

**pulp**  
MAG

# Masthead

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## APRIL SHOWERS

I wish the rain would come  
through the open window  
and wash me  
in my recycled bottle sheets  
all the way down the drain  
and out onto the flowing street  
like the arbitrary, infirm  
Styrofoam armature I am.

I could float, flotsam on the sea,  
but I sink in this bed, buried  
under the blue duvet  
with its water-coloured trees  
taking root under my toenails  
spreading, thirsty, through the capillaries  
of my feet, of my legs,  
growing into a dark forest  
encroaching on the roads  
of my arteries and veins,  
anchoring me in place:

a skeletal trellis  
for morning glory vines  
cloning themselves, clothing me  
in a shroud of springtime,  
ready to give way to new life  
that *lives*.

Through the window, April watches

my manufactured form,  
stagnant,  
hastening to decay  
so that my molecules  
may reshape;

the cruel month's  
mocking laughter  
ricochets  
off the rhododendron  
in droplets.

# FISHMONGER



## AMONG CATS AND GODS

The small bird had little time to get out of the way before my jaws snapped its neck. And now it was limp and dangling, jerking every which way as I ran through the grass and bounded towards home. The journey was quick from where I had been stalking chickadees and robins in the neighbourhood park. I practically pranced across the tops of fence posts while making no sound – steps too delicate to be heard. The clear skies added to my mood, nothing but the energy and warmth from the sun. Everything was peaceful: streets cleared of people walking their loud dogs for once.

It was a beautiful morning, the gods must have been content.

I leaped up and landed quietly on the windowsill, home to deliver a present to Mom. And there she was, bathing in the sun like I often did on the floor of her room. With her legs crossed, back straight, and breathing steadily with purpose, she looked blankly fulfilled. The sunlight around her glowed, but not as brightly as the energy surrounding her. Her aura burned in its rich blue colour that resembled deep ocean waves. It gently pulsed in sync with her deep breaths. A good meditation session then. Full of magick and positive energy – or as Mom liked to call it, “good vibes.” They weaved around her body.

I’m a familiar: I can not only feel magick in this world, but I can also see it.

I opened my jaws and let the bird fall. It plopped onto the carpet lifelessly. An offering to her, one I knew would have a specific reaction. She gave offerings all the time, maybe this time one of mine will make it onto the altar.

I meowed and called for her, something only kittens did towards their

cat mothers. Her eyes opened slowly at the sound, breaking her trance. The intensity of her aura subsided. I jumped down from the windowsill next to the gift on the carpet. There was a split second of her processing the image before she let out a shattering scream and physically recoiled.

“NO! GET IT OUT!”

I stared at her, tilting my head like I was a curious baby again, faking innocence. She was grumpy, her peaceful demeanour gone. The flicker of her aura’s fire went out like a wet match. For a quick moment, we stared at each other, and at the corpse with chewed feathers and starkly broken stick legs.

“Clea! Not allowed! Bad kitty!” She got up to scramble for something to get rid of it.

I just sat there. I pawed at the loose feathers. One tiny one fell from the body. Mom was cursing and mumbling in the background.

I could then hear this deep chuckle: one I knew too well. The sensation and energy of it – divine and cosmic – rumbled in through the window and encircled the room.

Even if I could actually hear it and Mom could not, I knew she could sense it. Her intuition was just that good, and her connection with him just as strong.

He told me to bring the bird to her. Whether to make himself laugh, or me laugh, it did not matter. She needed reality checks sometimes. This was the most fun way to do it. Earning the amusement of a god was rewarding.

Ra was a funny guy. Mostly serious, being the creator of all and king of the Egyptian deities. But he was also calm and friendly. “Chill,” as Mom always says to her friends. His humour could be as dry as his tombs probably were. He was the only image of a bird that I was not allowed to chase. Entertaining him was easy. Any task from him was easy, too, like reminding Mom to do a



reading with her cards or helping her pick out the right spell ingredients. Or just being there for her: an acknowledgment from Ra and of my own love.

Cats and Egyptian gods get along naturally, it's our heritage. And cats and witches do, too. My job in this life is to serve Mom both magickly and mundanely. I look and act like a "pet" like all the other animals that humans had in their houses; I am, in a way. But I am more. There is power contained in my fallen whiskers, or fur, or claws clippings: in the energy that I bring to protect this home.

I am the witch's perfect partner.

While Mom chaotically chucked the bird out the window with the help of a dustpan, I picked up the fallen feather I had found and ran to the altar. I jumped up onto its table, and set the feather beside Ra's candle. Its flame grew and danced happily, tall and strong. Just like him. I returned to the floor to find a sunny spot to sit in.

*Thank you, little one,* I could hear him tell me. He was still laughing at Mom, at the way she was stressing about germs on the carpet.

"Oh, ha ha ha," she said blankly, "you two are so funny."

She whipped around and stared at the candle, a glare that could jinx. It flickered at her: a mocking wave. She rolled her eyes, and the hint of a smile tugged at her lips.

She then pointed a finger at me, walked in my direction, and shoved it in my face.

"Don't do that! Even if he tells you to. It's not funny."

I meowed and rubbed the top of my head on her finger.

"You're lucky you're cute."

I remember the first time I brought home a gift from outside. It was a yellow leaf. I was still a kitten; it was our first few months together. The leaf was

from the yard, and she was watching me pick one out. I believe Ra told me to do that one, too. She had melted, said she was proud of me, and gave me head scratches. A few months later, I brought her a mouse. I have never seen her so grossed out. To be fair, its guts were hanging out, and it was missing half of its legs. I think there's still a little stain from its blood on the back porch. When that happened, I'm sure she started regretting letting me go outside.

She then sat down in front of me, both of us warm from Ra's sunlight and grace. I reached for her, paws and legs outstretched. She came down to my level.

"Don't lick me, you've got bird mouth."

I rubbed my head on her cheek instead, before jumping up onto her lap. My cuddles knocked around the ankh talisman and amethyst crystal on her necklaces: they clanged together and reminded me of the bell collar my cat mother wore.

Mom picked me up as she stood, holding me close.

"We're doing spell work later, I need your help."

We walked to the altar, which was messy. That meant she was doing the work, Ra always told me. The more chaos, the more magick sometimes.

"We could use your help, too," she addressed him, shifting some crystals and offering bowls around to look a little neater. We watched the flame of his candle strengthen before giving soft yet excited pops and crackles. He was always eager to help us.

Mom ignored the feather, either from her not seeing it or just letting it be there.

~

I jumped up on the kitchen counter, the pads of my paws lightly touching its cold stone surface. And I sat down, curling my tail around my body, and

tucking my paws neatly together. Mom rarely let me do this. She would typically swat at me to get down, worrying about dirty paws and where her food would go. When I was little, I would get the spray bottle. My kitten's curiosity interrupted by a water attack that made me fear anything shaped like it. But I was now allowed up here in special circumstances. And when Mom did not scream at me to get down, it was time to work.

She put a pot on the nearby stove. "Some enchanted soup for lunch? I have a bit of a headache."

I meowed in agreement.

"Probably from you two this morning."

I could feel Ra's presence, and he laughed at that.

Mom has some stress issues. Sometimes her aura is not as bright as it usually is. And not just in a magick sense, I can see it in her eyes after days when she needs to be away for a while. Or like when her temper comes out while talking to that weird box she plays with, a stern voice replacing the gentle one I know. Ra has pointed out little things too, like how she had not woken up in time to give me breakfast yesterday because she had trouble sleeping. I do my best to help, so I wanted to make sure to sneak in some of my magick to help release some of her stress.

The two of us watched Mom gather her supplies. Ingredients that came out of the fridge were placed on the other side of the stove where I could not reach. Things like bags of vegetables, and a tall jar of what I knew was home-made chicken broth. I loved that stuff. Things that came out from the cupboards went onto my side. Little jars and bottles of dried herbs and powders. Stuff I could help pick out for what qualities we wanted in the spell work. I sniffed around the assortment, familiar with their shapes, but not being able to smell or see their energy yet. I would soon, when Mom was ready to add them.

And she came back with some tools, the knife and cutting board way out of my reach.

She opened the jar of chicken broth. The smell wafted over to me and it was like heaven. I gave her the look, with the biggest eyes that I could express, and I quietly meowed as a final touch.

“One second, geez.”

After she poured a good amount into the pot, she reached into the cupboard for a little bowl. She poured a little broth into it and set it in front of me. I immediately lapped it up. There was the satisfying click of her turning on the stovetop, and she began to wash and cut vegetables. It was mesmerizing how her magick was already coming through just by handling the ingredients. I could see streams and waves of blue, ones that matched her aura, flow out of her hands and wrap around every little piece of carrot, and celery, and all the colourful things. Hers blended with their own magick and energy from the earth. She put them all in the pot with a gentle splash, and they all mixed around together in the broth: beautiful swirls of energy and colour.

“Clea, you’ll burn your whiskers off.” Mom giggled and pushed me back a little. I had not realized I was close enough to stick my head in the pot. She stirred things around with a spoon, her focus drawn to putting more energy into the soup. It was warming up now, and trails of steam rose out through the layers of magick.

She had forgotten something. I meowed to get her attention. When she looked at me, I nudged one of the jars with my cheek. Picking up on this, she went to the other side of the room before coming back. She placed the stone bowl with its little crushing handle in front of me. It was my turn.

Using my intuition, I picked out a few jars by pushing them around the countertop. I simply knew which ones to use, and the voice of Ra helped me

as well. This is where my magick came out, every little nudge from a paw or a cheek left wisps of purple behind. As I selected them, Mom took them, opened the containers, and scooped portions into the stone bowl. My energy mixed with the energy of the herbs, and they fused together in the pile that was collecting. They smelled nice too, but Ra reminded me that I could not eat those. Some were not safe for cats.

And when all the herbs were together, Mom mixed them with the matching stone stick and crushed them. I watched her magic return, spilling into mine and the herbs. She worked hard to crush it, and it all became this aromatic powder that felt powerful in front of us. I watched the swirls and colours dance around.

This was my favourite part: seeing our magick come together.

The soup was beginning to bubble now, so she poured the powder into the pot. I inched closer to see better. As she stirred it in, the colours of the energy got brighter. Her magick kept coming out of her hands, running down the handle of the spoon and into the food. Then she began to stir in the opposite direction before she formed the shape of a pentacle, creating a star with her spoon. I could see sparks of energy fly from the pot now. She repeated this while the soup bubbled more, words whispered under her breath in incantations and prayers.

Suddenly, the image of a giant bird appeared behind Mom's shoulder.

It would have startled me if I had not recognized his energy immediately. He was huge, easily towering over her. A giant man with the head of a bird, and a crown that looked like the sun. He did look a little scary, his resting face all serious like the stare of a hawk. His energy pulsed through the room, it felt regal and powerful. And I stared at him, being the only one who could see him.

I meowed happily. His expression softened slightly.

His big bird head tilted as I heard him say, *One more thing, Clea.*

An arm stretched out, and a finger pointed to something that was hanging by the kitchen window. It was a bundle of lavender that Mom had picked from the garden and tied upside down to dry out. The sun was shining brightly on it. I dashed over to the window and pawed at the purple flowers.

Mom watched, unaware of the god standing right behind her. She could probably feel his presence, but not as strongly as I could.

I looked back and saw the two of them tilt their heads in sync. They were both watching a child of theirs, but Mom's look was one of an exhausted mother, while Ra's was one of an amused king.

"Lavender in soup?" Mom asked.

I simply meowed.

She shrugged. Ra's deep laugh echoed through the kitchen as she went to clip some from the bundle. We watched her separate the little buds from the stem and drop them into the pot.

Mom's focus was on her spell while I still looked at the god.

*Well done, little one.*

Ra got a little closer and reached his hand out. With a single touch, Ra's magick lit up the pot brightly with his yellow energy. There were more sparks. The soup was as powerful as ever.

Mom was definitely going to feel better after just a sip.

Ra petted me on the head, his energy spreading down my back as warm as the sun.

"Alright, it's almost done!" Mom said, lowering the heat on the stove.

I looked at the soup. It smelled really good.

"You can't have this, I'll get you some more broth."

Mom came over and scooped me up from the counter, holding me in her arms. I cuddled into the crook of her neck. She was warm and comforting, as always. We moved around and I could hear the clang of dishes as she got herself a bowl. I watched her spoon the liquid with one hand while I was perched on her shoulder on the other side. I was dying for my own bowl, meowing in anticipation. Mom giggled as I pawed at her shoulder and cheek while begging.

When I looked up, Ra was gone, but I could still hear that deep, happy chuckle of his.

# Visual

Ashleigh  
Elstone  
2022

## SEER





## FUN HOUSE MIRROR

Dressed like a twelve-year-old boy  
with a tight bound chest that aches to breathe,  
a man bumps into me and says:

“Excuse me, ma’am.”

Words that echo through hollow bones,  
    carrying nothing but a heavy ring of dread.  
Fake a smile and move out of his way.

*I thought I passed today.*

Return home to stare lifelessly at a reflection  
    that does not belong to me.

*Is my hair too long?*

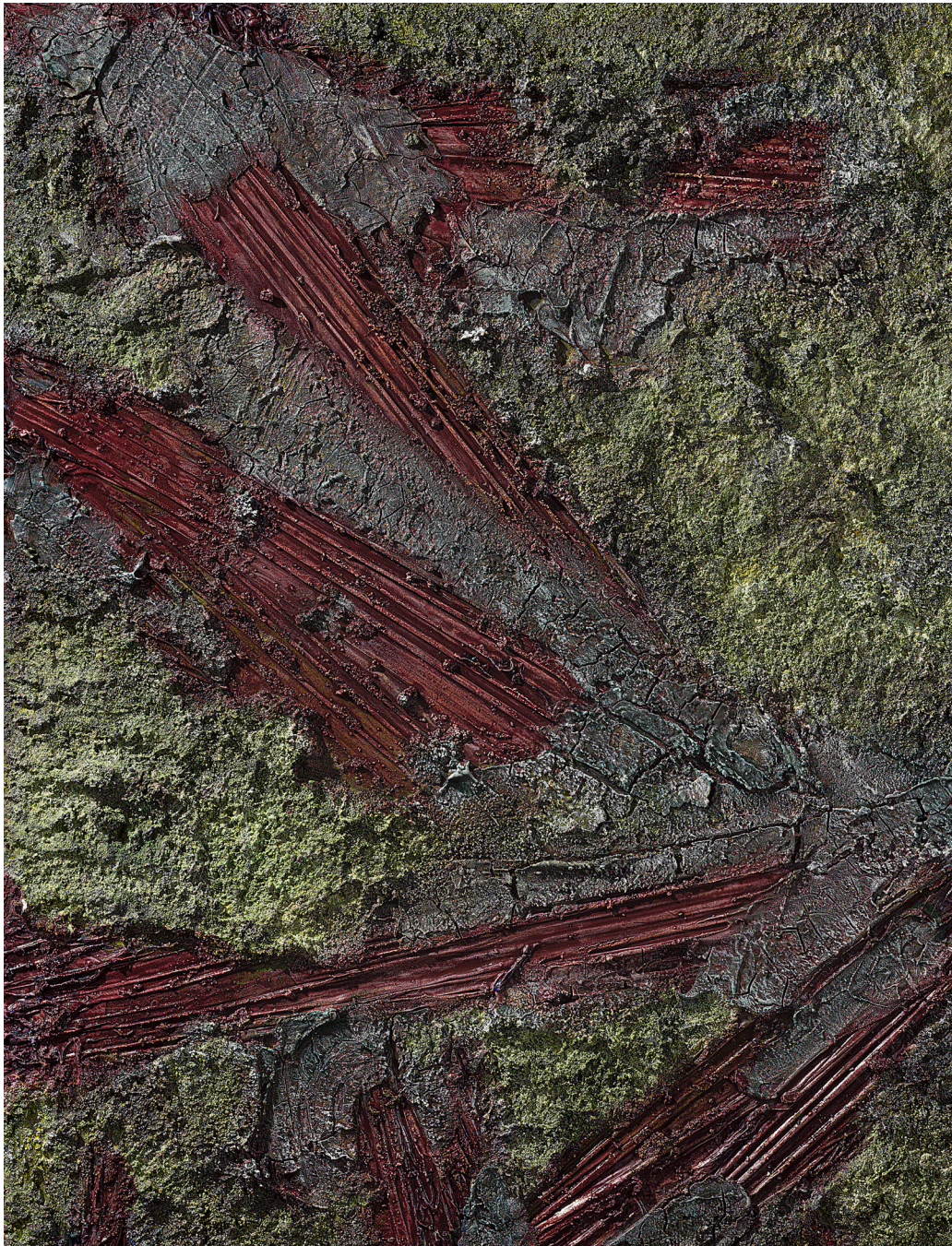
*My face too narrow?*

*Voice too high,*

*or hips too wide?*

Slip into bed and stay put  
until my mother calls from upstairs  
    for her Daughter.

## ANTEMORTEM STRIATIONS V



## THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN

Subway stations are downright creepy at night. The darkness envelops me as I stand at the edge of the platform, arms wrapped around myself to ward off the late-night chill. Overhead, the station's yellow lights flicker and sputter in a sporadic rhythm.

There's barely any sound, just the groan of air moving through winding tunnels. It feels like I'm the only person alive.

*I shouldn't be out at this hour. It's not safe.* A young, small-framed woman like me would be an easy target for any passing stranger looking for someone to victimize. I should be home right now, but taking that night shift was the only way to make some extra cash. God knows I need the money – although I'll probably waste it at another cheap bar this weekend. Maybe I'll make a night out of it, pretend I have a good life. It would be nice to be happy for a few hours, even if it's just an act.

But tonight, I'm not making it anywhere until this blasted train comes. I peer down the yawning tunnel of the subway – nothing yet. Sighing, I tug my scarf over my mouth to block out the smell of mould and rotting garbage. *Living the dream*, I think bitterly, glaring at the wall across the tracks. To think I left home for this waste of a life. Momma would be ashamed. A familiar stab of pain cuts through me at that thought. *Don't think about Momma*, I order myself. *She's gone now.*

No. That's not right. Momma's still there, living her life without me. I'm the one that's gone. I'm the one who left her. And for what? A world of cigarettes, alcohol, and minimum-wage jobs. An apartment with nothing but a

sagging sofa and the stuff I grabbed before leaving my elderly mother to fend for herself.

*Some life.*

Finally, I hear the echo of the train speeding down the tracks. It rolls to a stop in front of me, and the doors slide open to reveal empty seats and metal flooring. It's completely deserted when I step inside. Figures, with the time and all. I take the nearest seat by the door, so I can get off quickly if I need to.

The car lurches as it begins moving. I lean back in my seat, squirming to get comfortable against the hard plastic that digs into my shoulders. Overhead, the interior lights buzz softly, mixing with the sound of the wheels against the track.

A wave of tiredness crashes over me. I rest my head on the window behind me and close my eyes, feeling the pull of sleep tugging me under its current. My mind fades into a dream. Or is it a memory? I can't tell.

I'm six, standing by the edge of the tracks of a subway with Momma gripping my hand. A man stares at me from across the crowds, his cracked lips moving as he talks to himself. His eyes are bloodshot, lids puffy. My gaze jumps to his hands, which are twitching at his sides. I scoot closer to Momma, who puts a protective hand on my shoulder.

"It's alright, Angie," she says, using my nickname. "I'm right here. You're safe. Just stay close, now."

The scene fades into another — me, older, standing in the kitchen as Momma paces, her slippers shuffling against the floor. Darkness stretches outside the window.

"You should have told me you were coming home late," she snaps. I glare at my shoes. "I didn't know the party would go on that long."

“A party, Angie? You told me it was just a get-together with your friends.”

I wince. “I thought so, too, but then they invited these guys over, and...” I look away. “I left early.”

“Did you even *know* the people who showed up?” She shakes her head. “You’re lucky something didn’t happen to you.”

I don’t look at her. Silence stretches between us until she finally breaks it with a hesitant, “*Did* something happen?” When I don’t respond, she says, “Angie?”

My shoulders slump. “A lot of people got drunk. There was this pushy guy —” I cut myself off. “You know how it gets at parties. That’s why I left.”

“Oh, baby.” Momma steps forward and engulfs me in a hug. “You did the right thing. It’s all okay now. This is why you have to be careful. The world is such a dangerous place.”

Something jolts me awake – the train, taking a sudden turn. I crack open my eyes. The lights are dimmer now, and somehow, the hum of the car moving and shifting seems distant, like I’m underwater.

I blink to clear my vision, eyes blurred from sleep. The dreams cling to my thoughts, even when I try to shake them off. *Deep breaths*, I tell myself. *They were just memories, nothing more. Move on.*

I check my phone for the time. The screen won’t turn on – out of battery. *Oh, come on.*

Looking out the window gives me a view of pure darkness. No light in sight, and no way of knowing where I am. I slump in my seat, head in my hands, staring at my cheap shoes. Those memories are still floating around in my head, refusing to leave me alone.

Someone coughs a few seats away. When I lift my head and look over,

I see that the train isn't empty anymore. An old man rests a few seats down, a weathered cane propped on his knee. He holds an open book in his wrinkled hands. Its cover is faded and torn at the edges.

For a second, I debate whether I should talk to him or not. Speaking to strangers isn't a habit of mine — but I gotta know where I am, and what time it is. So I clear my throat, lean over, and say, "Excuse me?"

The man doesn't look up. Instead, he turns a page of the book, tapping the spine with one wrinkled finger. His skin is leathery: dark and rough, like he spent all his youth in the sun.

"Hey, uh — sorry to bother you, but can you tell me what the next stop is?"

Nothing.

"I just need to know where I am. I think I missed my stop, and I really wanna get home."

"Do you?" he asks, eyes staying on the page. His voice is surprisingly smooth. A grandfather's voice made for telling stories and singing lullabies.

"...Do I want to get home? Uh, yeah. See, there's been a mistake —"

"Has there?" He finally looks up, meeting my eyes. His are dark, deep-set, and mellow.

I clench my jaw, leaning back in my seat. "Can you just answer my question?"

"Hm." He resumes reading. "Maybe."

*Oh, for God's sake.* "Alright then, fine. Thanks for your 'help.'"

To my surprise, he smiles at that, shifting the book towards the light, probably to read the words better.

I turn away from him and check my phone again, jabbing at the power button and willing the screen to flicker on. When nothing happens, I glance

around the train in search of a charging station, a power outlet – anything to get this thing running again. No luck.

Fine. I'll just have to wait.

"Next stop's still a way off," the old man says from his spot, finally giving me something useful. He closes the book and places it on the seat beside him.

"How far?"

"Don't know."

"What time is it?"

"Don't know."

"You don't have a watch or something?"

His eyes crinkle as he smiles. "Don't need one."

I sigh in frustration, turning away from him in defeat.

After a few minutes of silence, the man asks, "Heading home for the night, are you?"

I don't look at him. "Yeah."

"Family waiting for you?"

"Not anymore."

"Ah. I understand." He takes his cane and hunches over it. Now that I've got a better view of it, I can see that it's old-fashioned, made of aged wood. It looks like it's from a completely different time period. "Families can be difficult."

'Difficult' isn't the right word. That means surface-level stuff. Pet peeves and disagreements that just get on your nerves. It doesn't cover the deeper things, like the undying tension between mother and daughter. The constant, never ending arguments: conflicts which are rooted so deeply that they can't be pulled out. The smothering weight, and that restless need to just *escape*.

I look away. “What I left behind was more than ‘difficult.’”

“Ran away from it then, did you?”

“What are you, my therapist?”

“Just a listener.”

“It’s been a while since I had one of those.”

“Well.” He smiles again, “We all need one from time to time.”

“.... Guess so.”

The silence stretches between us, leaving only the rattle of the train as it moves. He’s looking at me, watching me with those deep eyes that make me feel like I’m being judged. I shift uncomfortably in my seat.

“Lots of people run away from home,” I say, as if defending myself from an accusation.

He nods, “From time to time. But usually, they have the sense to come back after a while.”

“I was eighteen. I didn’t have sense back then.”

He laughs at that. It’s a pleasant sound, warm and rich. Comforting, somehow. “No one does when they’re that young. Trust me on that.”

I feel the faintest smile tugging at my mouth. “Well. That’s good to hear.”

The train takes a sudden turn, so sharp that I nearly slip off my seat. The old man’s book falls, sliding across the floor before stopping at my feet.

Once the train straightens again, I pick the book up and turn it over, giving it a quick look. Both the back and front covers are blank, except for the title, but the words are too faded for me to read.

I sigh, grab my stuff, and take the book to the old man, offering it with one hand. “Looks like you’ve had this for a while. You probably don’t wanna lose it.”



He takes it from me with a warm ‘thank you.’ I hesitate, glancing back at my old seat before sitting down next to him.

“So,” he begins, tracing the book’s worn title. “Lack of common sense aside, why did you leave home?”

I stare at my hands. “Does it matter?”

“I suppose not. But like I said...” He points to himself, “Listener. If you want one.”

I crack a smile and lean back in my seat, watching the darkness through the windows across the aisle. “Anger,” I finally answer his question.

“At?”

“Everything.” I pause, “Life, I guess. My mom, too, for being so controlling. Dad died when I was just a kid — she probably didn’t want to lose me too. It got worse as she got older. She was anxious about everything I did. I just wanted to *live*, but she...” I shrug half-heartedly, leaving the sentence unfinished. “It was too much to deal with.”

“Just for you?” I look at him in confusion, and he continues, “I doubt it was like that for just *you*. She was the one living *with* that fear.”

“I guess that’s true,” I admit. “But it was... I don’t know. Overwhelming.”

“Same with losing a husband. And a daughter.”

I wince. Look away. “I don’t know why I did it, okay? I just... I wanted to leave. Wanted to live my own life, to start new.”

“Did it work out for you?”

“Huh?”

“Starting anew.”

I laugh dryly, “What do you think?”

“I think it was worth it if you got what you wanted. Isn’t there some good in what you’ve got now? Especially since you don’t have to worry about

your old problems.”

“Sure. It’s hard dealing with everything alone, but it’s a relief to live my own life.” Even as I say that, it feels...like a lie, somehow. A half-truth. Because just as the response comes out of my mouth, Momma’s words pop into my head again: *‘It’s alright. I’m right here.’* The feeling from the memories comes back to me. The warmth of Momma’s hand on my shoulder, the comfort of not being alone. The calm, soothing knowledge that despite everything — all the issues we had with each other, the hassles, and rebellion — she was always *there*. There to run to when things got bad, when they got scary. There to pull me close and shield me from it all.

Not anymore. She can’t protect me now, can’t guide me. She isn’t there when I need her, like she was then.

And that’s my *fault*. God, it’s all my *fault*.

The realization sets something off inside me. Suddenly, I can’t keep it bottled up anymore. Words rush out of me, uncontrolled, “You ever think that by leaving all the bad behind, you’re also abandoning the good?”

He doesn’t hesitate before answering. “Lots of times. But those good things might still be there.” I blink, confused, and he shrugs, “They might be waiting for you to come back.”

“I doubt she’d welcome me home. What if I do go back, and it ends badly?”

His expression softens. “Well. You won’t know unless you try.”

I’m about to respond when I feel the train slowing down around me. The darkness through the windows brightens, showing the light grey of the concrete. Finally.

“Looks like this is your stop,” the old man says as the train grinds to a halt. The doors slide open, revealing an empty station.

“...Yeah. Guess so.” I reach for my things, hesitating before finally grabbing them. “Where are you getting off?”

“Oh, nowhere, really.” He pulls out the book again and opens it to a random page, placing his cane aside. Just like he was when I first saw him. “You get home safe, now.”

“Right.” I move towards the doors, wavering, then say, “Thanks.”

He just smiles, “Goodbye, Angela.”

I step off the train. A light breeze brushes by me, dancing through the station. New sunlight streams in from the stairwell leading up, soft and warm. Morning. I must have spent all night on that train.

It’s only when the doors start closing behind me that I realize something.

The old man called me by my name. I never told it to him.

My eyes widen, and I spin back around, but the doors are already sealed. I choke out a cutoff “*Wait —*” as the train starts to roll away. It disappears into the tunnel, leaving me dumbstruck on the platform.

After a moment, I shake myself off and force my body to move toward the exit. The steps lead to the edge of a neighbourhood. Recognition registers when I see the small houses crammed together, the overgrown lawns, and the cracked pavement. A memory flickers in my mind — me, seven years old, doodling with chalk on the sidewalks of this neighbourhood. Momma calling me from the house, telling me that dinner’s ready.

Impossible. This isn’t my stop. How am I even here...?

There’s a bus stop nearby. I can still head home and get some sleep like I planned.

*Or...*

My eyes scan the neighbourhood again. *Go on*, something seems to tell

me. Go.

Taking a deep breath, I start walking in that familiar direction.

I try to think back on my conversation with the old man. But it's just bits and pieces now. Fragments of sentences, brief images. Like a memory from years ago: hazy and fading. I can't even remember the man's face.

But I can still hear his voice. *'Those good things might still be there. They might be waiting for you to come back.'*

As if on cue, a house comes into my field of vision. Peeling blue paint, and wind chimes hanging from a crooked porch. The garden is in full bloom; Momma always liked to keep her yard colourful.

I step onto the porch and stop by the door. My hand lifts, fist hovering in the air. For a second, I just stand there, hand raised, feet glued to the ground.

I close my eyes. The old man's words are still in my head. Suddenly, the idea of walking away, of leaving again, feels impossible.

I make a decision.

I knock.

A moment later, shuffling comes from the other side of the door. Movement, murmurs, and footsteps. A familiar voice.

The door opens. For the first time in ages, I smile.

"Hi, Momma. I'm home."

# CONSOLIDATED PSYCHOGENIC CATATONIA



## THE BAKUNAWA

One of seven moons remains  
among milky waves of stars.  
Others were swallowed  
by The Bakunawa,  
who leaped from the sea  
to reach for celestial stone,  
forming tsunamis, earthquakes, and typhoons.  
Shoreside views left drained  
for nothing is stranger than an empty sky  
missing its pieces.  
For now, the last one  
undisturbed, tugging the tides,  
that hid the dragon beneath.  
Serpentine and certainly  
hungry for more, eclipse  
will form when it tries once more.

## IN THE MARGINS

I had been unemployed for three months and was afraid I was losing all connection to what might be called urban propriety. The only thing I felt was an overall lassitude and disaffection for what I saw of life in Canada. I woke at ten, got a glass of water, and went back to bed for another three hours. The pleasure of horizontal warmth was too much for me to cast off. I could sleep for twelve hours. I would ask myself if I was suffering from depression, but I didn't believe in depression. I was lazy: I had no affiliations, work was a grotesque thing, and I would never have any affection for it. Perhaps because I was qualified for nothing more than to be an automaton, a drudge, and a peon. It might have been my imagination, but I felt that others were looking down at me like I was beneath them, and they felt no compunction at making snide and sarcastic comments. I felt that people were being superior: making faces behind my back, and ordering me around with unnecessary gruffness. I was aware of what a strange and pathetic creature I had become since returning to Canada. I could hardly look at myself in the mirror, but I was firmly set and could not change.

For eleven months, I worked as a dealer in a casino. I told myself it was not bad, not too bad, but in fact it was awful, demeaning, and the lowest period of my life. The only knowledge I gained from that experience was that I categorically hated the people with the doomed psychological malady known as gamblers.

With nothing but a near paralytic fear of seeing my life cast into penury, I aspired to be like my colleagues, who were as soft and as warm as mausole-

ums. I asked how they maintained their composure, and a colleague, a Russian woman, told me,

Just fuck them, that's all, just fuck all the players, fuck them all the time, and that's it.

For eleven months I managed it, working the graveyard shift from eleven at night to seven in the morning. I left my flat as the last streaks of orange and red were fading to green and purple in the western sky. I rode to work on the metro, with young people who were loud and drunk and ready for a night of dancing. I travelled back home when the sun was coming up, riding the train with all the stuffy ones commuting to work. I slept during the day as best I could. My upstairs neighbour's cello practice, the lawnmowers, the traffic: these daytime noises made it difficult to sleep. I woke in time to see the last light of day. I drank whisky on the morning train so that I could get straight to sleep as soon as I got home. Then I could not do it any longer, and gave my notice.

~

I began working on a novel about my experience at the casino. I did fifteen hundred words a day and felt good. I knew that a lot of it was too much, but I kept going, telling myself that it could all be fixed later. Diligently, I kept working and felt proud of my effort. Then I read *Invisible Cities* by Calvino and that knocked the hell out of me. Directly after, I read Rulfo's *Pedro Paramo*, which finished all aspirations I had of being a novelist. It was impossible to believe I could write anything. I tried to think about writing, which is a terrible thing to do as it seems to come down to one realization:

There are books out there, hidden monsters of unimaginable stature, which some forgotten genius fired into the night sky like a blinding luminary. Books of which one might say, I have devoted my entire life to literature to find



this very book. Yet, for all their merit and inspiration, one finds them on the bottom shelves of junk shops, unread, for a dollar.

I thought about the great novels I had read, and they all seemed to possess an inspired quality; I could feel immediately the strength and authenticity of the voice emanating from the pages. I was merely writing words; I had no voice, and stopped working on my novel. Some days I would look at it, but quickly I put it away, feeling ashamed that I had made the effort.

~

When the money situation began to get critical, I started hunting around for work. It made me feel futile and old. I went to interviews where the interviewers were much younger than myself. I wanted to walk out, but I stayed. After I had not been called back for a dozen bartending jobs, a fear overtook me. I was not young; I was too old to be doing such work, and people would feel ashamed for a man my age to be working as a bartender. At times, I wanted to apply for work as a dishwasher, just to get used to waking up in the mornings again, and get a few pay-cheques coming in, but I could not bring myself to ask for such a position. Even as a casino dealer, several social rungs above a dishwasher, my supervisors used to ask me, Why are you doing this job? Shouldn't you be teaching, at least? I looked like I was educated, that was my folly. There was no hiding it, people intuitively felt that I should be doing something more with my life. Though I never made any effort to seem clever, there was something about me, some mannerism that signalled to people. But I was nothing. I had no qualifications. I was at the bottom of society, disinclined, and I had an awful attitude.

~

I applied for a job as a corrections officer. I read the job description with some confusion. It took a little while before I realized that 'corrections

officer' was the modern name for a prison guard. It paid fifty grand a year, and I applied. It was an exciting kind of feeling to apply for a salaried job: in my forty-four years, I had only ever worked for wages. All that was required was a clean criminal and driving record, as well as a grade twelve level of English; if that were to be verified, there would be a physical test. In spite of all the recent rejections, I was hopeful.

Physically, I was in good condition, my driving and criminal records were clean, and it certainly helped by having spent over a decade living abroad. Yet, right from the start, there were problems. According to the job posting, they required a seventy percent or better for one's grade twelve English. I sent them my transcripts, explaining that in Ontario we had a grade thirteen, and they should consider that grade rather than the grade twelve grade.

It had been a shock to get my high-school transcripts after twenty-five years. I had been a terrible student. My problem had been that I never understood the point of trying hard, doing homework, or studying.

The e-mail with B.C. Corrections went back and forth, my grade twelve English grade stood at fifty-six percent, the grade thirteen was eighty-four percent, but they refused to consider that. I wrote long e-mails, using my choicest vocabulary and punctuation, explaining that I had been to university for an English degree. I had taught English as a second language for sixteen years. I had even had poetry and short-stories published in magazines. They were staunch, and I had to submit to an English exam, at my own expense. Even the examiners were apologetic when I explained why I was there.

~

The next phase was to take the psychological exam. The candidates, all forty of us, met in a large auditorium. There were short videos with multiple-choice questions to answer about what we might do in these situations.

There were almost one-hundred videos, and it was to take three hours.

Even though they were actors playing inmates, it was only then did I comprehend the reality of the situation. I was applying to be a prison guard. I would be responsible for maintaining authority and strictly adhering to the rules.

Never had I felt guided nor restricted by rules since the time of childhood. Somewhere early in my life, I had wisely decided that everything appearing to be an organization was in some way a racket or a fraud. Rules had to be imposed upon people who were not smart enough to make rational social decisions, that was where rules came from. If one were intelligent, savvy and cosmopolitan, rules were guidelines, to be taken more as advice than law, that was my opinion. This was what made Canada such a dull place. There was nothing but rules so that people would not have to exercise their use of common sense. People needn't think when there were rules governing every gesture. That was what I had learned living in Europe; there were rules, but people were more likely to do what they felt was right, and police would only use their authority when people were blatantly being foolish or criminal.

What was most disappointing for me earning a living in Canada was the unrelenting waves of morons and idiots one met when working as a schlep, as a bartender, as a dealer. It seemed that every day of my working life I would have to smile, a false ingratiating smile at someone I had no respect for, and do what I was told to do as they looked for ways to insult me. It made me consider, if I found being a bartender a miserable job, if I hated dealing cards in a casino, how would it feel to become a corrections officer? Think of the people I would then have to associate with.

I asked myself, Can you do it?

I told myself, Think of the money.

Can you do this work?

Stay focused, it pays well, and has medical benefits.

~

A few days later, I got an e-mail. I had done well enough to go through to the next round, and now I needed to fill out a lifestyle questionnaire. The first question read, Within the last 15 years have you used or experimented with illegal drugs? If yes, which drug(s), date of last use, frequency of use, average amount used? Question 7. Within the last 15 years has regular or excessive alcohol and/or drug use resulted in a negative incident in any aspect of your life – at home, work or school?

I thought about going through all forty-five questions and ticking ‘no’ all the way along. I looked at the instructions, and found this paragraph,

‘This questionnaire pertains to your honesty, integrity, and lifestyle. It is expected that you answer all questions accurately, completely, and honestly. Should you be considered for continuation in the process, your answers may be verified by a variety of means including: a security interview, a computer voice stress analysis, a polygraph, and a background character check.’

Fifteen years, that would take me back to 2002 when I was twenty-nine years old. Did they want robots for this job, or missionaries? I looked at the test and still considered ticking ‘no’ to all the boxes. I had never taken a lie-detector test, and I was under the impression they were unreliable.

Question 8. Within the last 15 years, have you had an alcoholic drink, or used illegal or prescription drugs during work or on-call hours where your ability to do your job may have been affected?

Question 10. Within the last 15 years are you now, or have you been, addicted to alcohol and/or drugs?

Well, I thought, I suppose that’s the end of that. I checked my Face-

book, I had some friends in Budapest who I stayed in touch with. There is a nine-hour time difference between B.C. and Hungary, so we catch each other at opposite ends. I was most in touch with Enikő, she had just turned forty and had been writing me suggestive letters about her life: whether she would ever have children and how nice it would be to finally get married. She was an attractive woman, a lawyer with quite a lot of money. We had met at the University Boxing Club where she could do more push-ups and chin-ups than I could, and she drove a new red Honda. The problem had been that the day we met; I had brought a friend with me, Sándor, who was married, but on the side was having an affair with his yoga instructor. When he introduced himself to Enikő, he leered at her with an ugly grin: he tipped his head forward and only showed his lower teeth. It looked strange to me, but she seemed to like it. At first she had appeared to be more interested in me, and I thought he would leave her for me since he already had a wife and a girlfriend. But it looked like he wanted this one as well, so I let him have her. Six months later, it had all gone to hell; Sándor was getting divorced from his wife, and Enikő was disgraced because Sándor's wife had found all the e-mails they had exchanged. His wife then forwarded their correspondence to every employee at the companies where Sándor and Enikő worked. While that circus was taking place, I left Europe to go back to Canada, and shortly thereafter, Enikő began writing me long e-mails about her misfortune and misgivings wrapped in thin tissue-paper about having chosen the wrong one.

It was noon, and I had just got up. After the physical component of the interview process, I had gone back to the bottle. I enjoyed my period of sobriety, it was a good thing to wake up without a hangover, yet I could not keep to it. It was the tedium of the long evening hours alone. What should a man with no family do between the hours of six and midnight? There was nothing but

drinking.

The corrections officer job was more money than I had ever known a job to pay, and what were Canadian criminals, anyway? Just a bunch of guys who were unlucky, and maybe a little dumb. Many times I could have been one of them, but I was lucky, I had never been caught for anything.

I looked at the questionnaire and shook my head. I went to the toilet, brushed my hair, and drank some water. I opened my Facebook and wrote to Enikő, to ask what she thought. She called me back. She was nice like that. She liked to talk rather than send messages back and forth.

What should I do?

Are they really asking all the way, fifteen years back?

Yeah, I can't believe it.

I was looking at her photos, she was slim, sporty, and had a nice smile. Photos of her hiking trips in the Alps, wearing all her expensive gear.

When I graduated law school, one of the professors asked us to think about something. She told us to imagine that throughout our entire lives there had been an invisible police officer standing beside us, watching everything we had done through our whole lives. And now, when we are graduating, the police would arrest us, or show us a list, I can't remember what she said exactly, but if we thought about every crime, or stupid thing that happened to us, imagine what that would look like?

Right.

Well, when you think of it, even before you're thirty, you've already done a lot. Everybody has done things, and now when you're forty, if you think back fifteen years? What didn't you do, really?

So, you think I should really write what I've done?

No, no, but I just think that if someone hasn't done anything, they're

the more suspicious one, don't you think? But don't tell them everything, you know, just, a little bit, like if someone asks you how much junk-food you eat, or how much time you spend looking at internet porn. Nobody tells the truth about these things, right?

I smiled. She was a good one. Just as I was beginning to consider it, her voice grew worn, and she told me about a man she had been dating for a few weeks,

I think I'm really giving up this time, I'll just join a convent and I'm finished with men.

Me too, the whole idea of dating, smiling, flirting, asking those questions, What music do you like? What are your favourite movies? I can't do it.

But, you still don't want to come back?

I do, sometimes I do. First, I check the weather here, then I check it in Budapest. I still check what movies are playing at Toldi and Örkény.

You're tired of being a teacher?

No, being a teacher was great.

You like it better in Canada?

I can't stand it here. I have no connection to this place, I was only born here, but this country, somehow, it's not my country. These things, like this questionnaire, that's what this place is like, everything is so stiff, and the cities are very ugly.

What about nature?

It's all far away, and full of mosquitoes. Europe is the place, Europe is culture and history. In Canada, we just borrow culture, and nobody cares about history.

Why don't you come back? I told you, you can stay with me, I have an extra room, there's plenty of space. You could take a month off before you start

teaching again.

Thanks, Enikő, you're the best. I'm almost ready to go to the airport right now, but I told you, I have to make a life for myself here, and I should be able to, it's just hard for me right now, but don't worry, you know, I always make it, somehow.

But what's the point if you're so unhappy with where you are?

I looked at her picture, she was attractive, intelligent, and she lived in the city I loved. I was thinking of it. Moving back to Budapest, the whole city was a photo-album of happy memories, a job as a teacher, something people respected. I was really thinking of it when she spoke again,

Well, there's a place for you here. Unless, I get married.

Or get a cat.

Or if you get a big beer-belly.

Or if I go bald?

Bald is OK, but no beer-bellies.

~

I filled out the questionnaire as she told me, but when I looked at it, I shook my head. They wanted robots, and if they were to refuse me the only option would be to go back to the casino. Six more months of graveyard shifts, drinking whisky when people are eating breakfast, and living like a vampire in the darkness.

I checked the magazines to see if there was anything for me. The Vancouver magazine *subTerrain* had a call for submissions. "In The Margins" was the theme. What did I know about it? I had been living in Canada for over a year, but still I felt like a refugee without heritage and no grasp of the language. Like a molecule that cannot bond with other similar molecules.

I have to do something. I have to get a job and stop drinking. In the



margins, one year and it felt as though the sum total of my time had been spent travelling from the bed to the toilet. Procuring a job, maintaining a job, only humiliation.

I sat in front of the screen, the cursor flashing, and began to type.

## **Maylyn Chan**

Maylyn Chan is a full time fourth year student at KPU in the BFA program. Born and raised in Richmond, BC, Chan is a daughter of Chinese immigrants and has faced identity issues of being a third-culture child. As a part of her self-exploration and healing, she began this journey by joining as a part-time Canadian Armed Forces member. This allows her to be a part of a community that is diverse in ethnic, cultural, and personal backgrounds. These experiences allow her to put everything into perspective and to explore the concept of “home” while away from home. Alongside this, Chan continues her journey of self-exploration, being an artist and creating visual works that explore Eastern and Western culture, personal trauma from the past, and memories from her military and civilian sides of life.

## **ML Schneider**

ML Schneider grew up on and resides in South Delta on the ancestral lands of the Musqueam and Tsawwassen First Nations. She is a career Literature and Creative Writing student currently continuing her education at KPU, and was the recipient of KPU's Creative Writing Award in 2021. For ML, writing is a process of exploration through expressing her love of nature, and learning about herself, her family, and the human experience. It is her hope that, through reading her words, one finds oneself reflecting on their own relationships with nature, the people closest to them, and with themselves.

## **Kyle Chua**

Kyle is in his third year as a student in the Bachelor of Fine Arts. Focusing in digital media, his work explores themes of surrealism, depiction of dystopian futures and phantasmagoric visuals, occasionally referring to pop culture and social issues.

## **Rose Renaud**

Rose Renaud is a fourth-year Creative Writing student at KPU. Her poetry and short story inspirations range from emotions of love, personifications of death, magical realism, and her mixed Filipina-Canadian background. She has been published in pulp MAG and aspires to have books out in the world one day. She is also a podcast social media manager and dabbles in copywriting.

## **Ashleigh Elstone**

Ashleigh Elstone is a third-year fine art student with a focus on digital drawings and photography. She is interested in the relationships between objects and people with a focus on female subject matter. Her creations include objects and people and blur the lines between portraiture and creative still life. Her main theme is magic realism. Magic realism often has realistic narratives that also explore the fine line between fantasy and reality. When not in a world of her own artistic imagination, Ashleigh can be found playing Magic the Gathering or thrift shopping for the coolest props for inspiration.

## **Mo Campbell**

Mo Campbell is a poet currently living in Surrey, B.C. He is a KPU Creative Writing major who hopes to work in music journalism and freelance poetry writing. He is a lover of the arts, and in his free time, he can be found rambling about Mac Miller to anyone who will listen, or getting elbowed in a mosh pit.

## **Steven Robinson**

Steven Robinson is a process painter currently living and working in Richmond. Steven's work is influenced by the geological forces on Earth's landscape and how they are being affected by climate change. He forces frozen paint over textured surfaces to mimic the natural geological mechanisms of the melting glaciers. The act of recreating these geological forces by hand parallels the human urge to influence and manipulate their surrounding environment.

## **Lydia Doerschlag**

Lydia Doerschlag is a second-year student at KPU, pursuing an Associate of Arts in Creative Writing. Stories have been her passion all her life; she believes words have the power to heal and strives to write for the people who need it most. When she isn't studying, she can be found roaming the library, trying new creative hobbies, or planning her next story.

## **Mark Robinson**

Mark Robinson is a fourth-year student in the Bachelors of Fine Arts program at KPU. Mark's paintings are influenced by dominating emotional instances, focusing on repressed emotions. Mark uses both literal and subjective figures, within surreal psychic spaces to create captured moments of dejected breakdowns and erupting existentialism. Colour and space are key elements to Mark's process of building works; the two developed in tandem to create the space in which Mark's isolated figure/s expresses their outbursts.

## **Grant Shipway**

My name is Grant Shipway. Originally, I come from Ottawa, and I have lived a life full of strange experiences. I did a 60-day Bikram yoga program, I have a brown belt in Aikido, I've read more books than you and all your friends, and I've run with the bulls in Pamplona. However, the strangest thing must be that I decided to return to Canada and attend KPU at nearly 50 years of age.





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