



[Alternate Route]

Issue 12 Winter 2024

[Alternate Route]

#12, Winter 2024

Journal Creative Commons licensed by [AR]

Individual pieces/works © 2024 respective authors/artists

ISSN 2767-0317

Issue #12: Winter 2024

Editor: Michael O. Starr

Cover art: 13b by Richard Hanus

Contributors:

Cassandra Arencibia, Harley Claes, Jeff Burt, William M. McIntosh,
George M. Drosdowich, Greg Beckman, Michael Mulvey,
William C. Crawford, Jacqueline Morgan, Jim Dawson,
Peter MacQuarrie, M F Drummy, Richard Hanus

This periodical produced without institutional funding.

To submit, please see our website at <www.alternateroute.org>.

Journal edited in California.

Biographies precede the writer's and/or artist's pieces.

Typefaces

Cover text: **Esteban**, size variable and large

Internal text: Bell MT, size 11

Headers & footers: Calibri Light, size 11

Image captions: *Bell MT*, size 11, italicized

Footnotes: *Bell MT*, size 8, italicized

Bio text: Calisto MT, size 12

Thank you for reading!

Table of Contents

Cassandra Arencibia.....	10
Insanity Piece.....	11
Enduring.....	13
Harley Claes.....	18
God’s Ashtray.....	19
Killed by Originality.....	21
Sapling.....	22
Jeff Burt.....	24
Scuff.....	25
Another Howl.....	27
William M. McIntosh.....	29
Here I Come.....	30
George. M. Drosdowich.....	33
Monuments of the Future	34
To A Star.....	37
Spiritus Mundi.....	38
Greg Beckman.....	42
“Upon Seeing the Hollywood Sign”.....	43
“Bible-School”.....	45
“Peaches”.....	47
Michael Mulvey.....	48
Chopsticks.....	49
William C. Crawford.....	62

Image 5303.....	63
Image 5305.....	63
Image 5306.....	64
Image 5374.....	64
Image 5377.....	65
Image 5378.....	65
Image 5428.....	66
Image 5433.....	66
Jacqueline Morgan.....	68
Old Soul.....	69
Jim Dawson.....	81
Hard Wood Bench.....	82
Peter MacQuarrie.....	86
5 Spheres.....	87
M F Drummy.....	89
1790.....	90
Native Born.....	91
Arroyo.....	93
Richard Hanus.....	96
13b.....	97
14.....	98
Image 007.....	99

Cassandra Arencibia

is a senior undergraduate at Marist College. She is the fiction editor of her school magazine, The Mosaic, and has had her fiction and poetry published there. She anticipates going to grad school, though she has no real idea of what she wants to do with the rest of her life.

Insanity Piece

Writer, girl, mental patient.

Carbon copy poems strewn in neat piles,
colorful pen masks spelling errors and poor grammar.

Times when words were misspelled
accidentally,

and poems lacked meaning
intentionally.

Sit down at your pulpit,
crack your weary, straight-jacket limbs,
type out words as if you were talking
type as if you were thinking.

Pray that the words swim nicely together,
under the brackish water your brain is held in.

Rip imaginary typewriter paper out, toss it over your shoulder,
like salt.

The words may change
but sentences and syllables stay the same.

You could beat your poems out like a tune on your chest,
and you do,

same place, same rhythm,
a fist shaped bruise pulsing over your heart.

You can feel it,

digging ragged, crooked, tooth bitten nails into your bones,
but when you try to speak
-like a dream-
you just can't find the right words.

Enduring

Above the sky that is the Hudson river, there is a shelf of mountains where dozens of wide and tall houses pose as books.

Their backyards grin with teeth made of porches, blinking down at the drop with painted-on shutters, a complimentary pet barking or meowing in one of the windows.

I have only ever seen them from the other side of the river.

The bony stone of the ledge I'm sitting on is hurting my ass.

I am leading out onto a cliff face as well,

a feature of the landscape as much as the salt-encrusted, mossy rocks.

Below me, there is no river, but instead a wide sea of parking lot.

I've taken up smoking.

The cigarette that cradles me as much as I it,

spits out sheer smoke,

leeching yellow onto my fingernails,

the ones crusted with black nail polish.

My ass hurts, I shift again,

letting something sit beside me.

My cigarette smoke is mingling with the fog,

the fog that curls and licks its fingers against the trees and the water and the cliff,

yet curves away warily from the large colonial homes,

protected in their sterility.

Would I were as sterile as thou art, unchanging gentrified homes.

The tongues of fog fade along the river,
and I can see a man,
fishing.

He is an accidental smudge of ink,
and I imagine a straw hat on his head.

I teeter forward a bit, something whistling inside of me, hollow like the valley,

and I blow smoke into the empty space leading to the parking lot.

It is getting easier to shift,
gravity no longer an anvil pressing my chest down,
but a quicker way to just get down, get down, get anywhere.

My cigarette fades,
counting my time like an alternative hourglass,
the hot rosebud tip singeing the peach fuzz on my knuckles.

Around me it is empty,
open plains and light posts as far as one can see,
the spaces where people should be
whistle with my insides in harmony.

Something about a party,
it pings in my brain,

I take solace in the fact that I've got better things to do,

I've got to get down to get up.

Slumping forward, gravity pulls my hair down, letting it free
fall into the parking lot,

tugging at me, telling me to go.

I rest instead,

claiming I am conserving energy, letting it build in my muscles
like lactic acid.

My hair forms a funeral shroud around my face,
my fingers weakly find the gray hairs.

Their scratchy, woolen quality makes me slump further,
written in them is proof that I've seen enough.

Like a raindrop, the butt of my cigarette slips from its coat,
kissing my jeans with a hiss.

Fog lingers, but the clouds, they part and a gasp of sunlight
breaches the atmosphere.

The man is still fishing,
the setting sun painting the linen fog around him,
making it come to life.

I suspect it will snatch his hat off.

Behind the mountains, the sun has started to crawl away, the
train of her dress stained with red and gold, pink and white,
and she gives the peaks of rock a halo.

His crooked, old body straightens for a moment,
and as his line sails forward he leans back,
and I know he's caught something.

As the sun hikes her skirt up,
he continues to pull back, his hands turn to smudges in the
golden, hot air.
My fingers find the still warm black hole in my jeans and I
tremble, suddenly afraid of the wall.
In thought, I've slid down the rock face, my feet they dangle.
The man fiddles with his hook,
bringing a smaller smudge to his lips.
Creaking as he does so,
he sets the smudge of fish, of seaweed, of something onto the
ground,
and casts his line again.
I am thinking up an excuse that I slipped, that the edge was
closer than I pictured.
Instead, I grip the edge of the stony ledge, haul myself off like
it's the side of a ship, and walk back home.

Harley Claes

is a writer and entrepreneur from Detroit, Michigan.

Her work is oftentimes anachronistic, surreal, philosophical and holy erotic. She also happens to run the Beat-inspired press ANGELICAL RAVINGS. Her work has appeared 50+ times in literary magazines. You can find her at <<https://linktr.ee/harleyclaes>> and on twitter @vilecherubium

God's Ashtray

Our ashtray minds,

God puts a cigarette out on us

And dictates fate

Divining destiny into plastic chapels

And screens that wire their propaganda

Into impressionable human psyches

In our palaces of ignorant dreams

God smuggles sin into us

Once we are satiated on sleep

And fed on ambiguity

The analyst genius gets a

Special handpicked sale on lobotomies

Half off reality and high on amphetamines

The whole of humanity must wean

Themselves off of illegal thoughts

And sip on classic tragedies

We are bibles of flesh and blood

Given the illusion of freedom

Known as independent thought

A band aid for the bruise

From the lies we exceeded

This is the existence we were given

But not the life we needed

Killed by Originality

The poem enters the world as a wound

Bullet to the third eye

Ethereal bodies all baudelairian and visionary

Words are prisons

Written in the name of aging classics

Poets reach to eternalize the enigmatic

In hopes to pen the inscriptions of their cultural programming

But in the end the texts are left as carcasses

Until they can be reborn upon publication

When thought alive again

They are exiled by the establishment

Forever forgotten in the stream

Of more basic things

Sapling

Bonsai of melted choices on lovecraftian passages parade
around packages of soul & flowering wounds from a poet's pe-
riphery bleeding genius too soon, since birth somethings not
been right the weeping dream aches for landscapes not yet de-
signed abandoned arts and static songs breed embryonic hopes
and forgotten purpose decrypting code of wish is like seeing
through the eyes of ancients, hollowed out and sewn into sight
like a rookie with a dictionary all bible-like worshipping words
of creative visions and dead revolutionaries mad hungers for
acceptance and understanding dead languages all the dead po-
ets all the dead men I love in my prose I write them for you to
all the women who wrote too I write them for you. all hodge-
podge mind and paperkiss poetry parasols of thought I lionize
and procure and process all my meaning and put it in the trash
to birth myself again. all the dead writers in me budding. now I
birth myself again.

Scuff

Day dirty from the night
before, scuffed by history,
torn by intentional
and unintentional conflict,
dawn not so much rising
as dragged by the boisterous
and fiery ball of achievement,
the engine that does not stutter
but makes the living
cough and spit and suck
a breath of poisoned air.
Slavery from centuries
sings on the twills of cotton
slipped over limbs.
Misogyny steps away
from intimacy at the bedside
like business from philanthropy.
We no longer puzzle
over why the birds sing.
We enjoy their continued poverty,
spread tiny millet when we step

from the door, smile

at their hunger, how they peck.

Another Howl

I have watched the ferocity of curiosity
drained from my children by fabrication
and vacillation of truth depending on the teller,
the doom of humankind shape-shift
from a nuclear cloud to our atmosphere
gathering our industrial storm
and raining it back, the depletion of species
foretelling our population's demise,
the wealth and waste of a few
determining the fate and faith of the many,
the loss of extravagant minutiae,
democracy hardened and knurled like a single set screw
driven to hold power of one over another in place.

William M. McIntosh

is a writer of drivel and collector of rejection letters. He loves literature, film and any other kind of art he can get his grubby little fingers on. His work has been published by Maudlin House, The /t&szl/ Review, The Yard: Crime Blog, BarBar Magazine, Night Picnic Press, The Lowestoft Chronicle, Roi Fainéant Press, and Your Impossible Voice. He doesn't tweet, but if he did it would be @moonliteciabata. You can find links to his work at www.wmmcintosh.com. He is based in Cincinnati.

Here I Come

You sit there in your car with the engine still running. You shut it off, check your phone. *Here I come*. You look around, but no one comes.

You tap the wheel with the song on the stereo and try to look natural. You adjust the angle of the seat, pulling it forward and pushing it back. You change the station and listen to an evangelist talk about heathens. You check your phone again. *Here I come*. Still, no one comes.

You look around at faces and try to decipher what they see, hoping it isn't you. You go inside and buy a pack of gum and an energy drink, even though you don't drink those anymore. You're a coffee man, now. They only sell shitty energy drink coffee here. You thank the cashier and go back outside to your car and hope the purchase has validated your presence. You check your phone. *Here I come*.

Twenty minutes go by. Then another ten. You're getting antsy. You lie back in the seat to avoid being noticed and sit back up when your phone lights up. It's a promotional text from Arby's. You stay sitting up.

The SUV finally appears. It parks at the pump that is the farthest from you. You casually wave and try to catch attention but are not seen. You send a text that says *should I come to you?* You receive a text back that says *come 2 me*.

You climb inside the back of the SUV and make awkward conversation over the pounding bass. You cram the handful of pot in your pocket, sans baggie, and attempt to lock hands in solidarity. You fail to dap properly and exit the vehicle in shame.

After walking back to your car with your eyes on your shoes, you put on the seatbelt and turn the ignition. You start backing out of the spot you're in and get maybe three feet before a thud

from behind makes you slam the brakes. It's the shop owner. He's clinging to the trunk and screaming in a language you don't understand.

You press the gas and go sideways, preparing to floor it for the road. Shop owner swings with the car but clings tight. *I know what you're doing* he shouts. *I see what you've done* he screams. He yells something else you don't understand. The car lurches forward and shop owner holds on for dear life.

He hollers *do not come back here* as you bottom out going from parking lot to street. When the bumper bounces off the pavement, shop owner bounces too and loses grip of the trunk. He hits concrete and rolls, and you go screaming down the boulevard. Your heart stays lodged in your throat and pounds as you blow through yellow lights.

You text Mr. SUV and tell him you can't meet there anymore. You tell him about the shop owner and your mad break for freedom and how he knows everything. You tell him the spot is too hot. Mr. SUV texts back and says *it's cool* and *hit me up next week for some loud* and *it's some real gas*.

You pack a tiny amount of ground up brown into a baseball bat one-hitter and suck the flames down, wondering why you even bother. You wonder how a drug that isn't habit-forming keeps you coming back to the Citgo for covert drug deals. You wonder how much a fine for possessing ten bucks worth of lawn-mower clippings is. You wonder out loud if you'll be able to pick all the shake from your pocket and if you'll end up inhaling burnt lint.

The guy on speaker duty at Arby's says he doesn't know, asks if you'd like a medium or large. You say large. You can't help but say large. Your mouth is drier than white dog shit. He says the total and says to pull up and you can't help but laugh as you tell him *here I come*.

George. M. Drosdowich

published his first novel, “Bad to Me” NineMile Books September 2022. He’s had Poetry published over the years in The Seneca Review, NineMile Magazine and Hole in the Head Review. He is a retired Green Energy Developer and Attorney. He resides in Warwick, NY with his wife, adult children and 2 grandkids.

Monuments of the Future

*"There among the ferns and mosses,
There among the prairie lilies,
On the Muskoday, the meadow,
In the moonlight and the starlight,
Fair Nokomis bore a daughter.*

And she called her name Wenonah," Henry
Wordsworth Longfellow, 'The Song of Hiawatha' 1885

1.

Give something to the birds

Crying in their nests

To the sore strangled creatures

Hiding in the sea

Tell the birds we wrote for a clever people

Say to fish we lived our lives singing

About the ones who wasted theirs

Tell them poetry was sometimes gliding

Oval stones over ice

We never understood how they spun - tell them

There were more poets than clever people

2.

The Founding Fathers were not poets

& We had no right to witty critics

No right to inspired readers

We had the right to remain silent

To bear arms in our camouflage pajamas

The right to fill blank pages
With bullet holes or symbols
To echo across the mountains
There was no justice for the Delaware
No justice either for the squatters and their children
And anything we said would be held against us

3.

On Mt. Tor above the Ramapo River
Over the confluence of Rte17 and I-287
Rose the statue of Wenonah daughter of Nokomis
Five-hundred feet of steel and bronze
The light in her eyes searching west
For her lover the wind had deceived her
Wenonah with child fit and holy
Buckskins and bead work
Seduced and abandoned
The Legislature levied the funds

In Oklahoma a ziggurat to her son
Hiawatha Peacemaker
Ascended six miles into the sun and darkness
The people spiraled up its edges
Until noses bled and lips babbled
Until we nestled in its clouds and slumbered
The shadows of the constellations passing over

4.

A tale discovered

Only to exist in its telling

Longfellow poet led us

Through the walking fires and past smokestack lightning

The anarchic indoctrination continued

We peered into the great eye of the prairie flower

And flew over

We opened our own eyes

When the surprise strangers appeared over us

And wiped our brows with rain

Blessed us with smoke of cedar

Assured us we were forgiven

And feathered their prayers upon us

In that unregrettable hour

The visitors

Returned to earth

To A Star

One casual morning fresh from sleep
I wondered if you ever thought of me,
So distant in space and time. Who can see
Clearly what force flung you through so many
brutal orbits into fresh radiance?

Fugitive suns lingered like the glowing coals
That cleansed a prophet's lips. I saw your
piercing beauty, your grace of limb, and recalled
The scent of your cheek coming from the cold
And your urgent hunger to feel it all.

What you meant to me you cannot mean to yourself,
Nor will obscured and isolated distance
Blunt the pang of beauty and desire,
Nor my shaky scope cease to scan
This blackened arc for still another look.

Spiritus Mundi

Oh what is rising in the east?

irradiated seeds

Pandora's lacerated hands-

fat-men on strings

floating over Syracuse -

children, whose hearts were strangled

naked children, in the mirrors of the sheik

children, choking on gas-

an old grave's progress through time

a bone's lengthening shadow-

Oh what is above us?

the great green vine-

the flopping ocean in a bowl

factories the width of a hair

cells of a Pharaoh-

cells demanding

the metal kiss-

the Resurrection of Pig Boy Crabshaw
a procession returning the sacred drums to Africa
the dense plasma of cold space
our chariot of the sun-

Oh what is beneath us?

-the poor posture of one plus one
leaves from the calendar of hell swirling
the squirrel in the flywheel of the mind
T. Rowe Price and the Temple of Doom-
lost sons
the daughter of the moon Nokomis-
all that is undone and all that is forgotten
the unshakably shook-
the settling of dust
the veterans of desertion-

Oh what is in the western sky?

the last leaves of November quivering black in the sunset
the forests of California burning
new walls around the national debtors' prison
women crawling from the wombs

the beach the New World is claiming for itself-
unseen eyes of the forest stare
while the sons of the immigrant nation wear their names
like old saddles
their horses fly on tiny balls of gravity
while the rusty trombones of Messiahville play
“Killer Robots in the Sky”

Greg Beckman

is the author of three collections of poetry. He is Los Angeles born and raised and writes in the everything-already California spirit. His work can be found at gbeckla.com.

“Upon Seeing the Hollywood Sign”

“Did you ever notice,”

Tate asks as he pulls down his shorts,

“that when they ask,

‘What’s your dream?’

like they do in that stupid movie —”

he turns around to face the tall white letters —

“about the prostitute with a heart of gold —

what was it? Oh, yeah, *Pretty Woman* —

that they never —

camera ready?”

I say yes, the camera is ready.

Tate opens wide his arms to The Sign,

hefted cheeks glistening, reflecting the sun,

flexing newfound freedom, a bounce...

“ — really let you choose

off-menu?”

The phone makes the sound cameras make,
a sharp click, as if something real just happened.

“Know what I mean?”

he asks as he pulls up his lucky shorts.

“Bible-School”

In those days,
after God scourged their enemies,
the holders of the land
and keepers of older scrolls,
after those made in His image
dashed soft child-brains against dusty rocks
and bathed triumphant feet in still-warm blood and tears,

Little Mikey raised his hand in Picture Class
and setting down his crayon, asked:
“Excuse me, Mr. Hawley,
does this mean it’s okay
to kill? ‘Cause it says
‘Do Not Kill’ somewhere.”

To which the teacher replied,
smiling down at seven-year-old Mikey:

“Son, it’s *always* okay to kill.
We kill cows, don’t we?”

It's murder you got to watch out for.

And you can't murder an animal."

“Peaches”

The peaches
tasted so good —
better than plums
cold from the icebox
because he was warm
and wanted wear just there —

oh I chose to eat
his high-prized goods
before returning to my book

and that has made all the difference.

Michael Mulvey

is a happily married father of four currently residing in Jacksonville, Florida. Mike had two short pieces, Worst Enemy and What Sound Does an Empty Nest Make, published in the Florida Writers Association April 2022 and August 2022 Newsletters. His short story, Replacement Theory, appeared in the 2023 winter issue of TheBeZine. He can be found online at www.mulveywrites.com.

Chopsticks

“Don’t look at me,” laughs Officer Williams, his eyes staring out the tinted squad car window toward the park, “after what went down between me and Donna, a potential disturbance between wealthy, stay-at-home moms and their nannies is the last thing I should be investigating. Besides, you’re the new guy.”

“Then, I may not have the experience for this,” jokes Officer Sawyer in response, “and I think they may be Au Pair’s, not nannies.”

“See, you know the lingo, and pronounced “awe-pear” with an accent. All the better reason for you to investigate.”

Officer Sawyer accepts defeat and slowly exits the patrol car, walking cautiously toward the Frond’s Bay Municipal Playground. The unfolding scene seems ludicrous. The kindergarten-age children, of which there are many, cram together on benches. Wielding sticks in both hands, they stab at Lego blocks, balls of paper, and numerous unidentifiable objects that are scattered and stacked on the picnic tables in front of them.

Adults speak and shout in accented words bearing dialects from numerous states and countries which echo off the Japanese Fern Trees that border the park, creating Babel-like hysteria that conflicts with the Eden-like bubble of Frond's Bay. The adults chastise the children, stating "stop that" and "sin tirar" in varying degrees of forceful tones, but the projectiles continue to fly. After side-shuffling through the staggered fence entrance, one of these projectiles hits Officer Sawyer's shoulder and lands perpendicularly on his shoe.

"Is that a chopstick?" exclaims Officer Sawyer aloud through chuckles of confused laughter.

"Oh my god!" exclaims a mother running his way in an accent more native to Long Island than any part of Florida, "I'm so sorry, officer, I can't believe my little brat did that."

"It's Austin, and it's okay." He pauses to pick up the projectile before holding and turning it with his fingers. The sparkle from the woman's jewelry catches him off-guard. He shakes his head and blinks before asking, "is this a chopstick?"

"You have no idea," she replies, sensing disapproval and feeling compelled to over-explain. "The school changed its admission

requirements. It used to be stacking blocks and cutting a few shapes with scissors, but now the kids have to pass a chopsticks test.”

“A what test?”

“The school says it’s based on research with Chinese children.” She pauses to speak in a voice intended to mock the school administration. “Using chopsticks triggers higher level thinking skills at an earlier age and provides our students the aptitude necessary to successfully navigate not only the challenging curriculum here, but also at the many highly competitive colleges and universities they will attend.”

“But,” interjects Austin before pointing his one chopstick at the children, “these kids look six or seven.”

“Mine’s five,” declares the woman before placing her hands upon her hips and declaring in Long Island splendor, “how is he supposed to learn to use chopsticks? He’s barely coordinated enough to pick his nose.”

“What school is doing this?”

“Fronde’s Academy,” states the woman in a tone that implies Austin should have known because there really isn’t any other

school unless you drive your kid over the intercoastal bridge to the public school, and no one around here does that.

Austin pauses to fully absorb the scene. By now, women scramble to confiscate Lego's while others offer both threats and potential rewards to settle the children down. These are desperate times, thinks Austin, as a parent follows, "stop that or there's no xBox when we get home" with, "we can stop at Sun-Daes, and you can get an extra scoop" to get her child under control.

"My wife has an early childhood degree," says Austin, attempting to help. "What I remember from listening to her recite the various theories and stuff, you're doing this all wrong. There are way too many kids trying to learn at once."

"Can your wife use chopsticks?"

"Yes," Austin feels compelled to add, "her mom's actually from Hong Kong."

"She is," states the woman while staring deeply into Austin's eyes but clearly looking through him to her great idea lingering amidst the Japanese Fern Trees. "Is she available?" A few

seconds pass uncomfortably so she clarifies, “you know, for tutoring.”

“Tutoring in chopsticks?”

“Exactly. I’m sure your wife’s native abilities will be much better than our Hispanic Au Pair’s. Mine’s from Cuba. I don’t think she’s ever eaten Chinese food.”

“You can do it, Tommy,” encourages Beth, Austin’s wife, “just watch me and do what I do.”

Beth does not sit at a picnic table in Frond’s Bay Municipal Park. She suggested much smaller groups and a multi-purpose room as more conducive to learning, and several moms offered their homes. After negotiations tactful yet firm enough to release prisoners from terrorists, Beth created a schedule utilizing two different houses without bruising anyone’s ego.

Tommy watches intently as Beth slowly grasps the chopsticks and picks up an object while softly singing “the chopstick song,” as she likes to call it: *this is how we chop with*

sticks, chop with sticks, chop with sticks; this is how we chop with sticks, to pick up the gummy bears.

“My Tommy, I swear to god,” comments his mother.

“He just needs more time,” offers another mom. Her daughter, Maya, picks up and consumes gummy bears with robotic efficiency. “And, you know, girls are quicker learners than boys at this sort of thing.”

“No, he’s hopeless just like his father, who asks for a fork at Chiu Fan Gardens; it’s so embarrassing.”

“Look,” the other mom points toward Tommy while grasping Tommy’s mother’s wrist with her other hand. “I think he’s got one.”

The room goes silent. Even Beth stops singing and holds her breath, worried an exhale will ruin the moment. A yellow gummy bear wiggles between the chopsticks as Tommy struggles with the exact amount of pressure needed to keep the gummy bear still. The chopsticks and gummy bear hover above the table, an inch high at most. Adult eyes bulge and stop blinking as Tommy lifts the gummy bear several inches higher. For a long, long second, he appears frozen in panic. His motionless

body extenuates the twitching of the chopsticks, making the gummy bear's belly jiggle.

"You got this, Tommy," whispers Beth.

With a resolve not seen among most five-year-old boys, Tommy nods and exhales. The gummy bear stabilizes before elevating further above the off-white table, creating a shadow from the overhead, track lighting. He smiles at Beth, eyes wide and desperate for approval.

"You did it, Tommy," whispers Beth, terrified that, like several times already, he will send the gummy bear flying across the room before it reaches his mouth. "Now, place it in your mouth. Then, you get to eat it."

Tommy smiles and nods. Opening his mouth wide, he guides the gummy bear in between his lips before placing so much of the chopsticks in his mouth that everyone fears he may choke. He doesn't, sliding them out of his mouth while triumphantly swallowing the gummy bear whole.

"That was amazing," exclaims Tommy's mother, cheeks flushed and hands trembling. "He can get into Frond's Academy now."

"It's a good feeling," adds the other mother, "isn't it?"

“Orgasmic,” she states bluntly, “I’m giving her at least an extra hundred bucks for this.”

“Shh,” mouths Austin while placing his index finger over his lips.

“Sorry,” mouths Beth in response, quietly closing the door behind her.

Beth and Austin’s two-bedroom condo reflects the madness of new parents trying to balance their pre-child lives with their post-baby reality. An elliptical, positioned adjacent to the sliding glass door that leads to a small patio, is covered with onesies and blankets, rendering it completely unusable. Next to the elliptical, a mechanized baby-rocker blocks the path to the patio, where several plants die the slow death of neglect. The patio furniture accumulates dirt, dust, and leaves from the trees in the courtyard.

Beth steps softly toward Austin, extending her arms to take their sleeping child. With a skilled mother’s grace, Beth lowers the infant into the mechanized rocker. She turns the

knob to “low” more for the background noise than the rocking motion.

“How was tutoring?” asks Austin quietly.

“I don’t want to see another gummy bear for at least a month,” she whispers, “and I could use a drink.”

Austin chuckles while lifting himself from their oversized chair and following Beth into the kitchen. She has a full glass in hand before he gets there.

“You want a glass?” She asks as a wad of bills fall from her open hand onto their kitchen table.

“Holy crap! You should be drinking the champagne.”

“This is the good pinot; it costs more,” Beth laughs as she swirls the wine around the rim of the glass before taking a sip and continuing, “but, I don’t know, Austin.”

“What do you mean?”

“The moms want me to keep tutoring their kids, not just until the admissions test but after – through the summer. I thought this would be a one-time deal, two-times at most.”

“Isn’t that great news?”

“What about Josephine? You were off today, so we didn’t need a babysitter. We’ll have to find one next time, and the time after that, and after that. It feels rushed.”

“It won’t be too hard, right? Mrs. Jenkins has been offering to help since she found out you were pregnant.” Austin pauses to read Beth’s reaction. “We won’t find a better person.”

“She would be great,” replies Beth before sipping again and placing the wine glass next to the money. “And, I was planning to go back to work. That’s not what’s bothering me.”

“Then,” asks Austin quietly, “what is it?”

“These women are offering more than I’d be making as a social worker.”

“Yeah,” sighs Austin before continuing, “it’d be terrible to make more money.”

“That’s not it, Austin,” His sarcastic tone on “terrible” elicits a cold stare from Beth. “That’s not it at all.”

“I’m sorry,” says Austin apologetically, “what’s bothering you about this?”

“Josephine is never going to Frond’s Academy. The pre-school costs twenty-seven thousand dollars a year, and that doesn’t cover the extended-day coverage, uniforms, or supplies.”

“Why are you worried about that?” Austin wonders when and why she looked up those costs.

“I’m not sure how comfortable I am helping kids get into a school that Josephine will never attend, especially when we decide to have baby number two.” Those words always elicit a smile.

“I never thought about that.” Austin smiles, too.

“I hadn’t, either, until driving home. I got stuck at Frond’s Bridge – some super yacht was entering the harbor – so I had time to research the costs.”

“I guess I figured our kids would attend public school.” Austin gestures with his open palms and attempts a smile. “We survived and turned out okay, didn’t we?”

Beth hears Austin but looks past him, out the kitchen toward the baby clothing covered elliptical. Silence ensues until the gentle whirl of the mechanized baby rocker reverberates gently off the walls. They bought it used, so the motor strains

and increases in volume the longer it's in use. Beth moves her gaze to the pile of bills on their kitchen table, adjacent to the stack of cash. Looking toward Austin, she senses a crisis coming as navigating motherhood, employment, and her child's future never seemed so complicated.

“Would you quit your job for something like this?”



Image 5303



Image 5305



Image 5306



Image 5374

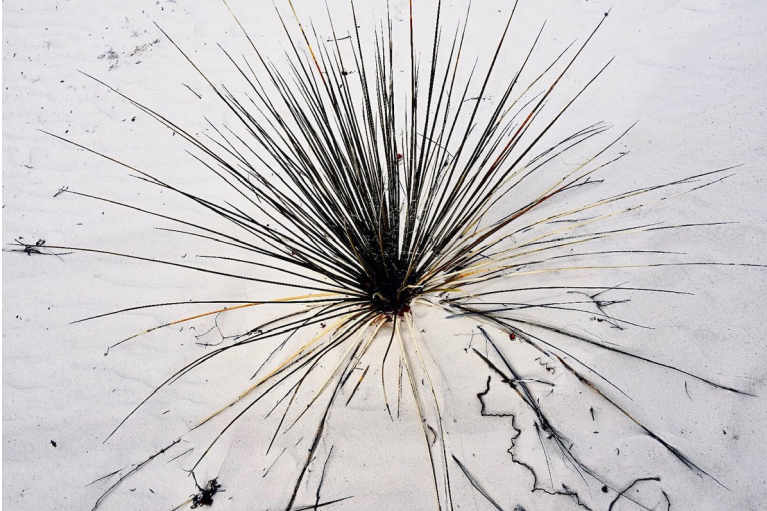


Image 5377



Image 5378



Image 5428



Image 5433

Jacqueline Morgan

is a voracious reader and orange cat enthusiast based in Minneapolis, MN. She is pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at Hamline University. Follow her work on Instagram @jgmorganwrites.

Old Soul

Existential Crisis, Day One

Sentiment (noun)

- 1) An attitude, thought, or judgment prompted by feeling
- 2) Refined feeling: delicate sensibility especially as expressed in a work of art

See also: emotional idealism, a romantic or nostalgic feeling verging on sentimentality

Good lord. There I go, opening with a dictionary definition. What is this, a high school English paper? I can't let my professors catch wind of this. But really, what's a girl to do? I love words, especially when they capture the nuance of a feeling I thought I was the only one experiencing.

Sentiment. Emotional idealism. Nostalgic. Romantic. I've always thought of myself as "romantic" with a capital "R." Not in the "I believe in love" way, but in the Lord Byron, bawling-while-

watching-Old-Hollywood-movies-because-I'm-cheesy way. I'd rather experience all of life's colors – the wistfulness paired with the warmth – than be “just happy” or “just sad.”

Why have I got sentiment on the brain, you ask? Well, you see, I had a rather alarming incident happen to me the other day, when I brought my cousin to the mall. In a desperate attempt to seem cool, I took her to Forever 21 to try on a pair of low-rise jeans she'd been eyeing. For many of us, simply saying the words “low-rise jeans” is horrific and climactic enough, but this is only just the beginning.

The store was exactly how I remembered it from high school: clothes strewn all over the dressing rooms and under sales racks, a pop singer wailing on the speakers. The 90s were making a comeback, I noted, observing a rack of oversized Nirvana tees and neon color block windbreakers. I scratched my fingers along a few of those jackets, chuckling drolly to myself. I was a fan of vintage fashion, too, though I tended to go for gingham dresses and low-heeled ankle boots, more 50s and 60s fare. How could I fault this fast-fashion conglomerate for dipping a little into the past?

That's when I saw it. Directly ahead of me, shining a sickly yellow under the fluorescent lights: a display with the words *Y2K nostalgia*.

Seriously? Y2K? I'd yelped.

My cousin rolled her eyes good-naturedly, said something about those styles being "classic." How things seemed so much simpler in those days; how she'd heard on TikTok that families used to have "computer rooms" rather than smartphones. How music wasn't the same anymore, now that groups like NSYNC and Destiny's Child weren't writing songs. She had a far-off, misty look in her eyes; I was sure I'd become the target of some cosmic joke.

If you'd said the 50s or 60s, I'd forgive you. But the early 2000s?

My cousin snorted derisively. *Sounds like grandma needs to get back to the nursing home.*

And there you have it, dear reader. Awful, simply awful. I'm trying to place myself in her shoes, I really am, but emotional idealism over Juicy Couture tube tops and denim on denim is where I draw the line.

Existential Crisis, Day Two

A vision from my early-2000s upbringing came to me yesterday. It was the first day of seventh grade, so this would have been 2007. I sat in a circle of desks in Ms. Muir's geography class, tapping my blindingly white Skechers against the linoleum. The class was being told to zip it, so we could get on with our "getting to know you" segment.

I don't think I've ever not panicked during the "getting to know you" portion of an event. For someone so much in my head, I was, and still am, painfully obtuse to what makes me interesting.

Ida, a girl with tidy French braids and an even more impeccable side eye, sat across from me in the circle. She shared something about her family owning a lake house, and then called on me, her eyes gleaming, catlike. I squeezed in one last internal panic and said the first thing that came to mind:

I rarely live in the present. I love old movies, books, and TV shows.

Now, the way I phrased it probably sounded pretentious, especially for a thirteen year old. But surely that was no excuse for the way Ida *laughed*. Just threw her head back and straight up cackled. Well, damn, Ida. It's because I'm so hoighty-toighty that I'm not stooping to your level and saying your name sounds like a farm girl. I'm the most poised kid in this joint.

That's not to say Ida caused me irreparable trauma. There are always obnoxious little shits like this in middle school. But hey, I'm sensitive! Or rather, sentimental. I love being the weird girl, but it's hard not to feel a bit apart from others sometimes.

Existential Crisis, Day Three

Okay, turns out I'm brooding over the Forever 21 incident. Those Y2K-inspired threads are popping up *everywhere*. Target, even high-end department stores. I mean, seriously, Macy's, you're better than this.

I keep imagining their key demographic – Gen Z-ers who aren't that much younger than me, yearning for an era they

imagine to be simpler. With each slang reference or viral dance craze I don't get, the canyon between our generations will shudder and grow wider. Soon it'll be a gaping maw.

The thing with the Y2K boom, though, is that those styles all feel so trendy now. I've never felt trendy, in any of my iterations of yearning for the past. But where is my holier-than-thou attitude coming from? Do I want every kid to feel like an outcast, like me? Am I making myself a martyr and just a little bit proud of it?

Existential Crisis, Day Four

Found another great word for my opener. Or rather, a phrase: *mono no aware*. A Japanese idiom that honors life's impermanence. That beauty, while fleeting, is still beautiful. What can I say? I'm an optimist at heart.

Day Four, Again

Not only am I an optimist, but I'm painfully earnest sometimes. I want shows that don't rely so heavily on ironic hu-

mor, like today's ones do. I want Gene Kelly, tap dancing his heart out for three straight minutes with no cuts and no CGI. I want music that tugs on my heartstrings like a Dean Martin ballad. I want something hokey. I want something real.

And Again

A confession: Even when I'm aware of life's ephemeral nature, it's often tinged with panic. During a particularly good moment in life I'll be thinking, *I'd better cherish this moment now because it'll soon be gone, or I love that I'm still young, but I'm also so much older than I was five years ago.* I want to be someone who looks back and says, "that moment really was as good as I remember it." But damn, if that ain't easier said than done.

Existential Crisis, Day Five

If I don't feel at home in the present day, then where do I belong?

How can I find comfort and community in the present while still staying true to myself?

Existential Crisis, Day Six

You know who really gets it? Winona Ryder's character in *Beetlejuice*. You know, "I myself am strange and unusual"? It's contradictory, but I'm comfortable with the foreign and the strange. Overthinking and oversensitive about it, sure, but for the most part, fine.

You go, Winona. A figurehead for weird girls everywhere.

Existential Crisis, Day Seven

I'm turning thirty soon. Can you believe it? THIRTY. Not me, surely, the little twerp who felt so superior in Ms. Muir's class way back when.

This, in addition to having a soul-sucking corporate job that's nothing like the publishing gig I dreamed of, has me reminiscing about my youth. I know what you're thinking: *Jackie*,

stop it! You already know how this works! The past is not inherently better than the present! Well, gosh, I know it, but old habits die hard. Time is passing so quickly, and I need to get my escapism fix somehow. I haven't had the chance to wander aimlessly through an antique shop in weeks.

It's much easier to romanticize the past when those times are static, I'll give you that. When you can dilute certain eras down to their pop culture staples and ignore their harsher realities out of comfort and privilege. It's far simpler to pull up my big band playlists than to watch the days fly by in the present, or listen to my internal monologue, chanting, *your window will soon close, any dreams of happiness or belonging you had for yourself are growing increasingly slim.*

This is sounding an awful lot like an existential crisis, you say? Well, I warned you up top, what did you expect?

~~Existential Crisis~~, Day Eight

There's hope for me yet. A friend recommended me for an editorial assistant gig, and my last Tinder date seemed really interested in my passion for Old Hollywood. Opportunities are

still out there, and even if people don't get me at first, those who matter will endeavor to understand.

Oh, and did I mention? My cousin sent me a TikTok earlier today (because of course she did, the whippersnapper) through Facebook messenger (I still refuse to get TikTok). It was some forgettable piece of content, something along the lines of "The Zodiac Signs as 50s Trends," but what struck me was the "thought of u <3" soon after. I'll admit, I was absurdly charmed by the gesture, my cousin remembering this small fact about me. God, maybe I really am getting old. Or if not old, sentimental as hell, but you already knew that.

Work's been slow today, but at least my new pair of gogo boots has me in a sunnier mindset. They're electric blue, because there's no way you can own gogo boots in a sad neutral color. Vegan leather, rush-ordered online. Read that last sentence again. Sometimes living in 2023 can be quite beautiful.

Did that sound contradictory, coming from me? Fair enough. I'm a beautiful mess of contradictions, in case you didn't know. Strange and unusual. Something hokey. Something real.

Jim Dawson

has worked in the arts since wandering into an empty theater at nineteen. He's mixed music for the free jazz artists of AACM, run rehearsals for Trisha Brown, and designed sound for the Wooster Group and numerous award-winning films. He's collaborated on texts for devised theater projects and crafted web copy for the United Nations. Galleries in New York and LA galleries show his video art, and after all that, he finally arrived at the art he most loves: writing. His stories have appeared in Flash Fiction Magazine, On-The-High, and The Lifespan Anthology.

Hard Wood Bench

On hardwood in a narrow hall
belted police block
the locked
outer door,
leaning as far
as feasible from the stench.

The yellow odor tastes of
quick commonality,
soiled bodies hemmed
in sinus intimacy.
A muscular hand and foot
cuffed man strains forward.
Mouth three feet from mine.
Loud, so loud
over and pounding over
to murder every man,
rape every woman buzzed
thru the inner door.
And me, he wants to kill,
over and kill.

The pinon-man arrested
without pants on my right,
lanky, windmill power,
cackles, lustful stabs,
stab, and stab.

A third man inside the ward
rams his forehead.
into the safety glass
eye hairy,
draws a thin finger
across his throat, slips away
to repeat, and repeat.

Medical personnel come and go.
Police talking hockey lingo.

I want to run from commitment
and save the slumped boy
on my left, eyeliner,
nail polish,
unable to walk,
cold out.

A need to rush him from
this sealed distance
and let move his lungs.
before the state takes him.
We could still go, yet
a clear danger to himself
the therapist said.

I ignored her advice
last month, and like today,
found him chained,
unconscious,
twitching on a gurney,
as cops watched a nurse
fight rings from his fingers.

Real menace lives
between the green walls,
male desperate violence
crammed into dissecting
surveillance. My boy'll be hurt,
mangled. How can I
suffer him
in this leaving place?

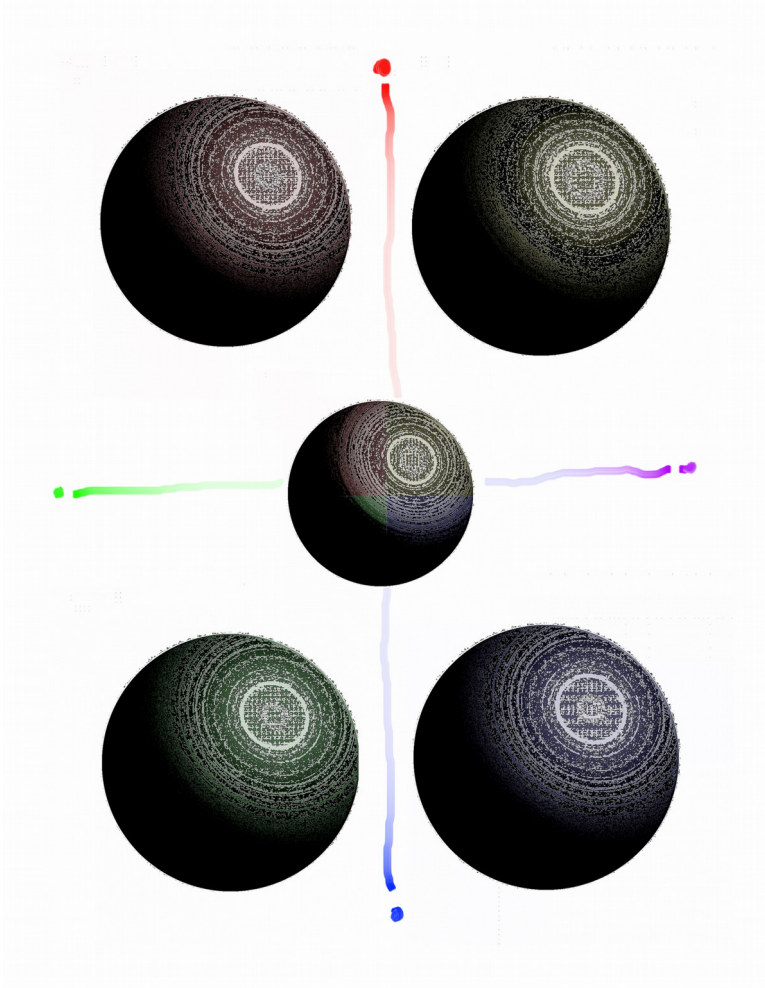
I can't keep him home,
or track him down.
Dragged off the plane,
Apprehend by customs agents,
Beat by the police,
I'm not enough
to keep him out of jail,
out of court, or this ward.

Little time, click, click, clicks,
Our escape time dwindles.

Right action a fallacy.
Fear fouls choice.
Run and delay
or let
the unnatural happen?
He downed two liters,
six miles high,
hovered near death.
Now, in this loud,
narrow hall
on a hard wooden bench
I stare at the distance
burgeoning between us.

Medical personnel come and go.
Police talking hockey lingo.

They take his clothes,
his shoes, his belt
and my last “what dare I?”
He signs, accepts
a wristband and buzzes in.
I step out into
the certain half-deserted hall
with no idea if
the marvelous
side-by-side continues.



5 Spheres

M F Drummy

holds a PhD in historical theology from Fordham University. He is the author of numerous haiku/senryu/haibun, articles, essays, poems, reviews, and a monograph on religion and ecology. His work has appeared, or will appear, in Allium, Amethyst Review, Anti-Heroin Chic, Emerge, the engine(idling, FERAL, Frogpond, Main Street Rag, Modern Haiku, Pato, Prune Juice, The Rumen, Scarlet Dragonfly, streetcake, Viridian Door, and many others. He and his way cool life partner of over 20 years enjoy splitting their time between the Colorado Rockies and the rest of the planet. He can be found at: Instagram @miguelito.drummalino Website <https://bespoke-poet.com>

1790*

For some reason I feel like
Emily Dickinson today –
A timid, untitled
Bird – wings clipped –

Descending, Zen-like,
Through nesting dolls
Of Loneliness toward
The unwelcome potsherds

Of Deceit – fearsome relics
Of the archaeology of
The Soul – Life in chaos,
Nature unbound from

Intention – random, drifting –
Daffodils wrapped in Wax –
Will I never get my Ducks
in a row again?

**While there are enough disagreements to fill a small library concerning the number of untitled poems Emily Dickinson actually composed, the first Harvard University Press paperback edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by R. W. Franklin and published in 2005, tallies 1789.*

Native Born

As a child this is
what you told me:
If you're not careful,

*they will be careful
for you.* To look out
for me, I guess, is what

you meant. To have my
back, to be there for me,
to be *full of care* for me.

They would be all these things,
for me. Omnipresent you said.

But the distant voices I hear

now are not yours. Can
they be trusted? Can I just
stroll into any Safeway

on my way home
to pick up a few things,
assured I won't be

perforated by
an AR-15? Here, where

you gave birth to me?

Arroyo

Cheapened, descending, she dances briefly in
the pink wind, rotisseried airborne like rocks,

tornado split. O pretty pups, what have you
found in that forsaken arroyo? A strange dampness,

bare grass whipped sausage-like beneath
the striated mesa, pelted by sanded sleet,

calling you both home where treats, offered
in the palm of her hand, await. The sleeping cholla –

resistant, patient – slowly spiders itself awake,
its yellow bulbs cold to the merest touch. Through

her window she spies the twirling crow, threading
its way north, into the squall of snow, the dogs now

warm & safe. She has heard that, at night,
on the high road through Cañones, if you are

not careful, you can catch the emerald glint
in the eyes of the coyotes reflected in the headlights,

peculiar & astonished. There, in the mute
darkness, upon their king-size bed, one dog

on either side of her worn & swollen hips,
she begins the letting go of him, again.

Richard Hanus

Had four kids but now just three. Zen and love.



13b



14



Image 007

