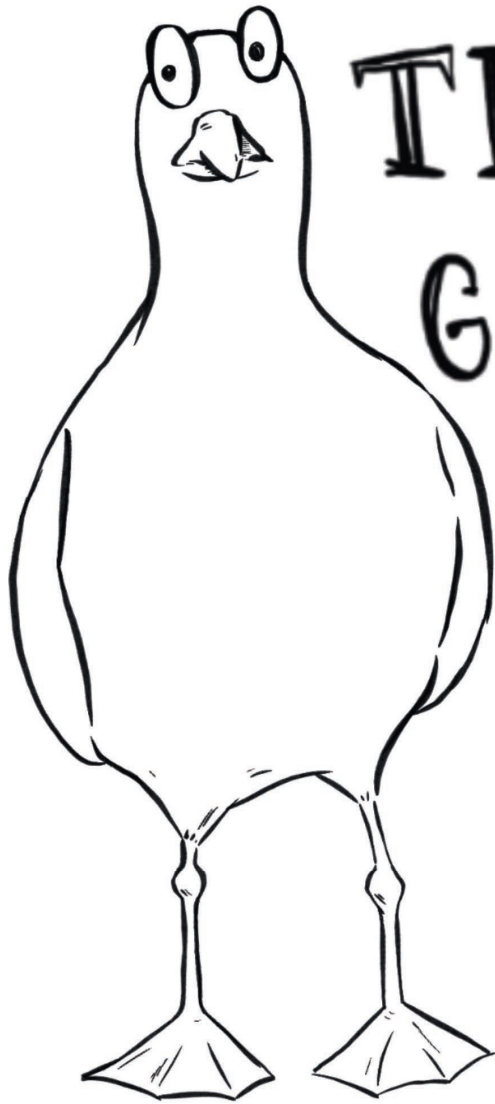




THE

GENTLY

MAD

LITERARY MAGAZINE

Issue 1



The Gently Mad Navigator
(with a bad sense of direction)

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Published on Lulu

Gentlymadmagazine@gmail.com

Print ISBN: 978-1-300-80226-6

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-300-80226-6

*"Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway
had been lost."- Dante's Inferno*

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On Navigating Nihilism

This world is full of wandering souls trying to find a direction, a path of purpose, a way forward, even if that way is twisted, like a sentence unfamiliar with its own message. Yet the author continues to write it, the captain continues to steer, the traveller continues to walk. They must. For there is nothing elsewhere. Helen Keller said, “life is either a daring adventure or nothing,” which is why people, time and time again, get hopelessly lost if only to do something. The alternative is stagnancy. A broken compass will eternally point in one direction, but a malfunctioning needle, at the least, provides options. Regardless of whether it will lead down the right path or not, there will be movement, action, a story to tell.

The literature that follows describes how individuals respond to different experiences such as the wanderings of the mind and heart, interpretations of words passed from mouth to ear, and the meaning that imbues legs and feet with the motivation to move. Each of these pieces is someone’s attempt to navigate towards purpose. Encounter lives lost to Atropos, private loves that last lifetimes, and the lament of lightning bugs as they light up the skies. Take the hand of the Gently Mad Navigator and let them lead you towards true Lost, that unwinding street paved only as far as the feet that walk upon it. Trust the Navigator’s bad sense of direction; only there can purpose be created.

Henry David Thoreau’s words ring true: “Not till we are completely lost or turned around... do we begin to find ourselves.” There is no map to instruct, no footprints to fill; there is only an invisible needle guiding the heart and a Gently Mad mind willing to follow it. When navigating these stories, poems, and artworks, be sure to look at them upside down and inside out, and don’t be afraid to topple into that rabbit hole. The destination might delight.

This is, of course, the optimistic perspective, but where there is North, there must also be South. When confronted with purposelessness, it is easy to fall into a hole and instead of reaching Wonderland, hit rock bottom. Nietzsche noticed how easily a traveller can get lost and despair as opposed to get lost and rejoice. The difference lies in whether losing one’s way is perceived as a chance to create or totally negate life. The former is the stance the Gently Mad Navigator assumes. Broken compass in hand, chest puffed out, chin held high, they quote J.R.R. Tolkien with a smile: “Not all who wander are lost.” They take willful strides even though

they don't know their destination; instead, they enjoy the journey because it is worthwhile. The latter disagrees. They are the Sane. They cling to rules and blueprints and equations in a world where not everything can be explained with logic. Naturally, the conclusions they reach are devastating. To them, a broken compass means existence is meaningless and not worth living. These two individuals wander Earth at the same time, with the same compass, but the Gently Mad life-affirmer will create something out of nothing while the Sane life-denyer will accept nothing from nothing. Going back to the quote from Helen Keller, the nihilist wouldn't even open the door when Gandalf comes knocking, let alone hear out his unexpected offer for adventure. It is simply not worth it. If Bilbo was Sane, the Hobbit would have never been written.

By this definition of madness, all writers and artists are Gently Mad. They have wandered without direction (instead of wondering and overthinking existence) and came to the conclusion that Milton was right. In *Paradise Lost*, when Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden, Michael said, they will “leave this Paradise, but shalt possess / A Paradise within thee, happier far.” It all comes back to perspective. The Gently Mad Navigator is Adam, Eve, Bilbo Baggins, and Alice. They all lost their footing and fell. Out of Eden. Through the Misty Mountain. Into Wonderland. It is only when everything is unfamiliar, extraordinary, and insane that a soul is forced to find their own direction. The brave adventurer is able to create a paradise within, or as Voltaire said, “cultivate [their] garden.” Life's meaning is to give life meaning after all.

So let's start off with a poem that does just that. And remember—read madly.

Paradise Within
Serafina Piasentin

Hike up my legs,
scale my nose,
unlock my ears &
tiptoe
around the garden—
pathless grass, patches of
pine needles pointing
in all directions,
vines twisting, flowers turning
open heads upwards
& begging with up-locked hands
for light.

Lonely clouds
drift,
thinking the world is brighter
down
below.

On the ground,
a wingless girl
observes the endless
wants
needs—

Clouds yearn to be heard,
but are silenced by rain;
flowers desire sun,
but are unaware of fire;
trees stretch towards the sky,
but do not know they may snap;
& the girl...
the girl sits in the garden,
reminding herself that
life was made to wander
not to wonder.



Ophelia Piasentin

Inky hibernation

Kalie Chapman

ink sinks into links
eased out by a finger and a thumb
like a clasp on a pick
it strums
a chord
of musical ink blots
orchestral thoughts
brought to life on a page

of paper
a tree wafer
tapered-off axed lumber
collapsed
resting in a slumber
like squirrels in December
outnumbered by the weather
while their habitat's
taxed by proprietors

charged by
humankind
like the mind
commands the hand
to swing an axe
to pulp paper
to strum strings
to ignite ink

to destroy homes
just to write about what they think

Compass

Vivian van Klaarbergen

You're an old, faded map with yellowed pages,
the ink bleeding out under the pads of my fingers,
and I'm a navigator with a terrible sense of direction.
You're the map and the needle of the golden compass,
but I can't find true north.

Sometimes I dream that I am a satellite,
and you are my earth. I dream that you're
barely within arm's reach,
and I wake up, heart pounding, missing something
that was never mine to begin with.

Free Spirit

Damian Younghusband

I will not suffer,
but I will dance—
a gracefully chaotic,
unapologetic whirlwind,
of blissful abandon.
My love,
the magic was
always right here
inside this little heart
I call home.

Slow dancing (with your dark)

Kalie Chapman

i slow dance with the dark
a shadow only present when i'm alone
when i'm face to face with a body
i don't recognize
a body i don't touch
a body i can't feel.
when we're alone
we slow dance
shoulder to hand
hand to hip
we sway
and dip
1 2 3 1 2 3
triple the step
toe shuffle shuffle
keep up!
your head
bent down
my chest
beating
in
rhythm
to your
sunken
stringy
waist
broken in by
malnourished
rib stitches
lung to aortic valve
breathe in and
hold two three
out

do you feel that?
we're alone.

let's dance

17 Tuesdays

Renan Mahmoud

“What is home?” she asked.

“A residence of returns and rest, temporary yet timeless,” he replied.

“Like an everyday tomb?”

“Think of it as a charging station for humans,” he said, gesturing toward his phone as it laid connected to a wire on the nightstand.

“But we’re not like other devices that charge. We’re dying regardless.”

“Just go to bed.”

She fell silent as she settled into the sheets. After a pause, she asked, “How long does it take to call a home ‘home?’ 17 Tuesdays?”

She was like an archer with a quiver of endless questions.

“...17 Tuesdays?” He mulled over the odd measurement. “A month has 4 Tuesdays, so that’s about 4 months... That’s too short. It takes at least a year,” he affirmed.

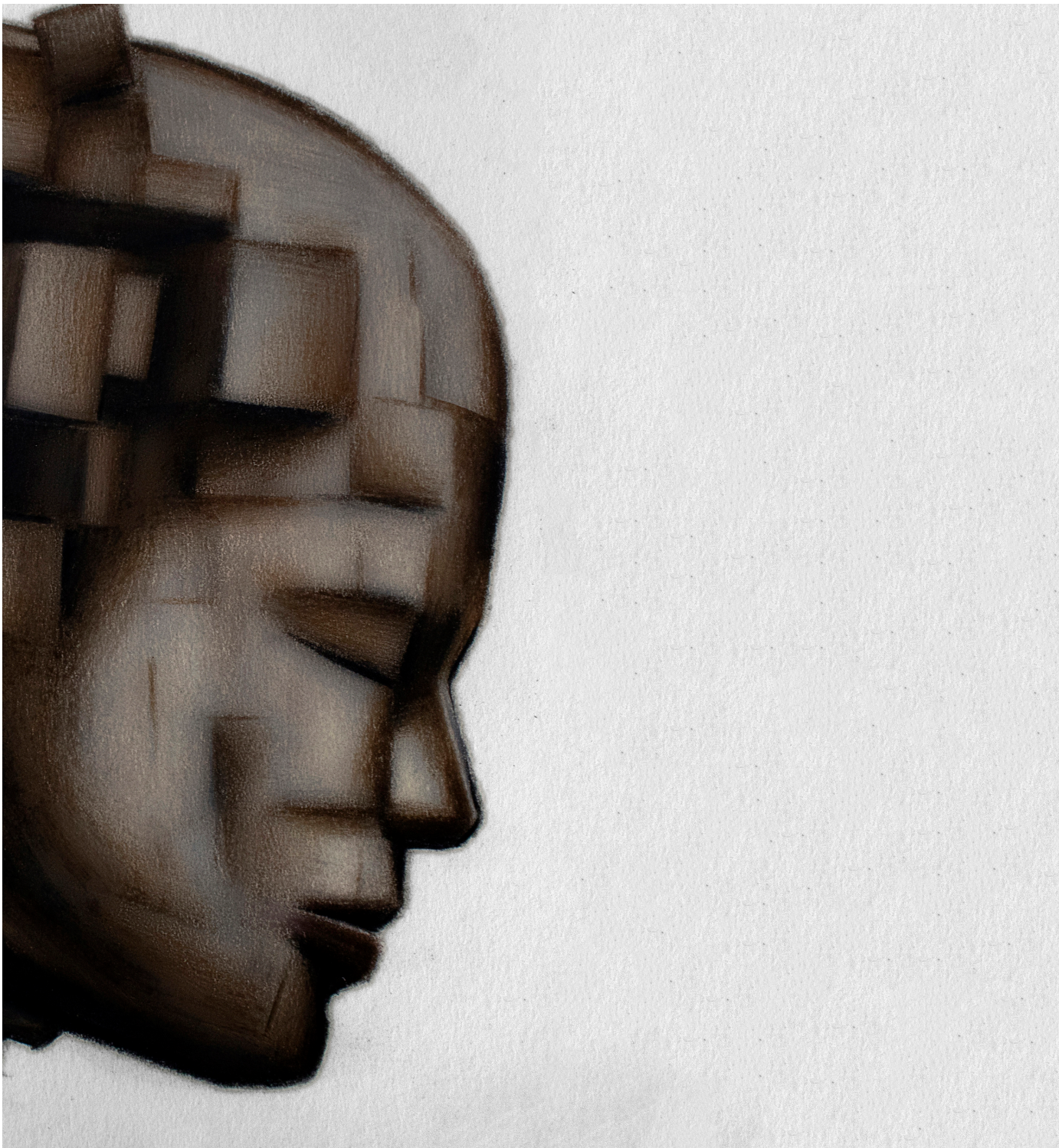
She looked away. “But I’ve known you for less than a year... less than half a year.”

“It feels much longer, doesn’t it?” He moved closer.

“An elapsed eternity,” she whispered, replacing her pillow with his chest in one swift motion.

When she drifted into a gentle slumber, he whispered, “A day with you transcends 17 lifetimes.”





Sampy Sicada- Cybernetics

The Tree Lady Of Sebastian Street

Terry Brennan

We'd see her around the Neighbourhood, usually with a notebook and a camera.

Torpedo knew her, she'd been his teacher. "Nice lady – kind, patient. Funny too. And crazy for trees."

If we passed her on a tree spotting expedition, Torpedo would beam and salute with two fingers and say, "Hi, Miss Melville, I hope you're getting interesting stuff today." Miss Melville would only smile, but in that, she would convey warmth and an appreciation of her old pupil's acknowledgement.

Then we heard she'd taken up with Hugo Candela.

That fazed Torpedo, "She used to live in the next street. She was a single lady in those times. That Hugo guy is gay. And a real chocolate Brummell."

We'd see them around the Neighbourhood. No notebook, no camera, arm-in-arm, eyes only for each other.

"And," said Torpedo, "he's twenty years younger."

That clearly didn't bother Miss Melville, happy as a humbug. Hugo looked pretty loved up, too. The only miserable person was Torpedo.

I quizzed him, "How come your pants are all buckled about this? Those guys are sweet and pickled, why aren't you smiling for them?"

Torpedo's brow knitted into a whole pullover of creases, but he didn't speak. Looked to me like he was trying to work out a load of stuff jumping around in his head.

In the way of it, we put the Miss Melville business aside and got excited about the things guys get excited about in the City. Pretties? Good guess, but no. It was August and the start of the football season. We were in the Lepanto bar on the first Saturday. We didn't go to the Mermaid Cafe on match days since Sanjay McMahon, who ran a tight ship and welcomed all of the Crew, didn't like football or football noise. He liked cricket. We'd moan, "How come, manny? You're 90% Donegal."

To which, "And 50% Maharastra. My dreams are all of the maidans. And googlies."

Sanjay was a top hombre but a blarneyista. On St Patrick's Day, he wept from midday to moonlight as the City's PD choir ran through its full repertoire out on the Old Toll Cross, 'the Mountains of Mourne' to 'From Clare To Here.'

Anyway the Lepanto was our football haunt and we were there as the excitement mounted. We spotted Hugo Candela. He was drinking coffee in a corner with a young guy. We honed in on the companion.

"What colour is that silk shirt? Aubergine?"

Torpedo contradicted me, “Plum.”

Either shot, it was one eye-catching garment, even in the Neighbourhood that was wall-to-wall kook.

Torpedo was unsettled, “Can you believe that thrupenny trout?”

He went silent, drummed his fingers on the table, finished his beer—half a glass in one gulp—then drummed some more.

Eventually, “I can't believe he would do this to Miss Melville. This needs sortin.”

Then he was out of his seat, up and over, me in his slipstream.

“Hey, mister, what's your game? Last week we see you big eyein sweet Miss Melville, now you're up to your old gutter tricks.”

Torpedo directed a fierce look at the Aubergine Kid and sneered, “Or should I say trick.”

Hugo Candela wasn't pleased. “Get outta here, you idiot, before I call a constable.”

Aubergine blushed, but in a sensitive tonal way, a sort of berry shade.

The barkeep, on our shoulders quick as a roadrunner, assessed the situation, focused on Torpedo, “Okay, son, time you were headin. You don't want to miss the kick-off.”

And that was it; a minute later we were walking away from the Lepanto and towards an easy 4-0. But even this great start couldn't assuage Torpedo. Post-match, I invited him to join me and Zainab at Pasta Heaven, where we always had the Clam Macaroni, but no, he'd make a drizzle scan, head home, take pizza back for his Ma, who loved salsiccia as much as she did Françoise Sagan. I could tell Torpedo was hoping his Ma would straighten his head out. I wasn't so sure; his old lady was great, but with about as much sense as her boy.

But Ma was a woman, and the women we knew were experts at the settlement of strife. Ma went visiting. Miss Melville was pleased to see her, happy to share Nonnettes and Apple and Mint Tea, talk about the old days, about Torpedo's progress in his chosen calling, water management technician. Ma knew Miss Melville from way back when Torpedo needed his nose wiped every ten minutes and had accidents during the school day, and Ma had to run round with a change of pants, occasionally a change of trousers. Ma loved how Miss Melville was discreet, never made a fuss, reigned in the other kids, had everything back on the level in jig time. Ma was pretty perturbed about the Candela business too, wanted to get to the bottom of it. But it turned out she kinda bottled it, just chewed and chatted, and sipped and clacked, made no mention of love interest. She was leaving when Hugo Candela appeared with a huge bunch of carnations, a medley of pinks and reds, oranges and yellows, purple and lavender.

Miss Melville went all a tingle, hugged her beau, enquired of Ma, “Isn't he the sweetest man?”

Ma and Torpedo decided decisive action was a priority. They turned up at Pizza Heaven, squeezed in beside me and Zainab, pressed the drama overload button. If anything Ma was more animated than Torpedo and that was even after Zainab had given her Valium. Now it turns out Zainab knows things. Things about money. The money Miss Melville inherited from

an uncle in the interior who was a rich farmer or vineyard guy or inventor of the tumble dryer. Zainab speculated a little around the source of the fortune, but she was certain it was a big, big number. We asked how many numbers in that big number, "Seven?"

Zainab shook her head, "Eight."

And that was it. We all pressed the drama overload button.

It was Torpedo's Ma who came up with the plan. The plan to save Miss Melville, the plan to flush out Hugo Candela, the plan to bring order back to our little corner of the Neighbourhood. The plan was simple. We would catch Hugo Candela in flagrante and in that way unblinker Miss Melville.

We staked out Candela's place. He lived in an under-loved street on the southern edge of the Neighbourhood, still a great location, a short walk from the Old Toll Cross but also a quick tumble down to all the fun of the big City squares. It was on the shift Zainab and I were covering that Candela broke cover. He decided not to tumble but made a sharp right and was on his way.

Following him past the Cross we ignored the salutations of buddies that were drinking breakfast blends under the canopy outside the Mermaid, and kept our target in sight. He was heading straight for Bolivar Park where the big May festival was held and attracted the gayest of Neighbourhood folks. Zainab and I would always be there; we'd go for the plumpest of prawns and the sharpest of mojitos and the best of times. The Rainbow Runners would meet there and the Cosmos, the crack women's football team, and everyone loved the summer season of Wilde, Tennessee Williams and Garcia Lorca. If you were lucky enough to get a ticket for the House of Bernarda Alba, you danced in clover and would boast to everyone and the miscellaneous about genius under the stars and the roll call of Neighbourhood greats in attendance and how by association you were one of them.

We had a different trail of thoughts as we progressed under the heavily-leaved lime trees that led in a proud avenue towards the centre of the park in pursuit of Hugo Candela. We slowed up when Candela reached the flowerbed circles and took a seat. Zainab and I pretended to examine leaves. We did this with conviction; we liked to do that in the normal run of things.

Who do you think joined the rascally Hugo Candela? Got it in one, the Aubergine Kid. Zainab had the camera; she snapped vigorously. And, thank you guys, didn't they go into a big embrace with all sorts of kissing of eyebrows, and stroking of ears and flicking of noses. Each intimacy caught to provide indisputable evidence. Then the Montmorency Cherry, the diabolical pair took off hand in hand, headed into the woods on the rising ground.

We rushed backed to the Mermaid Cafe and a rendezvous with Torpedo and Ma. The final stages of the plan were agreed; Zainab would print out the photographs, Ma and Torpedo would visit Miss Melville and reveal the depth of Hugo Candela's deception, the old lady's

money would be safe and as had been the strategy from the beginning, order would be restored to our little corner.

Again Miss Melville welcomed Ma and seemed particularly pleased to see her old pupil, Torpedo. That was until Ma spoke and showed. Spoke of Hugo Candela's calumny, showed the photographs that proved the calumny. Later they told us it was the first time they'd ever seen Miss Melville angry. And it wasn't an everyday angry but a red-hot fury that in the beginning made it difficult for her to form words but when she did brought on an explosion of vitriol. Ma and Torpedo were ushered onto Sylvester Street where the exchange ended with door slamming of the vigorous persuasion.

"Wow," said Ma, "Wow," said Torpedo and, back at the Mermaid, "Wow," said Zainab. I—I had a Masters degree in EuroLit—said, "That's a flip of the doubloon," but added, "Wow," for reasons of solidarity.

Zainab wondered if a letter might work. She penned a clever epistle, measured and reasoned and only at the end urging caution. The reply was from the same playbook that Miss Melville employed when tornadoing Torpedo and his Ma.

And still we'd see dear Miss Melville and Hugo the horrible promenading and taking the air although now the notebook and camera had returned and there was lots of scribbling and snapping and smiling and sighing. We noticed too that Hugo Candela was wearing a beautiful jacket, textured wool, exquisitely cut and with a label that was way beyond the orbit of a Neighbourhood kook. She must have paid, that's what the carnations would have been about. We were at the end of our collective wit.

Then we read the story in the Comet.

City Arboretum To Blossom Once Again

The restoration of the City Arboretum project has received a substantial donation from well-known Neighbourhood figure, Blossom Melville. Miss Melville has made a gift, widely believed to be in excess of a million, to the Bolivar Park Commission, to be used exclusively for the renewal and development of the park's historic arboretum. Miss Melville has indicated that provision will be made for innovative interpretation of the revived facility so the arboretum can be enjoyed fully by the general public and by schoolchildren in particular.

Blossom Melville told the Comet: 'The restoration proposal was first mooted by my dear friend Hugo Candela, the author of *The Great Botanical Gardens of Old Europe* and an expert on the care and maintenance of native and exotic species. Hugo convinced me that the creation of a restored arboretum in Bolivar Park would bring great benefits to the Neighbourhood and the City. I willingly allowed Hugo to expand my understanding of dendrology. I had been an

enthusiastic amateur tree-lover since childhood, throughout my career in education and during my retirement, but to have my limited knowledge evolve in recent months has given me enormous pleasure.

I can't thank Hugo enough for that. An unexpected bonus of this process has been the establishment of a great friendship. Hugo has had me laughing since the first occasion we met and introduced himself saying, 'Blossom, let me be honest with you, I'm after your money.' Nothing has given me greater pleasure in my long life than Hugo Candela's success in his mission.

Zainab and I read the piece in Bolivar Park at the floral displays where we had spied on Hugo Candela.

Zainab winced, "How did I let you dumbbells get me involved in all of that craziness. I even wrote her that stupid letter."

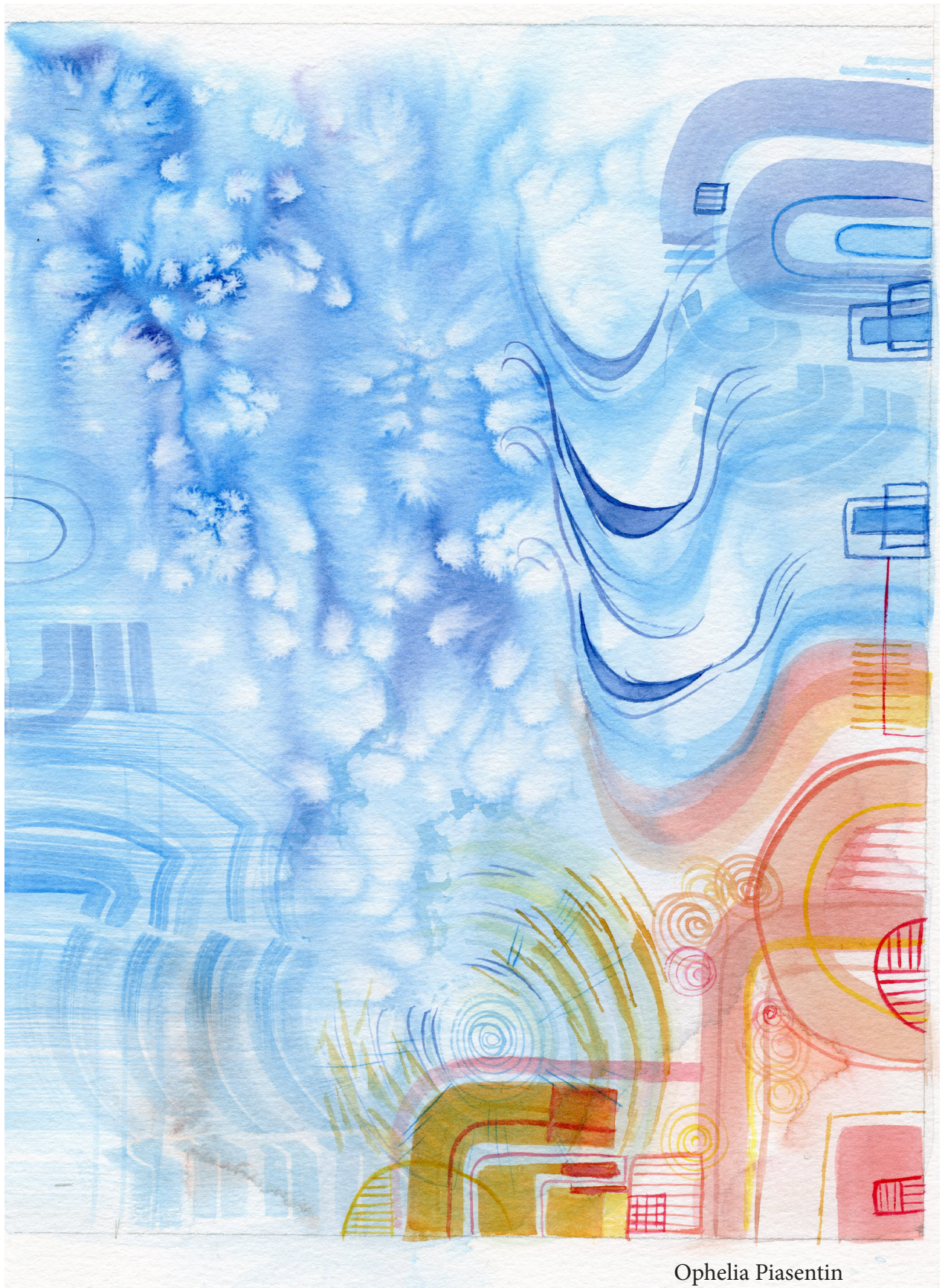
I cornered Torpedo, "You bark at trees, every tree but the right one."

"Sorry, amigo. I got carried off in a zephyr of barmy, didn't I? What are we gonna do?"

"We're going to do precisely nothing. Which is what we would have done in the beginning if a sweet lady smiling at someone hadn't got you all riled and ruffled and ranty. I'm gonna repeat, Torpedo. Nothing. Precisely."

I paused, but I wasn't finished with Torpedo, "You're gonna have to handle clever Miss Melville looking at you as if you're a lamebrain. Your Ma too. And sadly me and Zainab. That will probably last until she breezes away. It's what we deserve."

But things turned out differently. On the day of the official opening of the restored Arboretum, Torpedo and Ma and me and Zainab were there with our embossed invitations and the kind of sheepishness that made you want to baa out loud to let the pressure ease. Miss Melville sought us out, shook our hands, hugged Torpedo and gave us all signed copies of Hugo Candela's 'Great Botanical Gardens of Old Europe.' Afterwards we would see her all the time in the park, at the old Toll Cross or in Mandisa Biko's Emporium of Flowers, and Torpedo would say, "Hi" and Miss Melville would respond with her old smile, the one with the warmth.



Ophelia Piasentin

Honey Bee

Damian

My joy is radical,
an act of rebellion
against a world of expectation
my joy does not,
rely upon your approval
or need your permission
to sing across rooftops
or dance along the
surface of oceans—
it simply is,
and that's all it needs to be.

Painting the Roses Red

Lindsey White

One single red rose is on my table, the edges already beginning to brown,
a token of leftover love,
saying “you do mean something.”

Not a bouquet’s worth,
not enough to be picked up from the airport,
wrapped in a hug that leaves you breathless, holding hands in the car,
but enough for a ride in the backseat, a single rose from this bouquet.

I am loved, I think?

I open my drawer — there’s the near-empty red paint.
I put the rose in a vase meant for fuller flowers,
a sea of empty space pooling around its thin stem.
I take my red paint and touch up its browning petals.

Worm

Jovan Stefanov

Late October dandelion bloom,
covered grasses where illness
peaches bodily—
hear my fall devotion to the spring
as the worm turns his little life burrowing timber
restored by churning land,
so too "I am a worm"
the small flower belly of Earth
emerging rain for your skin
is root strumming, and cut
scarlet like those who stand.



Bethany Felix- Sister

Message in a bottle

Kalie Chapman

some days i feel like an ant navigating sand

grains crumble beneath my
scuttling legs
shards of glass tumble
with my small body
rolling against colossal stones
shaped by the waves that
threaten to swallow me whole
and even if i find a floating log
remember—

i can't swim



Brenda Piasentin

Waving

Sumayyah Khalife

fading fabled flutters upon ammonium fields soaking summer stories under
sundered shredded threadbare threads tinged in ocean tide,
atop waxy floors as it slips through the hands of crabs
washed ashore;
their clawed fingers clasped to malibu motorbikes
flutter, flutter, flutter, flapping, tapping over fences

Seafoam

Vivian van Klaatbergen

poetry suddenly feels purposeless
when I don't remember the exact shade of your eyes.
I find myself wondering—were they a crystal green
or an ocean blue encircled by a layer of seafoam?
perhaps everybody lies a little bit
when love is too strong
because I am certain that your eyes are different in each light
I know mine are golden in the sunlight,
and chocolate in the shadow –
I find myself wondering which side of you I saw.
were you bathing in the sun, or hiding in the shadow,
or did you perhaps never show me the real you?
would that mean I fell for your potential,
or a glimpse of who you truly are?
will I ever know for sure or am I destined
to spend an eternity wondering:
are they green or are they blue,
and does it truly matter if I never really knew you?



Ophelia Piasentin

The Great Wall on My Face

Okbi Han

For my dear Grandpa Hong Pil-yu. Please say hello to Granny.

English is my second language

The words war and wall sound the same

I was eight when I first went to the Great Wall

There was an old Chinese lady who bowed every three steps

Her face seemed to have lots of regrets, wrinkles longer than the Great Wall

Now when I look in the mirror I can find some regrets on my face and I hope my regrets will not become as long as the Great Wall

My grandfather is a Korean War veteran. He already has a designated tombstone in the National cemetery where the veterans get buried. The South Korean government promised that he would be buried with his wife, but the promise was broken. When he heard the news, my grandfather's face was filled with a sense of betrayal.

Due to family turmoil, I haven't seen my grandfather for five years. The invisible wall has appeared between him and other family members. He will die alone, but I can't do anything about it. That's my regret.

Satisfaction

Damian

I'll be that great cup
that never empties,
never knows lack
or seeks to be full—
I overflow eternally.
From now on,
may you never know
what lies at the bottom
of that chalice.



Bethany Felix - Pressure

Canadian Spirit

Katie St. Aubin

~ written only using words off cigarette labels

Look at the power of the cigarette.
Your kids are smoking,
Health Canada is smoking,
your unborn baby is craving a smoke.
You've got what it takes,
Go smoke!

I can use the hole in my throat to smoke my cigarette!

Fewer cravings if you resist.
Barb feels major and immediate bladder benefits,
Nicotine helps you live life to the fullest.
Earth-friendly oak aged Perique tobacco.
Smoking... What's in it for me?

Remember this face and that smoking leads to a better quality of life.

Sick of the average?
smooth and signature imported Montreal tobacco.
Lasts longer,
Smokes stronger.
Improves brain and lung expectancy.
Larynx may be removed for benefits to occur.

Warning! Quit smoking and blood lining the lungs causes wheeze and coughing of the bladder

There are many reasons to smoke,
What's yours?
Find your community,
Rid yourself of second-hand smoke,
we can help create a plan that works for you.
One smoke,
And toll-free call.

There are many reasons to smoke,
What's yours?

A Letter to the Self

Denis Robillard

Tonight I am trained on hot white ghost invective
where old syllables lie in a dark book
like sprains from the flesh of the unsubstantiated.
Too many memory fossils are scattered on the ground
left for the next generation to uncover.

I have come to realize that we sip water
from a holy cup that can never quench us.

Here the road longs for its own repair.
The lid snaps shut
the thread unravels
there is no bottom left
at the bottom where you last looked.

We are like cadaver dogs
scouring the wreckage of our lives
for something that is already dead and buried.

The days ache in endless silence
God's fingerprints get left
on ancient monuments –
this graft of woe
this chapter of sin –
I am writing another sentence
in the moonlight
of your pain.
Examining the silent conquests of the flesh
again and again.

And so you stomp on these few pages torn
from the sour novel of your own life.

Once again you have failed to define
the cold puzzle still breaking up inside you.

Friction

Damian Younghusband

I tie my shoes too tight
because I fear I might
slip, fall, and lose control,
but all that did
was give me blisters.
So I loosened up a bit
gave myself some rest –
now I feel ready
to give it my best.

Tokyo Dreams

Lindsey White

A crescendo of intimidating thoughts rose with the plane,
a 16-hour flight — the only sound, my heart beating... beating... beating.
My dreams of adventure always interrupted by
the image of me, a small girl
in the middle of the biggest city in the world.

I stepped off the plane, holding a suitcase
far too big for my small frame,
and was immediately embraced by the singing
notes of the Japanese language.
My beating heart slowed to match the tune,
my self-doubting thoughts relinquished their hold,
making way for the kindness of strangers carrying
my suitcase up subway stairs.

I inhaled deeply, as if I could breathe deep enough that each encounter,
each challenge overcome, could seep into my bones —
deeper than memory, easier to recall.
My exhale joined the air swirling around me,
touched my skin, and pulled out of me
someone I had never known.

She, a carbonated drink bubbling inside an aluminum cage,
introduced herself with an erupting escape,
as if she had been waiting for this day
to show me what it meant to be free. She asked fear for a dance,
and dance we did, twirling underneath Tokyo lights as
she shed her disguise and became
everything I always wanted to be.

It's nice to meet you, I thought, where have you been?
And all that was small within me, which
had only been tucked away, rose up to fill
the unknown space.

She placed her steady hand in mine,
wrapped herself in a fearless force around me.
We are no longer on foreign ground,
hopefully inseparable now, as her feet keep
tapping, tapping, tapping to the tune of my Tokyo dreams.



Brenda Piasentin



Sampy Sicada- Cotton Wool

Archilochus

Denis Robillard

Tall clouds gather in the mountain tops,
the roaming hart is tamed by infinite art.
Archilochus says it's the fox vs. the hedgehog.
A king fisher flaps its wings on a protruding rock
and thunderstruck by the grape,
we say goodbye to the figs of Paros.

And like the Greek poet
with his eleventy-three tricks,
we still build things thousands of years later.

Practice carpentry and warfare
medicine and navigation.
We try to keep the world intact and
knowable.

But part of the truth is not the whole
truth of the elephant dictum.
Nothing exists in totality.
If anything does exist
it is unknowable, so he says.
Bereft of fatherland, orphaned
by friends, we blame the praiseworthy
or praise the blameworthy.

In our paradoxical thinking,
words can cause pain, joy
a panoply of emotions.
Even strike fear and benumb
and bewitch the soul with
evil persuasion.

With anarchy loosed upon the world
today
we must rise from our stony sleep

like the Coriolis effect or
planetary vorticity,
the maddening currents
of the ocean's gyre,
we are sucked down
by the funnel of language.

As our word powers begin to shrink
and almost disappear,
what is kept between us is important –

between the lesson written
and the lesson learned,
between the balance and the ledger
there lies the cost.

Past Present

Maria Schiza

~ response to a portfolio by Lincoln Perry in issue no. 218 of The Paris Review

in retrospect, the textures are off
and insistent, like something stuck between the teeth;
and you, you are always there with your hands,
reaching out or holding on — nothing has changed,
really, though the canal did overflow, the sycamore
was struck by lightning, and it's years, now, that you've been gone.



Brenda Piasentin

Necessary Evil

Maria Schiza

~ an ekphrastic poem after Amy Beager

The Fates share a single eye.
Your life, my life are
touch-known, touch-spun, primarily
in darkness. I hope, of all my
tangles, either my birth or death are
seen, either the coming or the
crucial
crossing of the river.

Atropos
doesn't need the eye: her hands gaze enough. The
scissors snap shut.

Lucincenderine

Alexei Ungurenasu

She wouldn't believe me. The rich lady in my private messages, who claimed to split her time between London and Beijing as a jeweler and influencer, stopped responding to my texts even though she reached out first.

I don't know what she expected—she asked me what I do for a living, and I told her the truth. I catch fireflies in the summer, and when I've collected enough, I fill up plastic balloons with helium and trap them inside. Around the end of September, I release the balloons into space, like little sky lanterns, and once they leave the Earth's stratosphere and pop open, the fireflies are reborn as stars.

Maybe I didn't explain myself thoroughly enough. For eight years, I studied astronomy and insect biology at Harvard, where I discovered that, besides luciferin and luciferase, another chemical may be found in some rare firefly species. I named this chemical lucincenderine, and whereas it had no observable qualities in the Earth's atmosphere, when subjected to extreme cold and in the absence of oxygen, lucincenderine became the catalyst for an incredible chemical reaction. This discovery nearly led to an unfathomable disaster when we came upon it in my lab.

We placed a single firefly in a controlled environment, and once we removed all the oxygen and lowered the temperature to near-absolute zero, the firefly quickly started glowing and expanding. But before it could reach the size of its container, it started contracting back to its original size, emitting even more light. If it weren't for one of my assistants' instincts to immediately revert the conditions to normal by reintroducing oxygen and rapidly heating the container, the firefly would have soon combusted in a process of nuclear fusion no different than the one that gave birth to our sun. Not a single newspaper reported the miraculous save, and we continued our work with sacred secrecy.

The second time we attempted this experiment, we were much more careful. We sent the first balloon up and watched as it popped, releasing its lone passenger into the void. This firefly, too, expanded before contracting, all in a matter of seconds, and then it burst with stellar radiance, shooting off at light speed to some random corner of the cosmos. We could hardly believe it ourselves.

Over a few weeks, as it traveled far beyond our solar system, the firefly grew and accelerated exponentially, dwarfing any planet it zoomed past. It defied every law of physics, traveling light years in a fraction of the speed of light. Our instruments had tracked spacecraft before, from satellites and spaceships to all sorts of probes and telescopes. But we had never encountered anything of the sort, and we could hardly believe it even after repeating our calculations and interpreting the data for the umpteenth time. We had no way of knowing whether the firefly was still alive, but considering its trajectory, it seemed as if the projectile had a set

destination, adjusting its course and evading any other celestial bodies on its journey. Months later, the firefly—or whatever it had become—eventually came to a halt, settling in a remote pocket of space and gaining command over a handful of nearby planets, warming and illuminating them as it formed its own little solar system.

That was six years ago. Now, NASA pays me somewhere around two million dollars per year to catch and release the most promising fireflies into space. My assistants and I are the only people in the world qualified for this task as we cannot risk revealing such dangerous information to any other country or company. This will remain a secret passed on from assistant to assistant, each one understanding the gravity of this discovery and the absolute need to keep the world in the dark about it.

Besides its ramifications for the future of humankind, I must also account for the complex nature of this project. We catch most of our samples in June and July, but for the rest of the year, we study their behavior and habitats. We identify and capture the fireflies with the highest amounts of luciferase, but we also aim to preserve them in special conservation areas where they can continue breeding with their own kind. Every year, we carefully calculate where to release the balloons from, as there are dozens of factors to keep in mind for a successful launch, such as the stars' and planets' location, meteorological conditions, political interference, and the impact on local wildlife. Even the smallest error in our calculations could spell disaster. It would also be a substantial loss of time and resources if any of the balloons popped while still in our atmosphere.

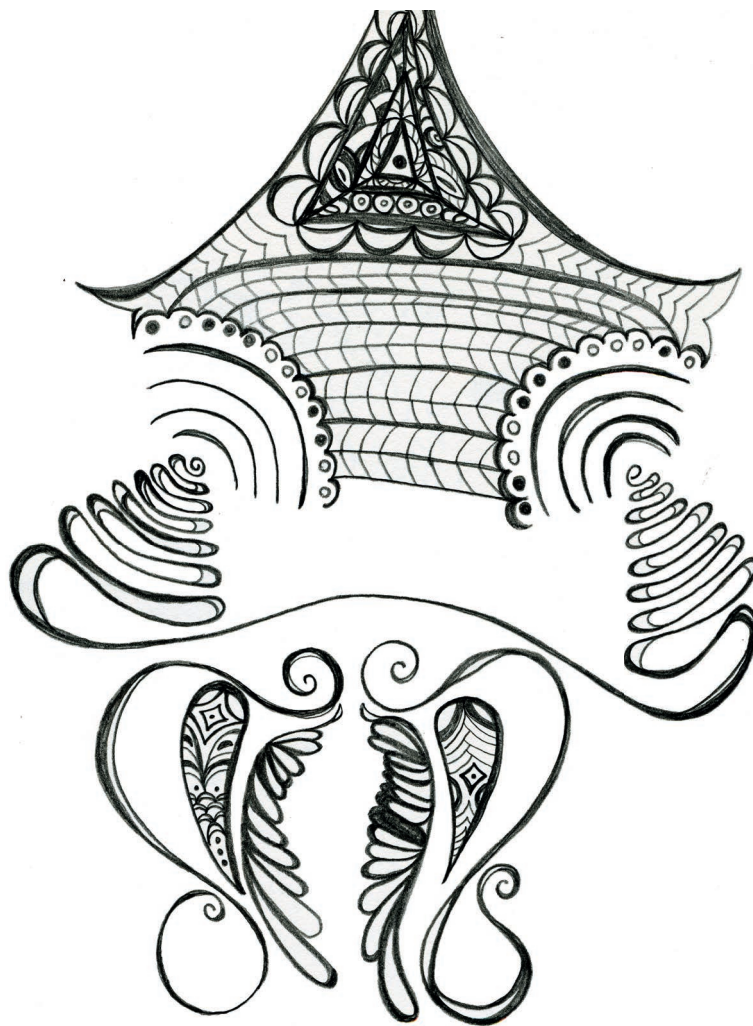
Every year, we only release four or five balloons, each filled with about ten or twelve fireflies. We could release many more, but we've considered the potential outcome of generating hundreds of new stars every year. Soon enough, the night sky could become so full, so bright, so beautiful that the whole world might give up sleep. Around the world, wildlife's sleep might also be disrupted by the myriad of stars.

There is also, of course, the ethical ambiguity of this little-known profession. A few dozen fireflies every year might not sound like much in the grand scheme of things, but given the tremendous transformation they undertake, the force with which they combust, and the fate we sentence them to, I must ask myself if anyone deserves such an end—or beginning. Maybe the fireflies are star seeds, and their sacrifice is necessary to keep the heat on in an otherwise cold, empty, starless cosmos.

Perhaps the fireflies are even greater than we think. I've considered, now and then, that they could be the true progenitors of life in the universe. Rather than killing them when the balloons pop, we might simply allow them to take on their true form and purpose. We could be the vessels for gods of immeasurable scale and complexity. And maybe it's preposterous for a man of science to say or even think such things, but for every firefly we launch, I plant another apple tree in my orchard. I hope that when I die, a swarm of fireflies will lift me up in a blanket of embers and carry me, their humble servant, to the heavens where they reign in light supreme.

At the end of the day, I guess it gives the guys at NASA something to do as they track and analyze the fireflies' positions. But in my opinion, they're going about it the wrong way. As far as I know, they haven't even noticed the pattern in which the fireflies have been colonizing the skies, but every year it's more and more clear to me that they organize and settle themselves along the golden ratio.

Not only that, but just last week, the fireflies we launched last year spelled out the name "Arianna" before continuing to their predestined nests, which foretold the message I would get yesterday morning from a stranger with the same name. I told her all of this and then asked her what kind of jewelry she made, but she never responded. After all, this story was probably as real as her.

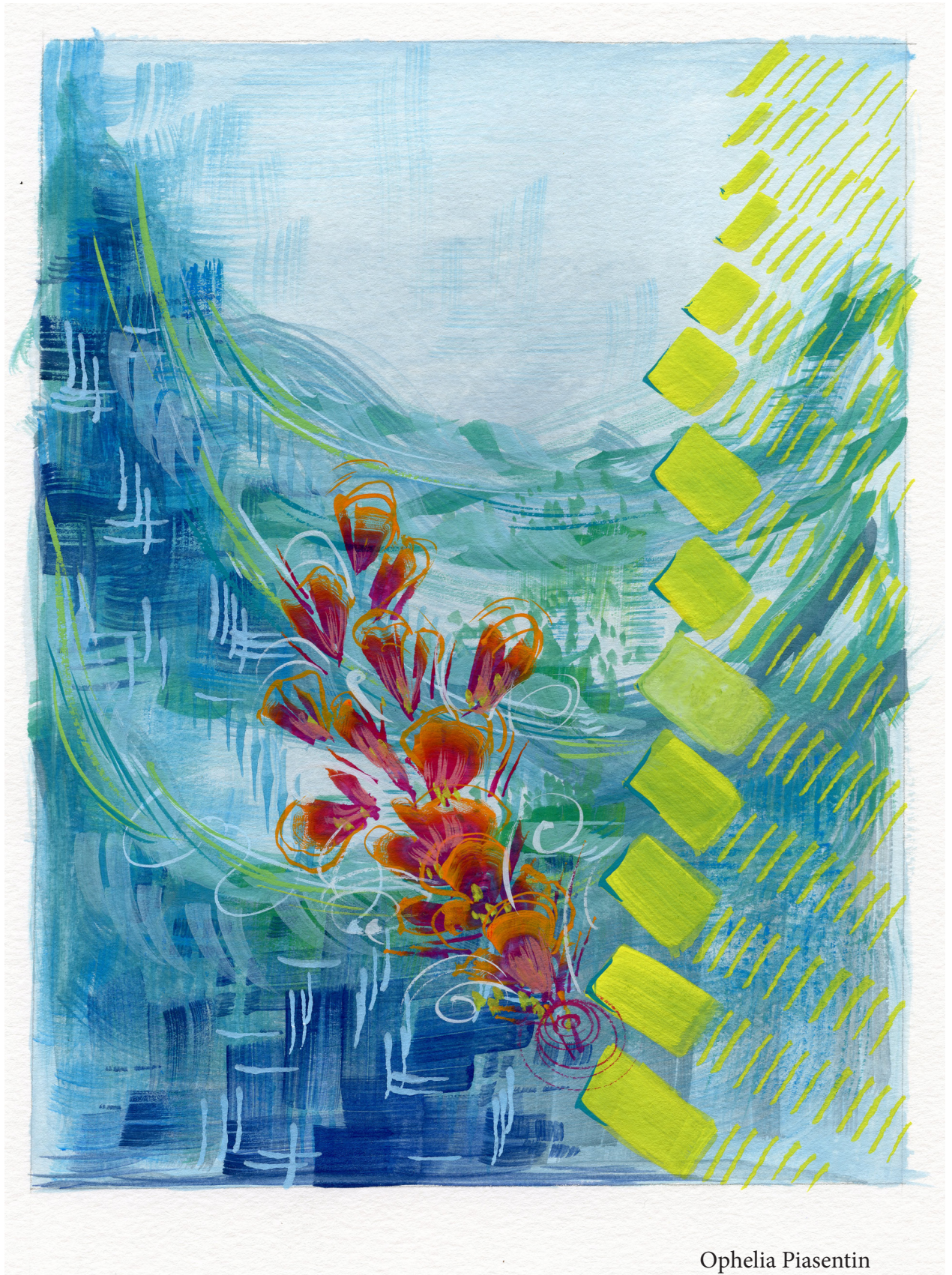


Brenda Piasentin

Autumn Chandeliers

Sarah Murphy

Saffron and sunburnt leaves
slip, trip from trees,
sticking, stucking in spiders' strings,
garlands adorning the morning;
tinsel trails spin, spun in the breeze,
crystals of dew glistening ornately.



Ophelia Piasentin

Nothing But Blue

Sarah Murphy

The sun beams down on
the glittering river -
alive with the wake of a ship -
rolling over itself,
over and over,
a dancing rhythm
in the leading tug of the current.

The sun beams down on
sparkling citrus,
humidity dripping from its peel,
fruit dripping from limb,
arching with the weight
of bright orange in green foliage,
slipping, sliding, splashing,
bobbing to the surface
following the lead
rolling over and over
caught in the dance.
A glorious sight to sailors
who had seen nothing but blue for days.

The Great Cicada

Katie St. Aubin

Staring up at a flurry of green skies and blue tree,
I find only screaming as deafening as my own here.
Voices parallel in hypnotic rhythms—
powered by screeching lungs until—
they shed their husks – free to flee.

Is this tree-cricket perhaps shouting all by his lonesome?

Swarming decibels pray on deaf ears—
protected by sap-covered trunks wrapped in a canopy of
leaves—
daring for an adversary as ear-splitting.
Converging Hemiptera's and infiltrating Hominidae's—
lost in the song of the tiny little great cicada bug.



Brenda Piasentin

Poets at catastrophe o'clock -

Kayshini Nilendran

an exercise in garden path sentences

the old man the boat

rowing rowing far from the coastline just to feel the proximity of the oceans that will
not hesitate to regurgitate their survival instincts a dozen meters down the complex
houses all of us and our dysfunctional minds, somehow

we continue painting on canvas erasing in the pouring rain, lightning strikes, and then of the
poets, the prime number few,

it is difficult to live with a finger made of dust constantly pressed against your lips to be
free of it, you bite it and taste your many ghosts

the cotton clothing is made, now grows invisible, we are accustomed to being naked but call
ourselves art

were we always the art we sought to imitate?

is there a reason glass cuts like the consequence of vanity slipping on humanity the superiority
who hunt duck out on days of faith, as if

there isn't much to believe in, anymore

in the ceaseless night, we continue to paint the wall with cracks

silence is deafening but voice? voices.

all but small, echoing tremors

shelving themselves between the blaring orchestra

Immortality

Caprice

For the person who introduced me to poetry and inspired me to write it

who am i within time and space?
i've been running Immortality's race.
will i decay first or will it be my face
carried away by eternity's wind
ashes upon ashes
upon ashes
worn
from holding together the structure of form?

what is this place between time and space?
these fragmented moments that will never need an elegy
—a hopestrung melody—
soft light reflecting in kind eyes echoing, in perspicacity, the pasts of many lives.
bright, shining eyes that live and burn and cry
bright and blinding and slowly dying
how close we come to prosperity,
to expanding into infinity,
to approaching familiarity with existence despite universal calamity—
instead deteriorating into eternity,
detaching from corporeality.

our words echoing out into the chasm of the universe organized into a termed galaxy.
Immortality
expanding and concealing with the ages,
bowing and rising through flipping pages.

strengthened in the face of fatality—
immortality
—holds my face—
suspended?
somewhere between time and space.



Your Room

Salina

when I'm finally able to close the light of the now dark room, I grasp my wilting flowers— and my barely beating heart of gloom with my eyes looking forwards and tears streaming down my cheeks, I leave for some days which soon turn to weeks

and as time goes on and years go by,
I forget about the abandoned corner
until one day, when I'm passing through
I see a light spilling into the once dark corridor:

the door barely slit open
that pesky thing— I could've sworn I'd closed it,
allowing dim light that the darkness is eager to consume, and there you are,
standing just where I left you

alone in the centre,
the vision so familiar
except you're holding living flowers
trying to relight the room with insufficient powers

Study after Velasquez

Maria Schiza

~ an ekphrastic poem after Francis Bacon

anything
can be forced
open

(the mouth is the entrance
to deep darkness)
though most of it lives
in the hours between your memory
stammering and stopping

and you
waking up
the darkness stretches,
measuring itself
against your body

Brother of Dusk and Umber

Denis Robillard

The life force awakens —
a gray haze wraps itself around trees,
then slowly burns off.
The sun takes its place in the sky
its equipoise shines through the window
like Sandburg, I remember
“Brother of dusk and umber.”
I inhale the lavish greenery,
watch the shadow play on a morning
notebook,
the right hand clasping the book
with three strong fingers
like a violin player fingering the fret —
the playthings of an idle brain

Under the bright panels of the sun
I am thinking of the neighbour’s
three-day rooster calls, Hawaiian leis
and deep-fried ukuleles

My mind feels like an effable blender
churning out the succulent pieces
to make them smooth and uniform
and ready for consumption.

Like bees asleep in the golden realm,
words turn like sermons in the heart

It is my father’s birthday today.
He would have been 84 years.

We parlay like chieftains on the moor,
my simple words like seed scatter birdshot
in the fallen dimension.

Gently Mad Authors and Artists

Alexei Ungurenasu

Alexei Ungurenasu exists. Sometimes they exist in Canada, and other times, in Romania and Korea. Is it ever enough to just exist? When it isn't, they write. Are you happy? Alexei is happy sometimes, when existing seems easy. They're just like you in that way.

Bethany Felix

Bethany Felix is an artist and designer from Tucson, Arizona currently residing in Savannah, Georgia. Her work explores human figure and emotion through painting techniques from traditional to digital, and occasionally through various printmaking processes. She works as a concept artist for independent animation and videogame projects and was a guest speaker at this year's Beaufort International Film Festival. Her spare time is dedicated to honing her craft in drawing and painting, as well as expanding her knowledge of art theory and philosophy - her present fixation being the works of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Brenda Piasentin

I have played many roles in this life, most importantly a mother, teacher, healer and eternal student. Losing my sister and mother at a young age ignited my quest for knowledge and understanding regarding the metaphysical meaning of life and death. Connection to Spirit has been a catalyst for these drawings as they are created through me to share a message unique to each viewer. In stillness and movement, perspectives shift; what is transmitted is understood by each individual soul. Eyes can see, the mind interprets, but the soul knows.

Caprice Strgar

Caprice Strgar, a grade 12 student currently residing in Southwestern Ontario, writes poetry exploring themes and concepts that are important and meaningful to her. She believes that her work centralizes around the power of experience; often interweaving themes of identity, feminism, environmentalism, philosophy, and trauma. As a FutureVerse alumni and ambassador for the Poetry In Voice organization, she runs poetry workshops for middle and high school classes. Beyond her writing, Caprice engages with the community by leading her school's Book Club and managing an initiative providing artistic students with the opportunity to create meaningful pieces for local retirement home residents.

Damian Younghusband

I'm Damian, 25, and I see myself as a young artist. I've lived in Michigan for my whole life, but often find myself traveling the world and collecting experiences, memories, and stories from those I meet. I believe the richness of life comes from fully engaging with one's emotions, in an honest and raw way. I hope to discover my unique art style that I can articulate in the world one day, whether that's through poetry or any medium I pursue.

Denis Robillard

Denis Robillard is a 58 year old poet and educator born in Northern, Ontario. He now resides with his wife and children in Windsor, Ontario. He retired as a teacher in 2023. Robillard was first published in 1986 and has had over 500 poems published in Canada, USA and Europe. Recent publications include Ristau (Kentucky), Rampike (CAN), Ekphrastic Review (CAN), Windsor Review, LUMMOX (Calif) and The Nashwaak Review (2020). He is the past winner of the Ted Plantos Poetry Award in 2015 and the Cranberry Tree Press Award for his book, THE HISTORY OF WATER. His poetry book, ASK THE RIVER was published by Black Moss Press in 2018. His most recent book is called DEEP FRIED KODAK. He is also an avid photographer. He has been published more than 500 times. He has been published in every province in Canada except for Nunavut and NWT. He has had a photo on a Jones cola bottle that was circulated 20,000 times. He was once a body guard for Michael Damion of the Young and Restless soap opera in the 1980s.

Jovan Stefanov

Jovan Stefanov is a Macedonian-Canadian writer and teacher residing in Windsor, Ontario. His work includes Marshwood Songs (with Nick Hildenbrand) and contributions to the anthology Where the Map Begins, published by Black Moss Press. His MA thesis, "John Dee & Prospero: Angels, Alchemy, and Empire in The Tempest" explored the intersections of Early Modern science, magic, and colonialism in Shakespeare's last play. He is currently working on English translations of Macedonian poetry.

Kalie Chapman

Kalie Chapman (she/her) is a master's student at the University of Windsor, Ontario in English Literature & Creative Writing. She is currently working on a creative manuscript for her thesis, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. She has been published in the poetry anthology Where the Map Begins, as well as four chapbooks, and two journal articles. Currently, all her energy has been dedicated to working on PhD proposals, with the goal to pursue her studies abroad in Ireland.

Katie St. Aubin

My name is Katie St. Aubin, and I'm based in Windsor, Ontario. I'm in the final year of my Master's program in English, where my research focuses on John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, with a particular interest in themes of walking, transformation, and Gothic horror. I'm an avid reader, always drawn to stories that challenge perspectives and ignite curiosity. Outside of my studies, I share my home with three wonderful cats—Milk, Zuko, and Tofu—who add plenty of charm and chaos to my days. As I prepare to pursue a PhD, I'm excited to continue exploring the intersection of literature and culture.

Kayshini Nilendran

Kayshini Nilendran is a passionate seventeen year old storyteller with a profound love for the linguistic and performing arts, including musical theatre. A 2024 alum of Poetry in Voice's FutureVerse, her work has been featured in the *Voices/Voix* student journal, the Poetry Institute of Canada's "Island Shores" anthology, among others. *Gently Mad Magazine* is her first magazine publication. Equipped with a flair for self-expression and creativity, she finds comfort in spoken word and written poetry based on her experiences as a Jaffna Tamil Canadian growing up in Markham-Stouffville. She hopes to pursue the juggle between writing, business, and law.

Lindsey White

Lindsey White was born in 2001. She graduated from Trevecca Nazarene University with a degree specializing in film, dramatic arts, and journalism. She regularly reads her poems at open mic nights and has been previously published in the online journal, *Synchronized Chaos*. She currently lives in South Korea as an English teacher, where she runs an English poetry night. Fun fact: she's been pooped on by a bird twice in her life. This either means birds have a grudge against her, or she's the luckiest person alive. She's sticking with the luck theory...

Maria Schiza

Maria Schiza is a poet and academic from Thessaloniki, Greece. She has graduated with a bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature from the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, followed by a master's degree in Creative Writing from the University of Nottingham. She is currently reading for a Creative Writing PhD at the University of Edinburgh, researching the possibilities of encounter found through ekphrastic poetry. Her recent publications include "Figure Studies in London" in *Outcrop Poetry* and "On Language, Nomads, and the Shifting Shape of Home" in the *Tabula Rasa Review*.

Okbi Han

Okbi Han is a Korean poet, painter, and video editor. She lives in Guri, a small city near Seoul. Her works have been published by SoFloPoJo, Buffalo 8, Biscuit Hill and Bombay Gin. Her

other work is scheduled to be published on 50 Give or Take and The Call Center Collective. She is also a professional french fries craver.

Ophelia Piasentin

My name is Ophelia Piasentin, and I am an artist based in Windsor, Ontario. I have always loved to draw and paint ever since I was little. I started with finger paintings in kindergarten to creating paintings bigger than I am using a wide range of mediums. Some of the mediums I work with are acrylic paints, oil, watercolor, gouache, digital, and just a classic pencil. I have always dreamed of hopefully being able to do something with my art for a living, and am continuing to work towards that goal. Currently, I am in school taking my BFA at the University of Windsor which is where some of my submissions come from.

Renan Mahmoud

Hailing from the land of the pharaohs, Renan Mahmoud is an aspiring writer studying English and Comparative Literature at the American University of Cairo. With her soul dedicated to the arts and crafts of writing and photography, she is currently working on poetry collections that explore the commemoration of memories and the composition of experiences. She likes her coffee as dark as her sense of humor.

Salina

Hello! My name is Salina and I am writing from my home in Windsor, Ontario. I am a passionate English major and I absolutely love to read and write. When creating my own work, I stay true to the genres of poetry and fictional stories, all of which form in my mind and in my heart. My favourite fictional novel is *A Curse for True Love*, by Stephanie Garber, while my favourite genre is romantasy because it's a reminder that the most magical experiences rest in the tiny universes created and controlled by the imagination of authors.

Sampy Sicada

"Sampy Sicada is a British fine artist based in Savannah, GA. His traditional graphite and color pencil drawings have been exhibited internationally, notably at the London Art Biennale and the AD Art Show at the Oculus at World Trade Center. Sampy has also given guest lectures and talks on art issues and media theory. His favorite pastime is engaging in overcooked readings for philosophy in pop culture artifacts, the current preoccupation being whether John Locke's metaphysical notions of psychological continuity are present in the web series *Red vs Blue*."

Sarah Murphy

My name is Sarah Murphy, and I am writing from Waterloo, Ontario in Canada. My work has been published in Windsor Public Library's *Pagination* Zine and Waterloo Public Library's *Inkling* Teen Magazine. I have also received awards for my poetry from The Ultra Best Short

Verse Poetry Contest. Many writers can say that they started from a young age, but I may be the only one who can say that when asked what they were doing on the computer at the ripe, young age of six, replied, "I love Microsoft Word." What better beginning to a life of writing?

Sumayyah Khalife,

Sumayyah Khalife, born and raised in Windsor, Ontario, is currently in her 2nd year of studying English Language and Literature at the University of Windsor. Reading Richard Wagamese's *Indian Horse* in her 11th grade class, she then realized her passion for reading, writing, and her yearning to teach both English and Indigenous literature. Sumayyah credits this book to the pursuit of her uncovered passion and still holds it very dear to her heart. Also dear to her heart: Foxy, her kitty of 14 years, creating art, and Ms. Kennedy, the most amazing woman, teacher, and mentor that she has the pleasure to know.

Terry Brennan

Terry Brennan is a new writer. He was recently shortlisted for the Scottish Association of Writers' Short Story prize. He is currently working on two collections of short stories and a novel. He tells *Gently Mad*, "I'm making up for lost time.'

Vivian van Klaarbergen

Vivian van Klaarbergen lives in a small town in the Netherlands with her cat Oliver. As a former English graduate and avid reader and writer, she has always had a love for symbolism and stories tied closely to emotion. She generally writes fiction, but when emotions are high, she tends to write poetry in order to make sense of her feelings. Her favourite musician is Taylor Swift, due to her amazing storytelling and the range of musical genre in which she writes, and her favourite song is *Question...?* (although it changes daily)

Gently Mad Editors

Juliana Allan

Editor-in-Chief

Juliana is an author, artist and researcher currently pursuing on her BFA in Illustration for Publication design at the Savannah College of Art and Design. She has also studied Creative Writing at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, and earned a Roman Art and Archeology certificate from the University of Arizona.

She currently works as a Writing tutor, Book Club Coordinator and Student Ambassador at her University. Outside of school, she also works as a freelance writer for art history magazines, having published three articles this year at Polyptych and ArtHer-story magazines.

In her work as an Illustrator and book designer she has worked in two books and the anthology *I Never Wrote Your Name* by Alice Winters.

You can always find her at her favorite coffee shop working on her book, or at the Library doing research. She focuses her work in Historical Fiction and Historical Narrative.

Serafina Piasentin

Editor-in-Chief

Serafina is an author, poet, and journalist from Canada. She holds a BA(H) in English Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Windsor and has studied at Keele University and the University of Edinburgh in the UK.

An intern for three years at Black Moss Press, Canada's oldest publishing company, a TA for grammar courses, and a copyeditor and cover designer through the Editing and Publishing Practicum at UoW, Serafina has vital experience in both editing and publishing. She currently works as a freelance journalist at Windsor Life magazine.

A writer at heart, she has poems published in both Canada and England. You can find her work in poetry collection, *Where The Map Begins* as well as journals like *Invention*, and anthologies like *Catch the Whispers Anthology Of Verse - Young Writers of Canada*. When she's not writing, you might find Serafina travelling the world. She is grateful to have visited 40 countries, each of which have inspired poems and stories in turn.

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