the way back to FP.

At the end of the day, when the bell rang and Mr. Quinn wished them all a good weekend, Gene gave out a whoop of excitement.

"Meet you after lunch for the movies tomorrow?" Gene asked.

"You bet!" Daniel said. He lifted the top of his school desk and got his books and pencil box, making sure not to forget the little metal horse he'd brought with him.

Out in front of Franklin Pierce Elementary, Mom waited in the station wagon to drive him home. Normally he took the bus, but they were going to see relatives for dinner

so today was special. It would be the trip to his aunt's where he saw a baby deer for the first time, something he'd never forget.

"How was show and tell?" Mom asked as he got in the car, cutting right to what she knew would be first on his mind.

"Great!" Daniel said. He put his books on the seat beside him and closed the car's door. "Dot brought a doll that had a dress from Mexico, but Lightning was the best." He held up the little horse as if she hadn't seen it a thousand times before.

"It's named Lightning now, is it?" Mom said.

"Yeah," Daniel said. "He needed a name. Names make things forever."

"I guess they do," Mom said. She put the car in gear, making Daniel's seat lean way back until he was fully reclined. The covers were warm.

"Can you remember my name?" she asked.

Daniel wasn't sure he did. "Lightning?" he asked.

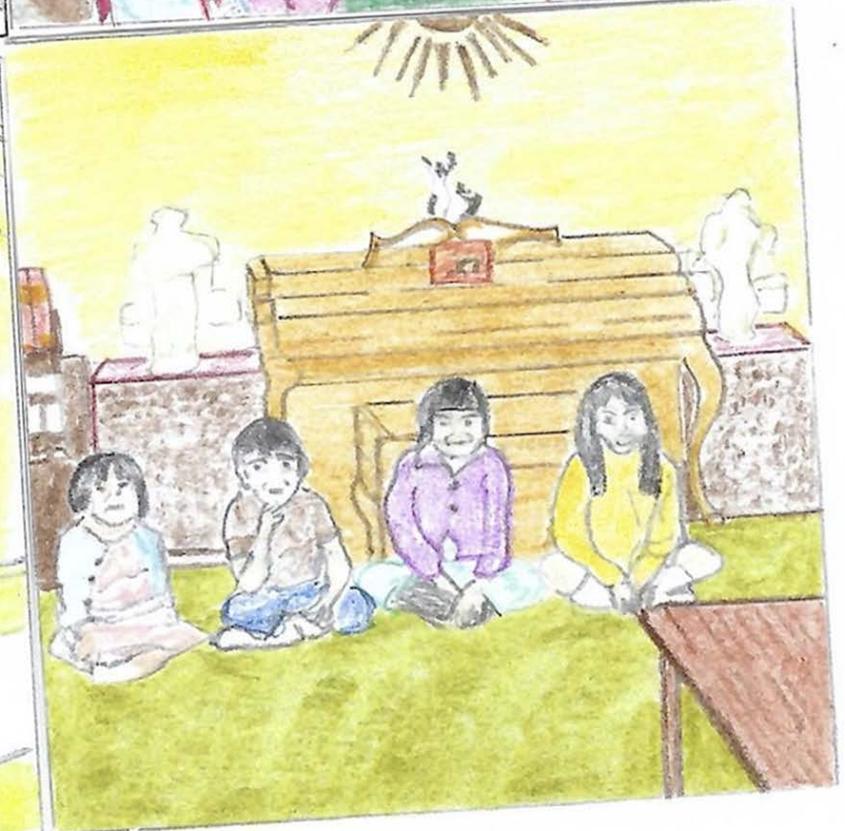
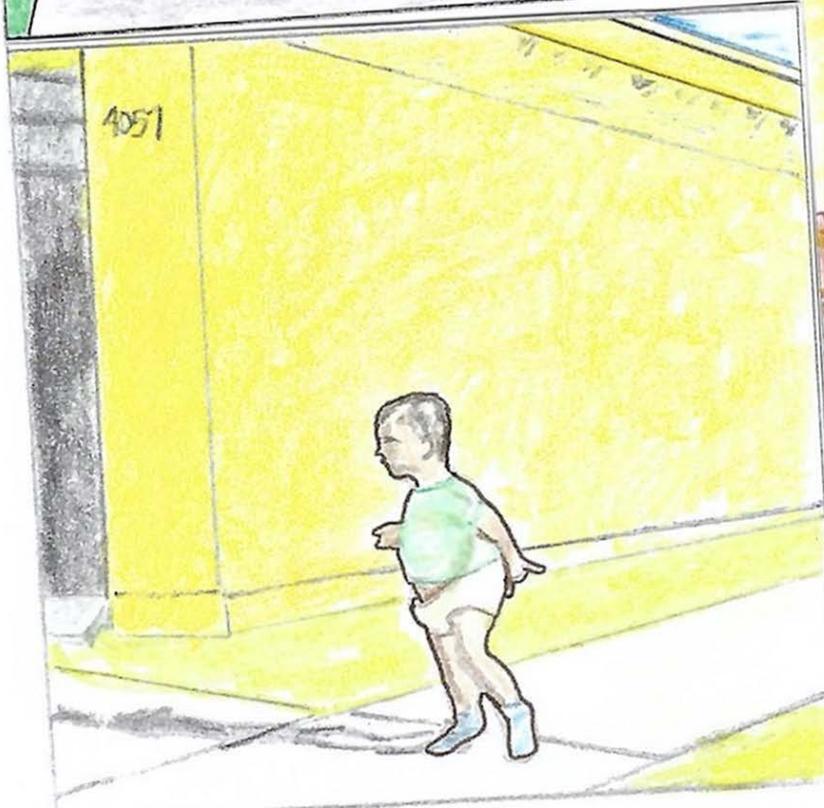
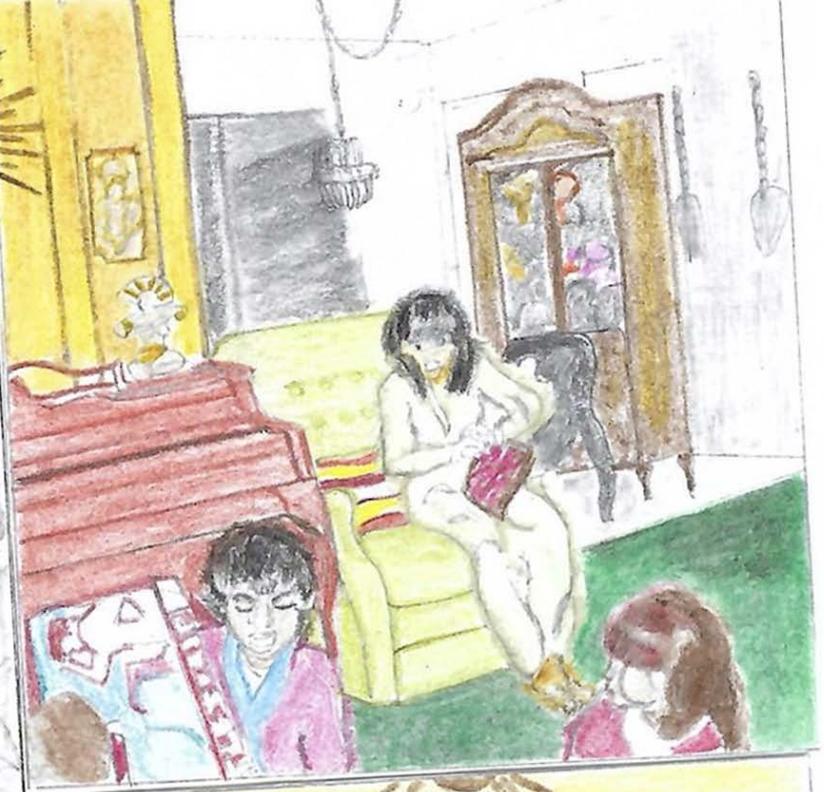
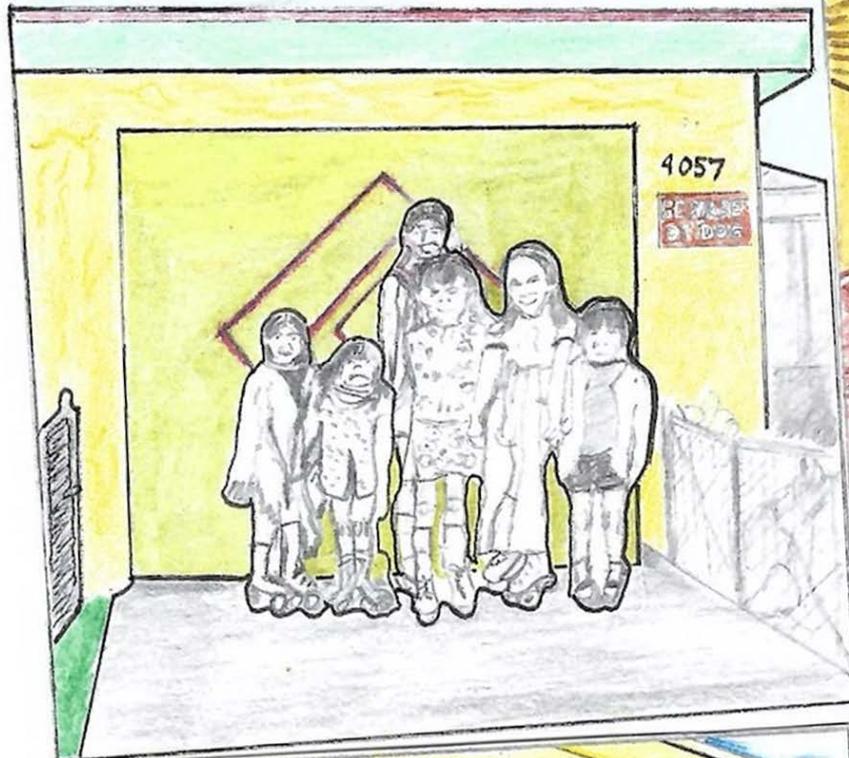
She laughed a little. "It's Alex," she said. "I'm your daughter Alex. How are you feeling?"

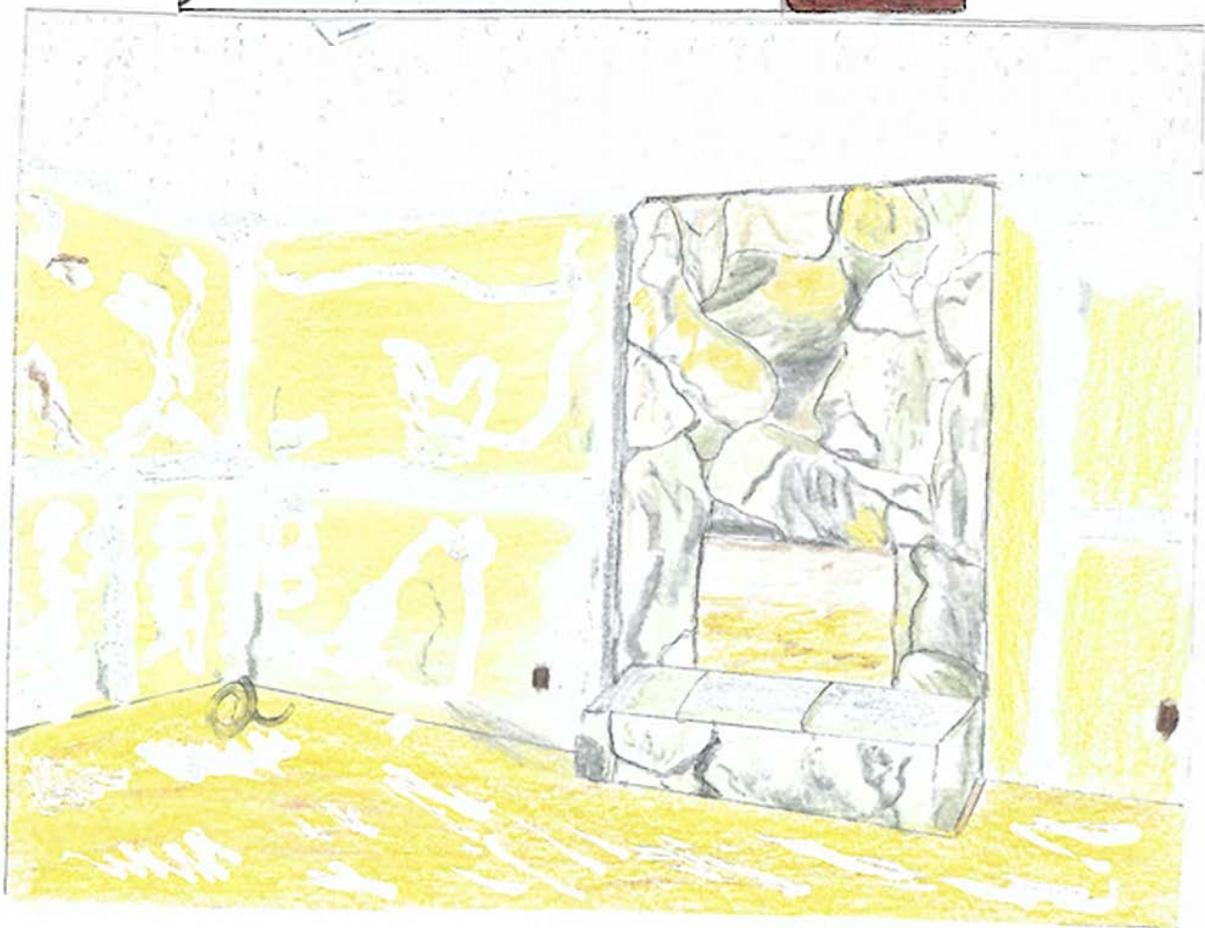
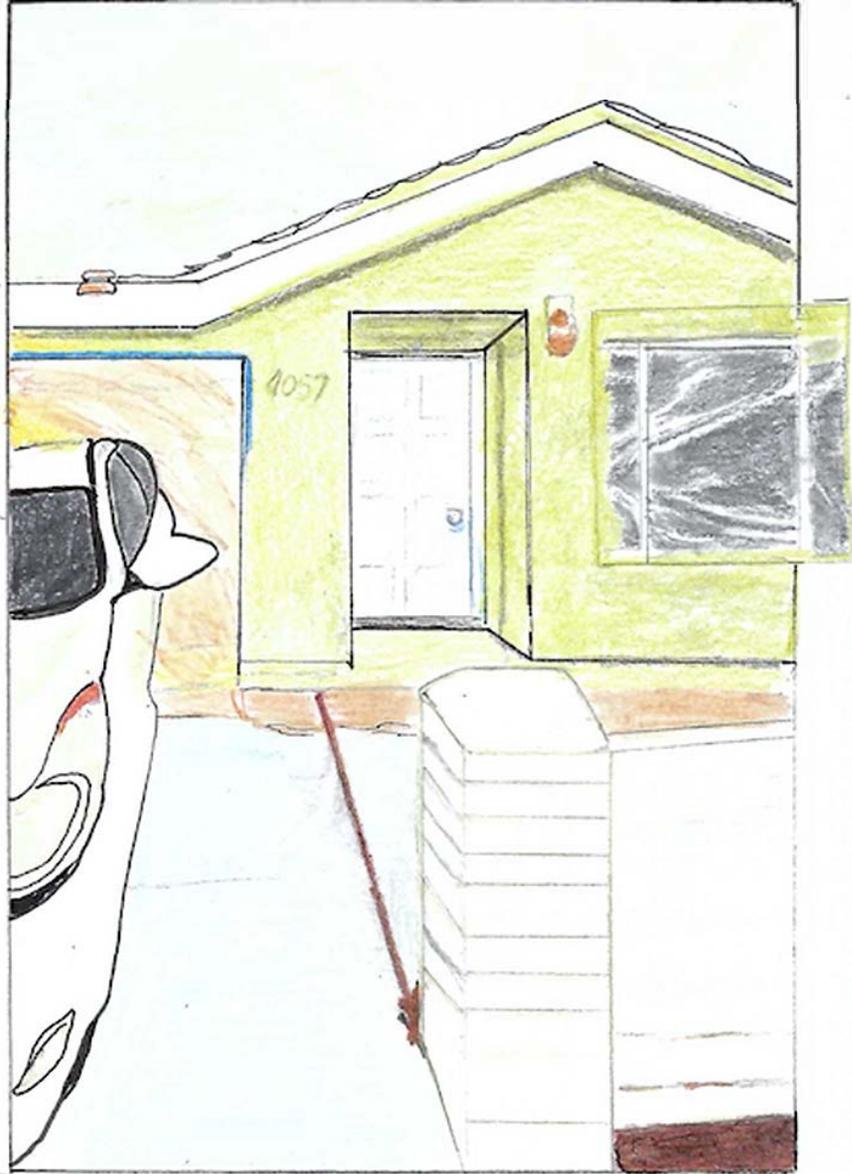
Daniel realized she was holding his hand. "I have a daughter Alex," he said, smiling.

"That's nice."

Then he went back to sleep, and the little horse was lost once again.

Over the past 30+ years, Dominick Cancilla's short fiction has appeared in scores of publications. His most recent novel, *Tomorrow's Journal*, is available from Cemetery Dance Publications. For those wondering, Cancilla really did win a little horse at a carnival when he was small and immediately lose it. He waits patiently for its return.







ERASURE is a series of semi-autobiographical panels in pencil, watercolor pencil, and ink.

Tina V. Cabrera is founding and managing editor of *Inter et Inter*. She makes art and teaches in the PNW. More about her work as a writer and artist can be found at www.tvcannyuncanny.com.

Flawless

In the beginning, a long, long, reaaaally long time ago, and also now, and in the future, The Grower experiments with tiny little worlds inside glass terreriums, which she displays on white shelves surrounding a fireplace. She calls it her Experimental Phase. She's trying to grow everything just right, *organically*.

"Do be an angel," she says to you, "and go and check on them?"

And you obey, appearing in miniature inside these little worlds, one at a time, the eyes and ears of The Grower as she tests out her plans.

"And remember, no interfering," she says.

"Hello," a boy says, offering you the curved handle of a bright yellow umbrella. "We don't get many newbies here these days. Perhaps I can change your mind."

"About what?"

"Living here in Flawless, of course." The boy can't be much older than thirteen, but he's dressed like a man who's seen enough history he can't escape it. His boots are polished, his slacks pressed, but the rest of him is unmistakably off kilter. He pushes his tweed fedora back with a finger, balancing it on the tip of his head, while his starched collar flips up, and the buttons on his too-bright-yellow suitvest hang one misaligned hole off.

"That's the farmer's market," the boy points, "and there's the bakery, the toy store, and the lemonade stand." Each storefront the boy points out is painted an adorable pastel pink or yellow or cornflower blue, with bay windows so big you can

see right inside to where all the goods stand deliciously on display. The street bustles with activity.

“Are you hungry?”

“No,” you say, and strangely, you aren’t.

The boy shrugs, “Not missing much.” He continues down the cobbled lane, jumping up to smack a few flowering vines that hang from an ornate gaslight, the likes of which line both sides of the quaint, cobbled street. “Come on,” he motions.

“These are the reasons not to live here,” the boy says when you’ve nearly caught up. “First, it’s flawless, just like the name, but that’s a bad thing,” he stops, hand up like a crossing guard. “Let me tell you why.” He jumps up and kicks his heels together as if he can’t control himself. “There’s nothing fun about perfection. Yeah, sure, it’s interesting, trying to find perfection, challenging yourself to get there, to get something *just* there,” he needles a finger into the air. “But once you’ve found it?” His arms swing wide, as though the speech is choreographed. “What then? I’ll tell you. This.” He pirouettes, arms out to the town, head flung back, face to the sky.

“Good morning,” someone calls down from a shuttered window, turquoise-blue and flung open just above your head. “Gorgeous day, isn’t it?”

“It’s beautiful,” you admit. And something smells wonderful too. You can taste it. Candied apples?

“Yep, nailed it,” the boy says, reading your mind, “and it’s not even apple season.”

“Now,” the boy stomps an untied shoe, hands to hips, a serious expression plastered across his face (though you sense a smile). “If I had your vote – and your

vote is what I'm after – I'd find a way to get *unperfect*. To bring a little mess to Flawless. Just a teeny," he pinches his fingers together, "bit of trouble. Nothing scary. Not murder or rape or even armed robbery, nothing like that. Just a little misdemeanor. Something to keep us on our toes."

You can't help but scan the village again. It's the cutest darn place you've ever seen. You want to steal a little sense of it and carry it away in your pocket.

"I know the feeling," your tour guide says. "A little bit of daring – the stealing part – and a little wistfulness, for everything that's just so. You don't think this kind of equilibrium can stay intact, do you." It's an accusation more than a question.

"Nothing's perfect," you say, because you've never yet witnessed perfection. As far as you know, none of the other Messengers have either.

"Ah," he says, sounding disappointed. "I see. Well," he tips his tweed hat forward and bows in your direction, "best of luck. I'll be sure to check back again tomorrow. That's my way." Then the world of Flawless disappears.

And you reappear back in The Grower's apartment, eyes smacked sideways by the glare of an all white room, blinding you like a flashlight beam to the eyes. White's everywhere you turn, and as you turn, you feel caught up in a too-white cloud, heavy air filling your throat. Your breath hitches. Panic is about to set in when a watery smudge lifts itself through the radiance to meet pale pink lips. The Grower takes a sip of hot water from a clear glass mug as she perches atop a milk-washed picnic bench watching you. She owns a mess of auburn hair, piled like a bird's nest atop her head, tawny and divine and undeniably substantive.

Sure enough, your feet find the ground beneath them.

Slowly, your eyes adjust, the textures of every surface surfacing. An unmade bed, sheets wrinkled into values of off-white and nearly-grey, a white cushioned window seat, tufted with buttons, thrown with alternating white satin and white canvas pillows, a crocheted blanket folded on the far side, lumpy and soft and all white. The Grower asks about your day.

Then doesn't wait for an answer since she already knows it. "Do you know what I love?" The Grower asks. "Maps. Maps map out territories by skimming away the excess and giving boundary where it's needed. Do you know what a boundary is?"

You do. You say so, steadily feeling your way through the room.

"No," The Grower corrects. "A boundary marks the limit of an area. A forest, an ocean, a farm. Boundaries give order to wilderness. But plants! Plants just grow. They don't give a damn about boundaries. People surely don't."

You're lost. You tell her so. She ignores you, bouncing up from the picnic bench to turn a corner you didn't realize existed, only to return immediately with a bag of garden soil, dragging a trail of dark wet mud across the painted floor like a unexpected gash. She lifts a glass terrarium from the center of her picnic bench and removes its bottom dish, filling it with grabby handfuls of dirt.

You peek around the corner.

"It's my favorite time of year," you hear The Grower say, "Planting Season. The best part of the process."

Terrariums the size of overgrown watermelons line the white bookshelves, layers of rock and soil and peat building delightful patterns inside glass cloches, the moss in one so green it vibrates. Atop these strata stand miniature villages. In one, tiny hammocks swing beneath hidden shelters high inside the limbs of bonsai trees, a series of toothpick bridges connecting each one, accompanied by floating firefly orbs that glow yellow after sunset. Another contains rolling hills, a few sliced in half and hollowed out, replaced by a dome of solar-sensitive windows that warm cozy interiors cluttered with towering stacks of tiny books, next to overstuffed reading chairs, before the most delicate setting of tea trays. Still another terrarium features animal-hide pyramids circled inside long prairie grasses, dotted with purple and pink wildflowers. A herd of bison graze nearby. The Grower chooses her favorite miniature world from a shelf. It's also the most active. Tiny people move about their cobbled, public square, calling out hellos and bartering for goods, trying not to wobble over as The Grower walks them to her picnic bench.

“Well,” The Grower says to you, “back you go.” She lifts the glass cloche from its glass base and sets it on the table.

And then you are inside.

On your butt. In the dirt. Again.

The boy is there, umbrella handle waiting, a monologue in media res. “...as the story goes, once upon a time in Flawless someone found a way out of the dome and ventured into other parts of the world, seeing a great number of things, some good, some bad. When this person returned – we don't know for certain if it was a

man or a woman or a something in between – they told all the people of Flawless every detail of what they had seen. They returned, they said, because the people of Flawless deserved to know what was out there. But let me ask you this, was it right of him/her/they to tell them?”

“Good morning!” someone yells down from another charmingly shuttered window. “What a beautiful day!”

You wave. The boy snatches your raised hand from the apple-scented air and drags you onward, off the cobbled street and into the softest, greenest grass you’ve ever seen. You take off your shoes just to feel the smooth blades tickle between your toes.

“Some people say the more history you know the more freedom you have. Have you heard of that before? I didn’t understand it the first time I heard it.”

“Where did you hear that?” you ask, curious if someone in your position was interfering again.

“Doesn’t matter. But they have a point! Take The Bomb. We all know about that bomb. It’s hard to forget. But what if we did? What would that do to our collective conscience? As a people of Flawless?”

“Do people of Flawless know about The Bomb?” That world had been pretty far along in the process before it was blown to smithereines. But how would the boy know about that?

Surely, that Messenger had been dismissed.

You wonder what a dismissal means. You're not often allowed in The Grower's apartment when she has company, and when you're not in her apartment, you're traveling the worlds with a tour guide.

"Everyone knows about The Bomb," the boy says. "Even in Flawless."

Huh, you think. Funny how some stories insist on surviving while others die away.

"Anyway, knowing what we know about what that bomb did makes us aware of our ignorance, and ignorance is not simply bliss, as some say, but it chains us to our world without our knowledge of being chained." He grabs a cone of cotton candy from a vendor, who's standing beside a cute little cart, beneath the shade of a flowering cherry tree, whose petals float softly down around us like mini clouds of pink cotton candy.

The boy hands you a puff of blue sugar.

It tastes magical.

Now you wish you had tried the lemonade.

"Anyway," the boy repeats, pushing back his hat just so. "As the story goes, the villagers get together and decide to let a few select people venture outside the dome, as long as they promise to report back on what they find. A few don't, but most come back. They've seen things. Things people who stayed haven't seen. So, as is the way with humans, more people start leaving so they can see what others have seen. Until everyone in the village has gone outside and experienced the outside and become a part of it, only to come back to the home they missed when they were away." He holds up a finger, muting the question on your lips.

“Back at home, the village of adventurers looked around themselves and realized they were now like every other people anywhere. There was nothing special about their village any longer. The people, however, still thought they were special for belonging there. And in a way they were special, because the people in the village now knew best of all how to love what they once had, because they had now lost what they once had.”

The boy looks at you with tears in his eyes, grinning. “You see? How can we ever be perfect without some imperfection?”

A child playing in the nearby wildflower fields hands you a bouquet and tells you all the daisies in the village have decided to bloom a day early for your arrival.

“I want to go,” the boy tells you, pulling on your shoulder. Then, in half-crazed laughter, he yells, “Show me the way out!”

You think of other Messengers. Like the Messenger whose world blew up. Was it hope that made them interfere? Pity?

You see the beauty in the bunch of wildflowers in your hand, the vibrant colors, some buds still waiting to open while others have fully bloomed petals with sticky stamens and seeds spilling over. You see bright, lime green veins running inside the dark green leaves along the stems, pulling water through the plant, mimicking the same design as a human’s lungs. Everything perfectly and organically and beautifully built.

The Grower’s warning plays on repeat in the back of your mind, even as you pick up the boy’s yellow umbrella. You twirl the umbrella in a wide circle until it

taps the back of your bootheel. "This way," you say to the boy, and you lead him to the edge of town and show him where to dig.

White dishes line The Grower's kitchen shelves, which are floating shelves, white on white walls, so the dishes appear to be hanging in the air. Directly opposite the kitchen, flanking a white-bricked fireplace with a scorched hearth so black it looks bombed-out, two enormous white bookshelves hold up glass terrariums with alternating layers of grey-ish white rock and dark soil and the remnants of greyed-out miniature, storybook villages. One – only one – terrarium has a bit of green moss left. The Grower spies the color vibrating just so and takes the terrarium down from the shelf, looking inside, talking to herself as though she's talking to someone else, like she see things others can't.

The bit of green that caught The Grower's eye is caught beneath the foot of a young boy standing in what remains of Flawless. He is giving someone a hand up by the curved handle of a polka-dot blue umbrella, prattling on about who knows what, but being very kind about it. So kind, in fact, that the young lady he helped up from the dirt thanks him, picks a flower from the side of the walk, and secures it to the boy's perfectly pressed blue vest. Another flower pops up to replace the one picked, and as the two tiny figures walk down a cobbled street, more flowers pop up and trail behind them, until boy and girl and flower reach a gas streetlight where the flowers wind up and gather themselves into a hanging basket, swinging down a vine in the loveliest of ways. The boy hops up to swat at it, and both he and his

companion laugh happily at their good fortune. “Oh to be in such a flawless, perfect kind of place,” they say.

The Grower takes the terrarium over to her picnic table, fetches a mug of hot water – adding a bright yellow slice of lemon – and then takes a seat to watch. She wants to see how the town will remake itself this time, step by step, one kindness begetting another. She wants to see where and how and when the flaw appears, and how or if she can prevent it.

Megan Paonessa is an award-winning fiction writer and professor of creative writing at Marquette University. You can find her work in *The Adirondack Review*, *PANK*, *Identity Theory*, *fwriction:review*, *Camera Obscura*, and elsewhere.

Wet Knee Stains And Dirty Hands

Mid-morning
but the grass is still
deep dew wet.
I dig small chasms,
add fertilizer,
water and garden soil,
carefully placing each plant
in its prepared hole.
I gently press the dirt
around the plant
until it is firmly in the ground.

By noon,
thirty-five vegetable plants
are now bathing in the sun.

I could have tended
your nutrient poor love
with the same thorough care
but all you saw
was....

Protracting Interstice

I shelter in this slight space
prolonging the inevitable confrontation
while gathering and arranging
specific cognitive data.

It is tranquil
like surf sounds
or the touch of its bubbly foam.

While not life altering,
the approaching interaction
requires skillful execution
like approaching a stray dog.

My desire to remain viable
confronts the time signature
that defines
the quality of lies to come.

Deli Lady

The lunch bag contains
a ham and cheese
on rye,
Ritz crackers with Muenster slices,
a Granola Bar
and a yellow paper napkin
upon which
she has simply printed,
“I love you”.

As you finish,
three things about this lady
are certain:
the day is Tuesday,
she never learned the Palmer method
and most of all
a good woman
can quench your every hunger
from inside
a brown paper sack.

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Bookends

The newborn in the cradle
The first ornate bookend
Made of the finest marble
A bit of trouble, but
They can only babble
Presumed innocence
For some, no one
Will ever be as cherished again
Than before they can even
Remember when their story began

Except perhaps
Right before the last
Intricate bookend, staring at them
Eyes downcast
Weeping purity onto
Their weariness
Reborn love from
Memory-wombs
Trying to nurse them
Away from their tombs

But the novels started rotting long ago
Most love polishing marble
Aging books- less so
Pages torn out of spite
Others worn out from the light
Text too small to decipher
Or too nonsensical to even bother
Self-polishing ones thrown out in the cold
Shivering from their stories never told
Bookends with nothing left to hold

Spinner of Golden Threads

You were spinning threads of gold
In a fucked up world
Somehow they saw its shimmer
While others were thrown aside
Their threads deemed tainted
By the same shreds of consciousness
That yours helped sew
Why can they see the celestial in you?

And not in the masses who perished
Alone in the cold abyss
Heartstrings left unuse

Sealegs

My briny sealegs
Twist, turn, float
Contort with my body
In chlorinated waves
A manmade boat

I've spent too long crying
This water is the opposite
Of my Kentucky tears
In the middle of a YMCA
A manmade sea for sealeless seafarers

What kind of sealegs did they have?
My grandparents, my friends
Are they in some distant world now
Flying underwater with no breath
Laughing at our misconception of death?

Haunted House

Had enough of
The deep breaths
That consumed me
As it stood there
Waiting for someone
To pierce its air

So I slid over leaves
And under ravens
Watching me stoke
My internal fires
To keep hurling myself
Into my dark desires

The elderly house
Once sent a chill down
Thunder's spine
But I sat in its obscurity

As the beings observed
From their realm of security

They turned the key to
Their vacation home
And sat with me
Until I was ready to dance
Feverishly with their silver sweat
No one else had ever given them a chance

Frozen Coffee in a Midwestern Winter

Sipping frozen coffee in a midwestern winter
As a crystalline scene unfolds
Through the windows, embracing us
In childhood fantasies like an old movie
Most prefer warming their palms with
Caffeinated particles, which run laps
To create the fire that warms their bellies
But we let ours stroll leisurely
A wintry mix of sweetened snow
Illuminating our cells like holiday lights
So we can better dance
With the ice fairies in the air
Who know we share their madness

Jennifer Klein is a writer, musician, and artist. Poetry is one of her favorite ways to make social commentary and merge her inner and outer worlds. Her poems have been featured or are forthcoming in Hawai'i Pacific Review, Fahmidan Journal, Bombfire, and others. She received a bachelor's degree in English with minors in Dutch Studies and Norwegian from Indiana University Bloomington. You can follow her on Instagram @JenniferKleinReal

The Leporine Apotheosis

It was a pocketwatch universe
A mechanism as infinite as it was intricate
With every floating mote of dust, every drop of water on every leaf, every little ridge or crevice on every rock having been placed
Just so
In accordance with some divine organizing principle
By which even the smallest things were imbued with intention and purpose
Had always been imbued with intention and purpose
Such that everything I experienced was the culmination and the fruition of plans that had existed even before the universe itself existed
Every mote of dust, every ridge or crevice on every rock being the fulfillment of an all-encompassing scheme that had been laid down over 13 billion years ago
Even the minutest of details going exactly to perfect plan

Except for me, and a handful of other wanton sinners
(A handful which would, I would come to understand, include almost everybody who was not my direct tutor in this cosmogony)
We who were grit in God's gears
And we just kept flying in the face of all of this beautiful machination
With our unforgivable
Mere
Humanness

And every feeling I had, and every thought I had, and every thought I should have had but didn't and every thought I didn't even know I was having because I was lying to myself so much
Rippled
Infinitely out
To the very edge of time
Where and when
I would still be tortured in Hell
For choosing to break the divinely designed mechanism
That was as perfect
As it was so brittle
To be entirely laid waste
By a thirteen year old boy
Admiring the curves of a girl's
Breasts

Oh, what a fragile fragile fragile fragile fragile fragilefragilefragilefragile universe it was

And it was all my fault when it broke
Wasn't it?

So people kept telling me

I had ruined lives

I had ravaged God's plan for all things

And I think I was out one night alone, standing on the lawn of a house where I had been allowed to stay

Smoking

Divorced

Staring up at the stars

Trying to think about how it all made sense

And when and how I had chosen to run so deeply afoul of that sense

And I considered a rabbit

Grazing on the lawn

And I thought there was nothing wrong with that rabbit

For all the rabbit's ignorance of what they *should* be doing

The rabbit didn't ask about purpose

And yet the rabbit was fine, for who the rabbit was

It was a shoddy sort of universe

That would give us consciousness

Just to punish us

For straying from some vast and inscrutable plan that was supposed to be

uppermost in our minds at all times, regardless of our inability to encompass that plan within our minds

It was a better universe

In which rabbits were rabbits

And nothing was wrong with that

Nobody asked the rabbit to define love

And then told the rabbit they were insane and sick because they couldn't answer the question correctly

And had it been one year or two since my ex-wife had told me that

And I had hardly been able to think of anything else since

The rabbit just was

They didn't have to justify themselves

The rabbit just was

And that was perfect

With no intention, with no grand, straining effort of soul
The rabbit was just perfect

Exactly because they weren't worrying about the ultimate fate
of their soul
Or any of that shit

Things have been different since the night of the Leporine Apotheosis
Being in the moment--I'm not perfect at it
But it's not about being perfect
It's just about being

Not about being the infinite superior alternate universe versions of you against whom you
are perpetually judged and found wanting
Not about being punished infinitely and eternally always and forever for your failures
against the perfect divine plan which made no allowance for the slightest bit of need or
vulnerability on your part
Not about being the villain in the stories of others who don't know how to have a story
without an antagonist

But it could just be about being
The way a rabbit is

It's not the worst thing in the world to set down the overwhelming guilt, the paranoia, the
perfectionism of living in the fragile-but-perfect clockwork

Maybe, in fact
It's the worst thing to hold onto it
Such that we are all twisted up with anxieties about invented things
Rather than spending out time
With rabbits
On a lawn
Beneath stars

The most perfect thing about us
Is that any imperfect one of us should ever manage to imperfectly love another imperfect
one of us

As imperfectly as I am able
I try not to care about being perfect anymore

It seems so much more important to me now just to love

Not to worry about the ramifications of every action and inaction out to the nth degree
But just to love

Not to love perfectly
But just to love

I'd thank that rabbit, if I could

But I'm almost certain that rabbit is dead now
Which I guess is a sad thing
But I don't think that rabbit spent their time obsessing about their own death, or obsessing
about what came after, or obsessing about how their thinking was surely deranged and
then obsessively questioning each and every thought
I think the rabbit just spent their time being a rabbit
And loving their mate and their friends and their children to the best of their ability
Until their time was up
And that is not a sad life

If the watchmaker made no room for a life like that
What even is the point of the watch?

Has it just been to generate the perfect sacred music of Johann Sebastian Bach
Those hymns to watchmaker God
And everything else has been vile putrefaction and gross squandering of potential?

No

It's in the rabbits
It's in the grass
It's in the stars
It's in Johann Sebastian Bach
And it's in you
And it's in me

The purpose is in you
The beautiful is in you
The good is in you
As it is in me
As it is imperfectly in us all

And there is no sinning against it
Because if the plan doesn't allow for imperfection
Then what the Hell kind of plan is it anyway?

It is imperfectly in us all
In this mortal, compromised moment

And when we imperfect beings imperfectly love each other in our imperfection
We become more perfect

How perfect
Is that

James and Jane

At 18 months, the twins responded to the mirror differently. The mother had hung the mirror close to the ground deliberately; that is, she wanted clarification of the terrible truth she had sensed at their birth: These twins could not be more different.

When James was placed at the opposite wall of the baby room, he crawled hungrily to the call of his reflection, smudging the glass with wet kisses of his pouting lips. Jane, on the other hand, remained unmoved by her reflection when the mother picked her up propped her directly in front of the bottom half of the mirror. Like a cat, Jane responded to her reflection with sheer indifference.

The mother was no naive, self-appointed scientist; she did not arrive at her disheartening conclusion based on one experiment. No, she performed the mirror test multiple times in various configurations. In each case, the result was the same: James exhibited self-recognition and Jane did not. The mother did research to reinforce her findings. She read dozens of articles on child development but did not feel the need to consult the expert diagnosis of a physician. That's not quite it. Feelings had nothing to do with her decision to determine how to best care for her children. Being the stickler for details as she was, she based her decisions on disinterested observation.

She started by painting a large dot on Jane's belly with a non-toxic marker in an eye-catching color, red, and sat Jane in front of the very same mirror. Instead of looking at the mark in the mirror and then using it to reach for the mark on her stomach, Jane sat dumbly. The mother, disgusted at the image which came to her mind just then, of her pet chihuahua and its wandering eyes, unable to focus for even one second, gave up that day after just one try. But despite her disappointment, she soldiered on. She tried the same basic mirror test

many more times, varying the shape and color of the mark, to no avail. That is, Jane failed the test on two fronts: One, to comprehend that the image in the mirror was a representation of herself, and two, to correctly identify the shape of the mark. For in the least, if she could point to the mark in the mirror or the mark on her belly and identify it correctly, then perhaps, the mother could have reason to hope. After all, she started homeschooling the twins from day one, speaking to them constantly and teaching them the words for everything, from the kitchen to the backyard. Most baffling was that despite her lack of self-recognition, Jane demonstrated the ability to speak (if mumbling can be taken as speech). Most of her language sounded, to the mother, like pure gibberish. The mother was too impatient with Jane. That's not quite it. She lacked the enthusiasm necessary to penetrate through her own wall of indifference. After all, she had two children, so where one was found lacking, luckily the other made up for it. While James grew and thrived, he did not, however, entirely leave his sister behind. They seemed to share a language all their own. When the mother, frustrated, would raise her voice at Jane, "Can you please stop mumbling!" James would step in and translate. For example, when the mother pointed to a rose in the garden and enunciated the word, instead of giving the mother what she wanted to hear, Jane mispronounced "flowa." James spoke up for his sister and said, "That's Jane's word for rose." Jane would say nothing to counter James's interpretation, and because the mother trusted James more than anyone or anything, there was nothing left for the mother to do but sigh.

It was obvious from the start that James was superior to his twin. You see, when the twins were born at home with the help of a midwife, the mother chose to bear them naturally with no help from medication of any kind so as to remain lucid and alert. She

prepared for the birth on the premise of a gut feeling. She had prepared for the birth both physically and psychologically, intent on approaching the entrance of her babies into the naked world with a clinical sensibility. Since this was her first pregnancy, she could only imagine the physical pain of giving birth, but for this she prepared too, by inflicting pain on herself at intervals, to see how much she could endure. For instance, she held her hand over the stove fire for as long as she could withstand it without giving herself a third-degree burn. Another time, she dropped a brick on her foot and refused to do anything to relieve the pain: Not an ice pack, nor pain medication of any kind, and certainly not a visit to the podiatrist. From experience, she learned that nothing could prepare her, no, and nothing could compare to the pain of giving birth.

The first thing she observed was how the first baby wailed loudly as soon as it came out while the second made no sound, not even when handed to the mother, not even when she cradled it in her arms. When the first baby, a boy, was handed to its mother, eyes open and alert, it was quickly pacified by its mother's kiss; its wailing subsiding into cooing and cawing. When the second, a girl, was handed over, eyes closed, it resembled a silent gremlin, wagging its purple tongue in disturbing silence.

The mother had prepared names for her twins. When told she was going to have twins, she didn't want to know their biological sex; knowing she would give birth to two was enough. She prepared for each possible scenario, having two male and two female names at the ready. If the twins were identical males, they would be called James and John, and if identical females, Jane and Mary. If fraternal twins, she'd likely choose James and Jane. She only came up with names for convention's sake, lamenting on how if she could have it her way, she would not name her children at all, for assigning names at birth, she

believed, limited their potential. The irony lies in the lack of imagination apparent in the names she chose.

After the letdown of first contact, it was inevitable that Jane would further disappoint. Unsurprisingly, James was the first one to learn to crawl, then to walk, to say "Mommy," and so forth and so on.

Now that the twins are 16, not much has changed. They are still homeschooled, which still makes it easy to hide Jane's disability. Now and again, either James or the mother will ask Jane when she passes a mirror in the house, "Who's that?" And Jane—if in fact she gazes—will look away. That's right, Jane does not depend on the mirror to help her get dressed, or to assess which physical traits are worthy of praise. The mother has never acknowledged the narcissistic nature of James's self-recognition. Most toddlers respond to the discovery of "me" with mirror-shyness, hiding their faces whenever they see their reflections. This is because along with self-awareness or self-consciousness comes the realization that oh, that's what everyone else sees too, quite unsettling! James has never been fazed by the image of his reflection, never timid, never shy. That is exactly what appeals most to the mother, her bold, beautiful James. Her 'baby' James loved what he saw in the mirror from the very beginning. He never fails to give mirror-James a wink, or thumbs-up, or click of the tongue.

Refusing a formal diagnosis, the mother is certain that her Jane is autistic, schizophrenic, or the sufferer of some or other mental illness, she rules none of these out. Every now and again, she will take Jane aside, try to look her in the eye, and ask, Who is Jane? in the dreary hope that Jane will self-recognize. When she does this, James just rolls

his eyes. To him, it doesn't matter what Jane's 'issue' is. It's a given. He is James and Jane is his non-identical twin.

*

James is getting ready for his first day of college and is using the mirror as final judge. Jane passes by the same mirror, and (probably) for the first time, exhibits recognition of something—not exactly herself, and not exactly not-herself. She says, "We," enunciating the pronoun clearly. Astonished, James is transfixed by the vision of "we," of Jane touching her face and his simultaneously.

"What about we?"

And just as quickly, Jane looks away, hands fall to her sides.

Maybe Jane was looking at herself in the mirror, maybe she was looking at James, or perhaps what she saw moved her for the first time to speak coherently. No, that's not it. While James always listened, he had never really seen. It comes together for him now: Jane sees herself—maybe she always has!—not as this distinct, separate entity. Maybe there exists other ways of seeing. Poor Jane, all this time appearing dispassionate, forced to submit to the mother's expectations, unfairly separated from context, never considered in company with her twin, the person that matters most. Maybe the real illusion is the notion that the person in the mirror is always the same person. All those times, he paused to admire that person in the mirror, failing to recognize that he had, in fact changed in imperceptible ways, always in the process of change. His self-praise came at a cost. He failed to recognize that the real him is more than just the image he sees in the mirror, more than how he imagines others see him; James includes his history, his experience, all of which has always included Jane.

Smoothing his collar and tightening his tie, James shakes his head in disbelief, and proceeds.

Tina V. Cabrera currently lives, writes, and makes art in the greater Portland area. She has taught writing and literature for over 20 years and is teaching part-time at Washington State University (WSU). She is also founding and managing editor of the online journals *Hybridities* and most recently founded *Inter et Inter, A Journal of Possibility* (<https://movingwordst.wordpress.com/>). Tina earned her MFA in Fiction from SDSU (San Diego State University) and has published fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, and hybrid works in print and online in journals such as *Pleiades*, *Eclectica*, *Hobart*, *Quickly*, *Crack the Spine*, and *Big Bridge Magazine*. Her debut collection, *Giving Up the Ghost (and other Hauntings)*, was published on March 1, 2020. Her creative nonfiction memoir *The Former Things Have Passed Away* that speaks to her experience growing up as a Jehovah's Witness, was long-listed for the 2020 Steel Toe Prose Book Prize. Visit her writerly blog at <http://tvcannyuncanny.com/>

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