

# THE PARAGON JOURNAL

SEVENTH ISSUE - APRIL 2017

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THE  
PARAGON  
JOURNAL

JOURNAL OF CREATIVE ARTS

**Warning: Some published pieces may contain graphic language, violence, and/or nudity. We are sorry if this may cause any discomfort. Consider this to be the only warning, and we hope that you enjoy reading this issue.**

The Paragon Journal: Journal of Creative Art - Spring 2017

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### Editorial Statement

Here at The Paragon Journal, we would like to thank you for your loyal readership as we give you our seventh issue. So much has happened in our world and our country between our last issue and today, and it has shown prominently in all of our submissions. From terror attacks to corrupted elected leaders, the pain, fear, and determination to come out stronger is evident in the stories and poems I have read; the visual arts submissions have shown me that there is still beauty to be found in our world. This may only be my first issue as Prose Editor, but I have enjoyed nothing more than reading the endless submissions. I only wish that we could have accepted them all, if only to show the world that our voice is still there and demanding to be heard.

Respectfully Yours,

Emily Deimler,

Prose Editor



the  
**Paragon Journal**  
presents

[insert yourself here]

---

submit yours today  
[anthology@theparagonjournal.com](mailto:anthology@theparagonjournal.com)

a  
poetry  
anthology

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## I AM REAL | JOSHUA GERST

I am a triumphant warrior coming home from battle.  
I have seen the glory of what is unreality and imaginary.  
I am an international leader.  
I am a global god.  
Many in my place before me have become discursive dictators.

Spontaneous upsurge of awareness and perceptive residues causes  
my brittle bones to repair and heal not only my-self but my friends, students, and  
colleagues.

Though time may not be kind, I am steadfast and unchanging in a conscious soli-  
darity, ever interpretive through composed interpolation of intelligence.

I have a life outside your apartment that will blow your mind!  
Ever retending and protending on the illuminous Inn Säi.  
Sailing upon the wind, my insides rip-roar upon the tide.  
My face is caressed by each incoming windy wave.

I am the prophet of prophets, and my house was erected on a solid foundation,  
bound by bold bravery. Saddled upon Yggdrasil, We ride reverie's radiant rain-  
bows of rebirth.

I am a game-changing geyser of inception and inference,  
inflating logos, imagination, and consciousness with my final  
dying breath.

My perpetual state of becoming and being broadcasts my hermetic personality---I  
am the Walrus. I am Real!

(I AM REAL, I am a Book)!

## SURVIVING | SARA STEVENSON

He leisurely drags his index finger along my back, my paper skin exposing the bumps and crevices of my spine. I shiver as a winter breeze blows through the chamber; I hold my body rigid so he won't see my physical weakness. A smirk slips across his face, and he lowers his gaze, raking his eyes down my thin legs and undefined calves. His smile falters and I know immediately what he's thinking — how could I continue to work if my legs were barely strong enough to support my weight?

He straightens, brushing unseen dirt from the lapel of his brown shirt. He circles around me, watching my chest pause as he raises my left arm. It quivers as I struggle to keep it from falling back to my side. He moves in front of me, bringing his hand under my right arm and raising it. I grimace, my arms shaking as I will them not to fall. His eyes remain locked on my face, watching me struggle. After a minute, my arms fall. He shakes his head.

“Please,” I whisper. It comes out rough and hoarse; my throat feels like sandpaper. “Please let me stay.”

He ignores me, bringing two fingers to my skeletal wrist. He holds them there for a few seconds, registering the faint pulse beneath his finger tips. He drops my arm again and focuses on my emaciated form. My skin, covered in dirt and

bruises, stretches over my bones. I shift my gaze downward, following his, and resting on my breasts. Small and barely accentuated. My nipples are red and chapped, bleeding in some areas, from the rough smock I've been wearing since my arrival several months ago. As the man continues examining me, his eyes jump to my legs and feet — large, broken blisters from the wooden clogs. I have one on the top of my foot that had broken open while I was working and was oozing clear liquid into the dirt beneath my feet.

There are no mirrors in the camp, but I know how I look. Just like all the other Jews. Dirty. Starving. Dying.

His fingers trail along my torso, counting each protruding rib. I watch his frown deepen as he fixes his gaze. He slaps my inner thigh, and a quiet sob escapes me. I squeeze my thighs tighter together, despite his demands for me to spread my legs. I hold back my tears, fearing my fate if I cry, yet knowing my fate is already sealed, as I remember what happened to Bethel....

*“Have you seen Bethal?”*

*I bit my bottom lip, glancing at the empty mattress in the corner and trying to remember the last time I'd seen her. Two days ago, after lunch. Or was it dinner? She'd been assigned to clean the kitchen while Lisabet and I had been sent to work on sewing German uniforms. I hadn't thought about the fact that she hadn't returned until then.*

*Lisabet, the other girl who slept with us, glanced down at the floor. The concrete beneath her feet is caked with mud, and she kicked a small chunk of it with her big toe. Despite the dirty floors, Lisabet refused to wear the wooden shoes the Germans provided us; she told Bethel and I that her mother and father had refused to wear them, too. After they were gassed, Lisabet stopped wearing her shoes. A way to carry on their memory, I suppose.*

*“They gassed her.”*

*My eyes widened. “What? Why? She was always so ...obedient. She always worked hard and never spoke.”*

*Tears brimmed my companion’s red-rimmed eyes. “She was bleeding. Without what she needed to stop it, it got on her tunic. You know how the Germans are about the white tunics.”*

The man in the brown shirt slaps my leg again, harder this time. Tired from standing and being examined and cold from standing naked in the chamber, I shift my feet apart. I hold my breath, my chest aching, as warm liquid streaks my legs. He scoffs, his face distorting with disgust as he watches the pale pink liquid meet the dirt and grime on my legs. The darkened streaks end on the top of my foot, further mixing with the pus from my broken blisters. The man straightens and turns his back to me.

He speaks to the two gentlemen standing behind me. They've been standing there as long as I have, their backs straight and their faces emotionless. They had been watching as Fritz Klein — our campus physician — examined me, their cold eyes taking in every ounce of pain I was feeling. I can't understand what they're saying — they're whispering in German, but I can't understand what they're saying. Their voices are too low, and I'm too tired..

But the truth is, I don't need to hear them to understand. All I have to do is watch his hands. His hands will decide if I get to stay here, in the labor camp, and live a few days longer or if I'll be forced to meet the same fate as my mother, my sister, and unborn baby brother when we first arrived in Auschwitz.

Klein, along with Josef Mengele, had separated us, despite my mother's pleas. We'd arrived by train, and my sister, Marishka, was weak from the trip. It was raining when our train pulled up to the platform, and when we were herded out of the train car Marishka fell. The German soldiers yelled at her, telling her she needed to get up and keep moving. But she couldn't. She tried. Our mother pleaded with her, grabbed her by the arm, and tried to pull her to her feet. But Marishka couldn't stand. She was too weak and too sick. The soldiers kept screaming at her, at all of us, and people were crying and screaming. It was chaos, and before I knew what was happening, I was standing in one line while my mother and sister were being pushed into another. It wasn't until later — almost two weeks later — that I

learned they had been sent to the gas chamber.

My mother was seven months pregnant. Too pregnant to work. Useless. My sister was too sick. Useless. I'm still not sure why they kept me, why they let me live. I guess I wasn't useless.

Fritz Klein turns back to me, his eyes falling on my blood-streaked legs. I stand there, in front of these men, naked and shivering. My bones ache, and my eyes are heavy. It's the end of the work day; all the other girls have left the chamber and gone to bed. I want the sweet release of sleep. I try to lift my arms, to wrap them around myself, but I can't. They fall limp and heavy at my sides. Klein snickers at my weakness. At my pain.

He leans forward, his clean-shaven face only an inch or two away from mine. His eyes quickly scan my body again and a scoff escapes his thin, pale lips.

“Die Deutschen immer vor dem Ausländer und den Juden,” he sneers. A smirk slips across his face as he adds: “Wir hassen die Juden.”

My breath catches in my throat. Several times a day I hear the men in the brown shirts shouting “Sieg Heil!”, their voices bouncing off the walls of the factories and chambers; Klein's words had become as common as the chant of support for Hitler. Fritz Klein had sent many Jewish men and women, boys and girls,

to the gas chamber, and before he had them sent away, he said the same thing: *The German always before the foreigner and the Jews! We hate the Jews.*

The two Nazis move quickly, passing Klein and grabbing me by the wrists. Klein smiles as the two men roughly escort me outside. The cold winter wind blows and goosebumps quickly appear on my naked skin; I grimace in pain as my nipples harden.

“Please. Can’t I go get my tunic?” I ask the man to my right.

He scoffs. “Why bother? They’re just going to make you strip naked again.”

Feeling defeated, I force my legs to continue moving until we arrive at the camp’s

entrance. A hoard of people come off the train stopped at the ramp. My breath catches as I spot Josef Mengele at the center of the mob, jerking his hands to the left and to the right. Children cry for their mothers, women scream for their children and their husbands. Mengele directs men to the labor camps and direct most of the women and children to the gas chambers. A small sob slips from between my lips as memories of my mother and sister cross my mind.

Before I can give myself time to mourn my loss, my two escorts shove me in the direction of the gas chamber. We join the group of new arrivals — about 300 people — and I take the time to scan the group. Women and young children cling

to one another; the children ask their mothers where they're going, and the women hold back their tears.

“The nice men on the train said we're going to take a shower,” one woman tells the infant she holds in her arms. “Then we're going to be given a nice meal and we'll be able to get some rest.” My heart aches, and I can't help but wonder if she knows the truth.

We near a group of huts, lined up in a row. An SS guard in front of the group calls out to everyone, telling us that we are to strip naked and leave all our clothing and accessories in the hut; they'll be returned when we leave the showers. The showers are meant to disinfect us, and afterwards we'll be given a hot meal. Low murmurs of gratitude ripple through the crowd.

The men who escorted me here speak to one another in German before releasing my wrists and walking away. I force myself to wrap my arms around my torso, a failed attempt to keep myself warm as I stand in the cold. I close my eyes, willing myself to stay awake and stay on my feet, yet wishing I could curl up on the frosted ground and disappear.

“Hey! What are you doing with those people?”

My eyes fly open. The man's voice is unfamiliar to me. I lift myself onto my tiptoes, craning my neck to find the man who had spoken. My tired eyes scan the



men standing outside the huts, and they land on one man who stands out from the SS guards in pristine uniforms. This man is running toward two of the SS guards, waving his arms frantically over his head. His light grey suit is wrinkled and there are spots of mud along the bottom of his suit pants. His clean-shaved face searches the people moving in and out of the huts, and he quickly speaks to the SS guards in front of him.

“What are you doing with them?” he asks, turning his attention from all of us to the guards.

“They’re to be showered,” one guard answers.

The man shakes his head furiously. “No, no. These are *my* people. They need to come with me.”

The tone of the man’s voice pushes the men to obey him. Without hesitation, the men began moving through the crowd, instructing us to return to the huts and redress. Another guard approaches them, questioning their actions.

“Es ist Schindler,” one guard says, “Er sagt das sind seine leute.”

*Schindler?* I wonder as I push through the crowd. *Who is Schindler?*  
*It’s Schindler. He says these are his people.*

I reach the man in the grey suit. My legs shake and my heart pounds; I reach out and brush my fingers against his elbow and he turns. His eyes widen as they

quickly scan over me.

“Are you taking these people away?” I ask.

He nods. “Yes. They’re coming to work for me.”

“Will you take me with you?” I plead.

He pulls a folded piece of paper from the inner pocket of his suit jacket.

“What’s your name?”

“Abigail.” My voice cracks. I clear my throat and try again. “Abigail.”

His eyes scan over the paper in his hand, and his frown deepens. “I have no Abigail on my list. “

The ache in my chest intensifies. I wrap my thin, bony fingers around the man’s elbow, tugging at the smooth fabric. “Please,” I croak. “Please don’t let them kill me.”

“How long have you been here?” the man asks, his eyes softening.

Tears prick my eyes. My heart races and my fingers find the fabric of his suit jacket again, gripping at his elbow as tightly as I can manage.

“Several months. I’ve worked in the kitchen and in the factories. I can clean and I can cook.” I pause. The cold air is burning my throat and my lungs. “Please. Please take me with you. Please.”

He smiles, and I force my lips to curl into a smile as well. He gently places

his hand on my back, nestled between my protruding shoulder blades. My legs shake as I follow his lead toward one of the guards, and my heart hammers in my chest. The guard's eyes skim my naked form as Schindler speaks to him. He speaks quickly, and my tired mind can't keep up with their conversation. The guard looks angry, but Schindler is insistent. He keeps his hand resting on my back, and I feel an odd sense of protection.

The guard leaves us, returning quickly with a heavy blanket. He extends it to me, his face emotionless. Hesitantly, I take the blanket and weakly wrap it around my body. The warmth envelopes me, and I sigh, fighting back tears.

“Danke,” Schindler tells the guard before leading me away. He guides me to the mass of people being loaded onto another train. Once again, my heart quickens and I jerk to a stop. My break quickens as images of my arrival to Auschwitz flash through my mind; despite the warmth of the blanket, my body shakes. I quickly turn to face the man, my eyes wide with fear.

“It's alright,” he assures me. “I promise you that this train is going to take you to my factory. You will be safe.”

I close my eyes, attempting to steady my breathing. “But...what will I do there? What if I'm too weak to work?”

Tears brim the edges of my eyes. The Nazis murdered those who couldn't

work in the factories in Auschwitz; would Schindler do the same? If I got there and couldn't work, what would happen to me?

Why were so many people willing to follow him? Willing to let themselves be blindly packed into another train to be shipped off to another place? Had we learned nothing?

Schindler rests his hand on my shoulder again, pulling me from my thoughts. I glance at him, and he smiles softly.

“I promise, Abigail.”

He leaves my side, immediately disappearing in the sea of people. I pull the blanket tighter around me and wait to board the train. The man's promise bounces around my head, mixing with cloudy memories of my family and my time at the camp, as I follow the crowd onto the train. When we've all been tightly packed in the train cars, it pulls away from the ramp. I snuggle further into the corner where I'm sitting and wrap the blanket impossibly tighter.

As the train whistle blows and the others in the car chatter excitedly about the man who was saving them, I close my eyes. Next to me, the mother who I'd heard talking to her infant earlier sings a lullaby. A small smile slips across my lips as I allow myself to be lulled to sleep by her sweet voice.

## 1995 | ALEX MOYENNE

The clouds were spilled milk  
on a summer dress  
when we took a walk  
out to Port Sunlight.  
You were the first from college  
with the front to ask me  
straight out what  
had happened to my brother.  
I told you he said  
he was coming back  
but he just never.  
A tear lodged in your eye  
like a splinter.  
Later other clouds hid the moon  
and your curtains hid the lot  
and in the nighttime  
of your room I pulled  
your jeans off by their fraying  
beer-soaked boot-cut ankles  
and read your body  
like braille pornography.  
Back then they measured  
us by the size of our dreams  
and not by how far  
we'd fallen short of them.



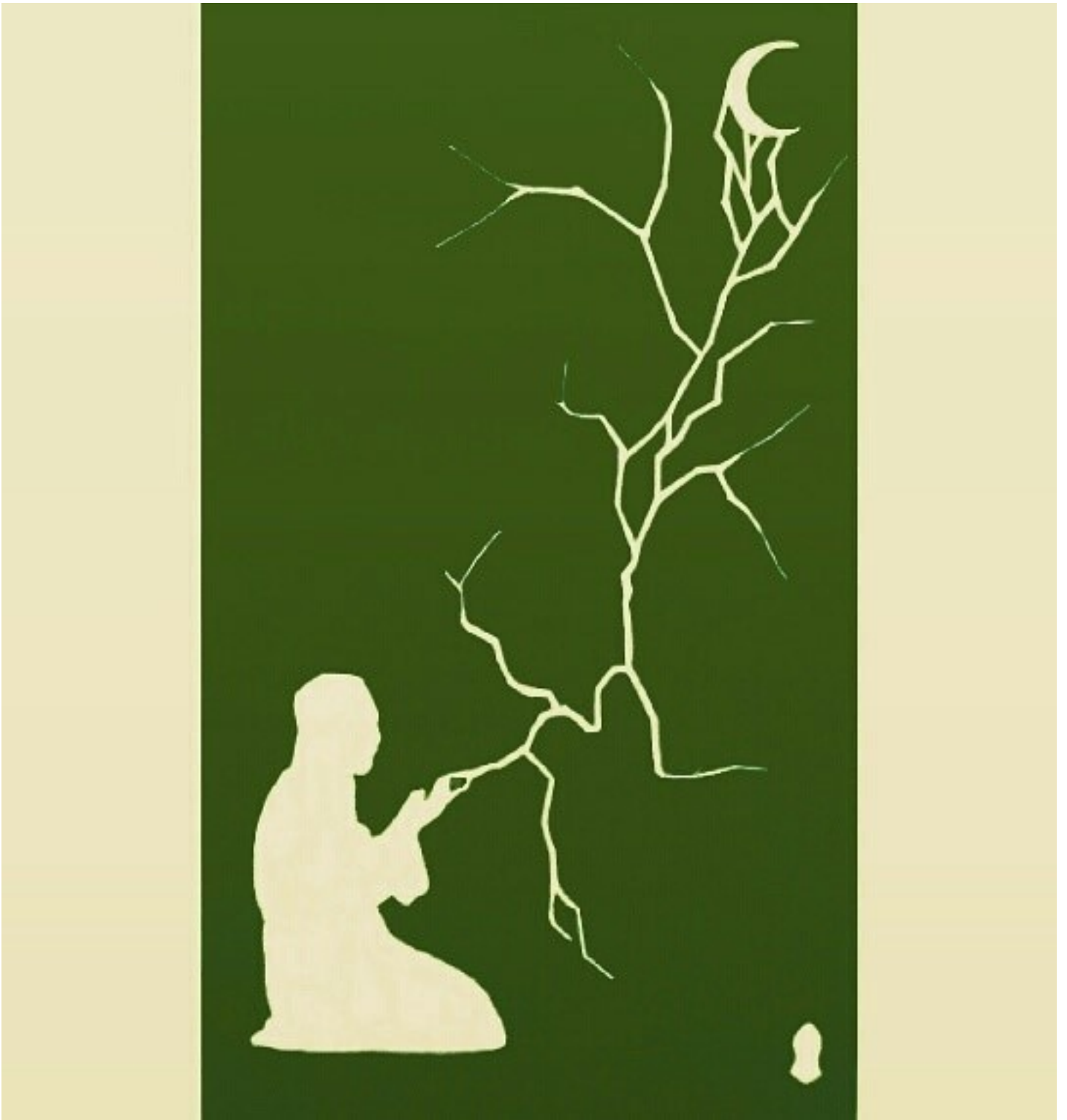
Beauty is The Most Literal Of Metaphors  
Khalid Elsir





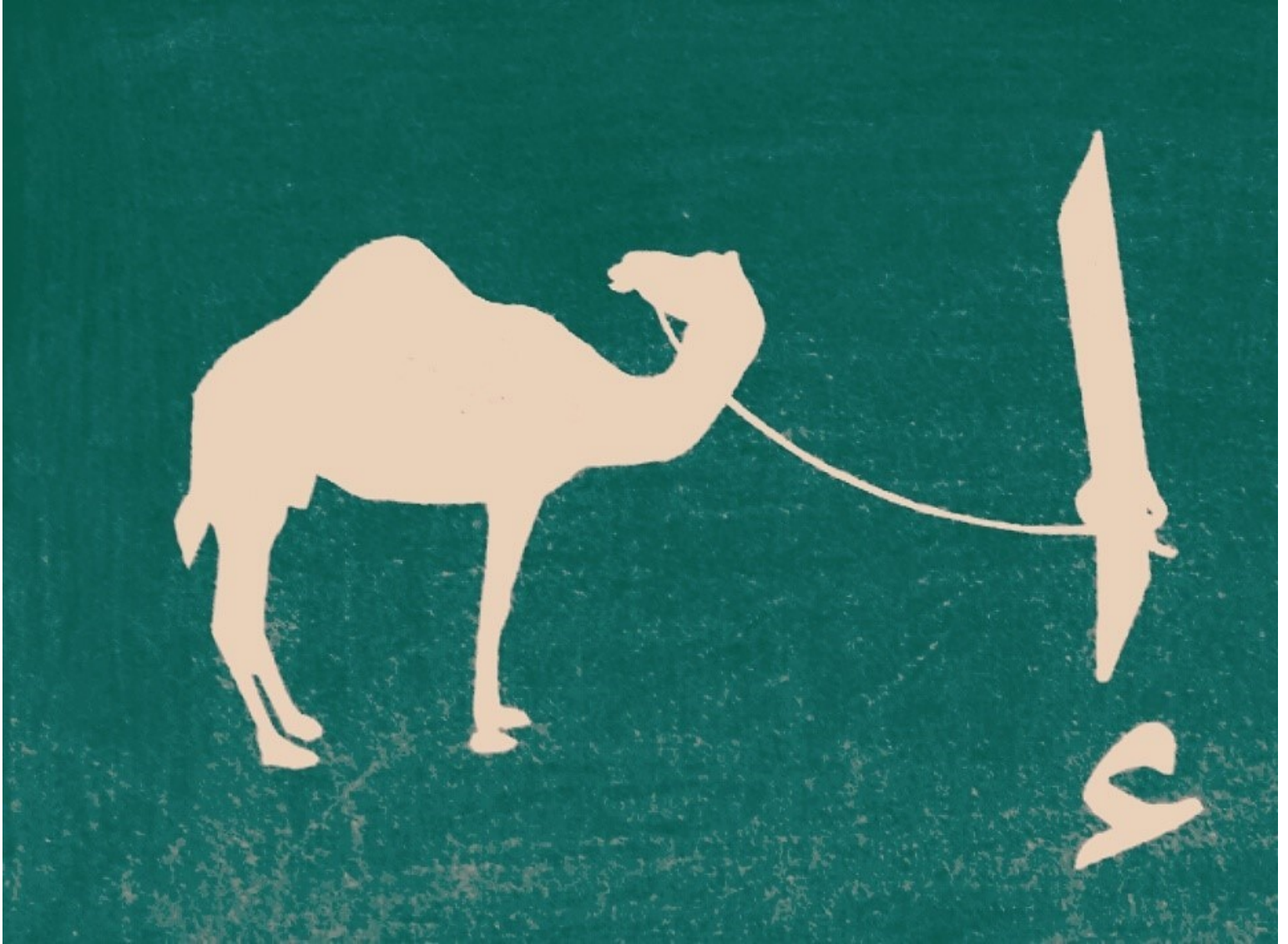
العلم كالغيث والأخلاق تربته  
أن تفسد الأرض تذهب نعمة المطر

Razaz  
Khalid Elsir



Supplication  
Khalid Elsir





Take The Means and Trust God  
Khalid Elsir





كُلُّ اِنَاءٍ بِمَا فِيهِ يَنْضَجُ

Vessels Can Only Pour Forth What They Contain  
Khalid Elsir



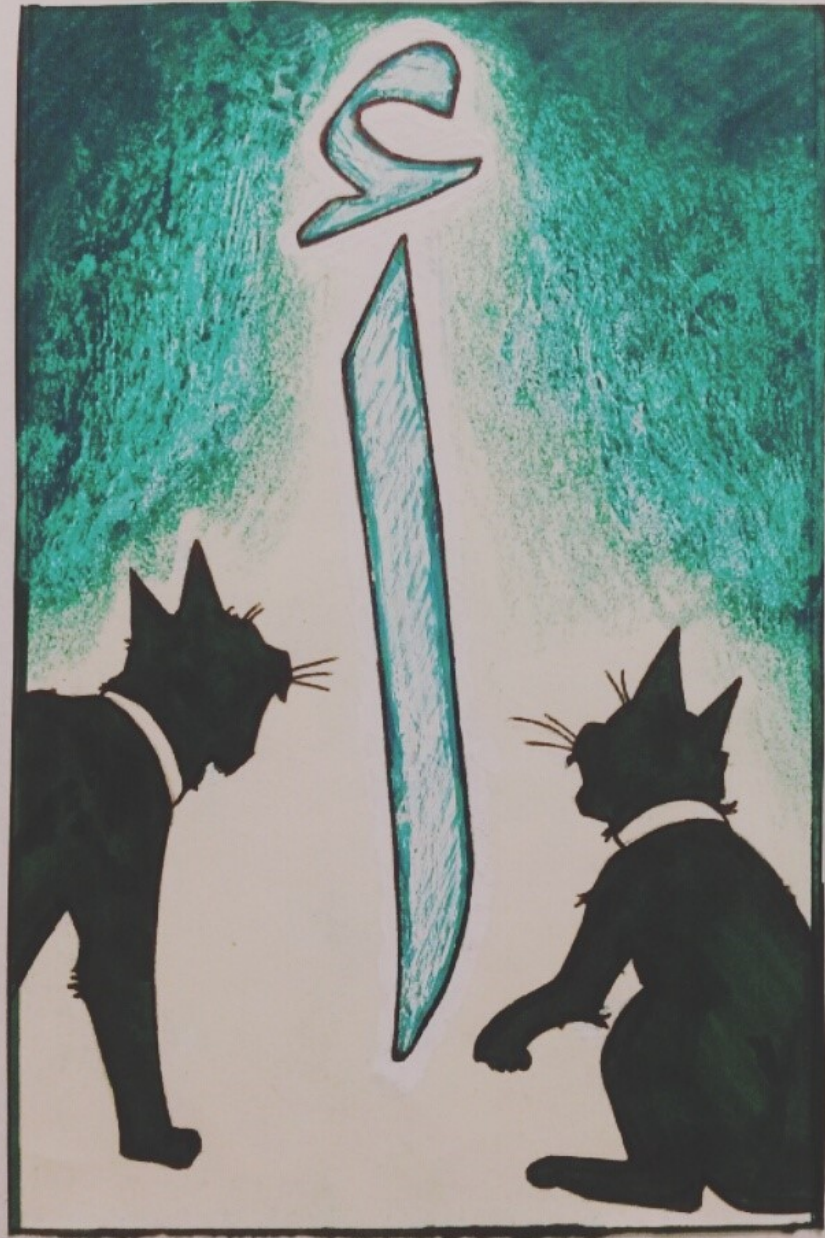


The Weakest Of Homes, Is The Home Of A Spider  
Khalid Elsir



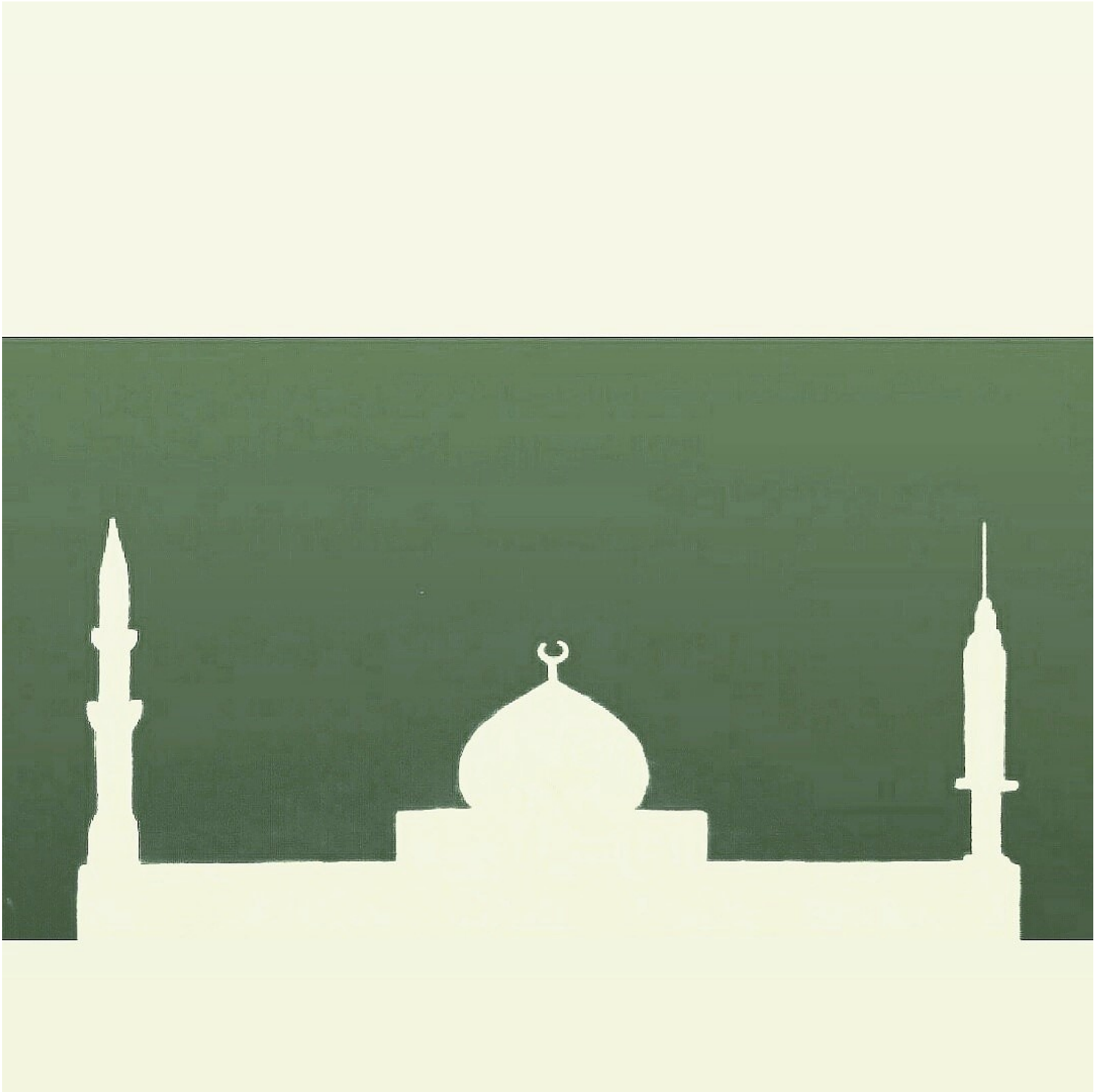
Books Are Orchards For The Intelligent  
Khalid Elsir





Wonder is the first passion.

Wonder Is The First Passion  
Khalid Elsir



The Delight Of My Eyes Is In The Prayer  
Khalid Elsir



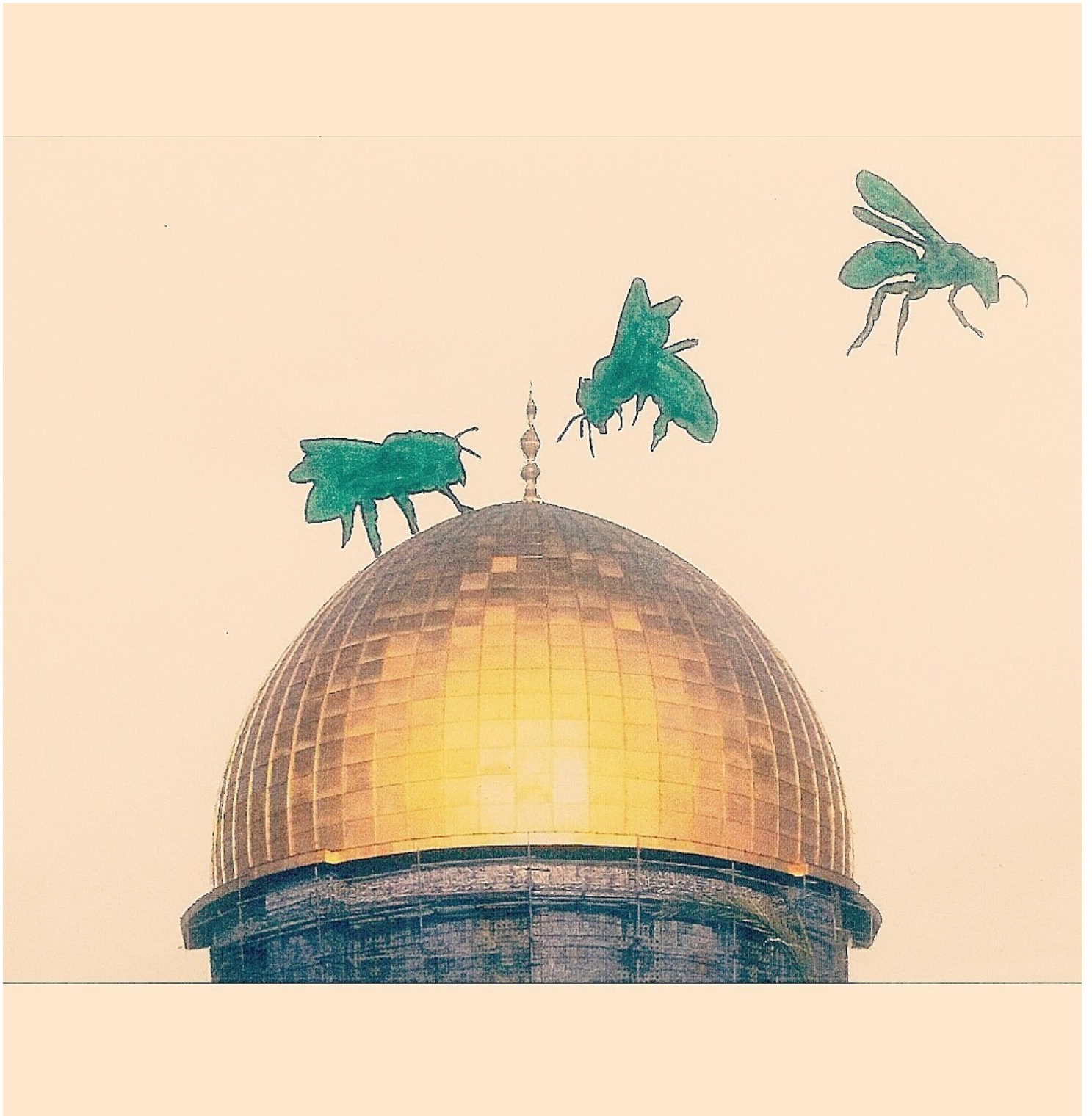


The Chosen, Upon Him Be Peace  
Khalid Elsir



Alhambra  
Khalid Elsir





The Sealed Nectar  
Khalid Elsir

# IN THE NIGHT | ROBIN FUSCO

## Characters:

Adoris, a girl, not yet a woman, early 20s, female

Kach, a manipulator, early 20s, male

## SETTING

A room.

## TIME

Night.

*A room, or a memory of one. No walls . A single door, which sits off to one side, and a glassless window frame suspended in midair where the back wall would be suggest the shape of the room. A moonbeam comes into the room through the window's void.*

*In the center of the room are ADORIS and KACH. They sit cross-legged on the floor and are surrounded by discarded, scattered pieces of clothing.. In front of them lies a messily folded bedsheet. Except where indicated ADORIS and KACH face and speak outward.*

ADORIS

Well.

KACH

Here we are!

ADORIS

Again.

KACH

Shall we?

(KACH attempts to remove ADORIS's shirt. She stops him. They face each other.)

ADORIS

Are you?

KACH

Let's not talk about —

ADORIS

I need to know.

KACH

I'm here, now.

(KACH again attempts to remove ADORIS's shirt. She stops him. She removes her white tee shirt herself and tosses it aside. Under her shirt is an identical white shirt.)

(KACH rips off his colored tee shirt. He throws it aside. Under his shirt is a tee shirt of a very different color.)

( ADORIS and KACH lift up the bed sheet. They hold it in front of them, like a curtain.)

(Slowly they lower the sheet back to the floor. They stare out.)

KACH

I have to go.

ADORIS

Stay. For a while.

KACH

I'm expected

(ADORIS glances at KACH.)

ADORIS

By her.

KACH

Let's not talk about this.

(KACH gets up. He heads toward the window.)

ADORIS

Not even a kiss?

(KACH walks back to ADORIS. He kisses her on the cheek. He hurries back to the window, climbs though, and leaves.)

LIGHT FADE THROUGH BLACK.

(ADORIS and KACH sit, staring, in their same spots.)

ADORIS

Well...

KACH

I've missed you.

ADORIS

Don't.

KACH

Shall we?

(KACH attempts to remove ADORIS's shirt. She stops him. They face each other.)

ADORIS

Have you?

KACH

Let's not talk about —

ADORIS

Leave her.

KACH

Let this be enough.

(KACH again attempts to remove ADORIS's shirt. She stops him. She removes her white tee shirt herself and tosses it aside. Under her shirt is an identical white shirt.)

(KACH rips off his colored tee shirt. He throws it aside. Under his shirt is a tee shirt of a very different color.)

( ADORIS and KACH lift up the bed sheet. They hold it in front of them, like a curtain.)

(Slowly they lower the sheet back to the floor. They stare out.)

KACH

I have to go.

ADORIS

Stay. For just a little while?

KACH

I can't. I'm —

(ADORIS glances at KACH.)

ADORIS

Expected.

KACH

Let's not talk about this.

(KACH gets up. He heads toward the window.)

ADORIS

No kiss?

(KACH walks back to ADORIS. He kisses her on the top of the head.  
He hurries back to the window, climbs through, and leaves.)

LIGHT FADE THROUGH BLACK

(ADORIS and KACH sit, staring, in their same spots.)

ADORIS

Well...

KACH

Have you missed me?

ADORIS

I don't...

KACH

Shall we?

(KACH attempts to remove ADORIS's shirt. She stops him. They face each other.)

ADORIS

I can't—

KACH

Let's not talk about —

ADORIS

Do this!

KACH

We're together right now.

(KACH again attempts to remove ADORIS's shirt. She stops him. She removes her white tee shirt herself and tosses it aside. Under her shirt is a red shirt. She notices.)

(KACH rips off his colored tee shirt. He throws it aside.

Under his shirt is a tee shirt of a very different color.

ADORIS and KACH stare at his shirt.

He rips it off. KACH's shirt is again the same color. They stare.)

( KACH starts to lift up the bed sheet. ADORIS springs to her feet.)

ADORIS

You have to go.

KACH

No.

ADORIS

It isn't enough.

(KACH glances at ADORIS.)

KACH

Let's talk about this.

ADORIS

No more.

(ADORIS walks to the door.)

KACH

One last kiss?

(ADORIS walks back to KACH. He kisses her, deeply, on the lips.)

KACH

Can we —

ADORIS

Goodbye.

(ADORIS opens the door. She waits for KACH to walk through and slams it closed after him.)

LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.



## Mango | Caleb Jones

There's a goddamn bomb in the kitchen.  
I wish I could  
swallow it like  
a hard green mango  
and let it soften and  
Yellow in my belly  
before it explodes,  
Ripe and Flame.

I'm slices in the fridge or between the wall  
and counter, shriveling in like old age.

## TINCTURE | LEIGH MARQUES

me,

my softness  
starts somewhere in my belly,  
unfolding like freshly pressed grass;  
it arises from somewhere  
you cannot reach  
by just the touch  
of my skin

she,

keeps tepid water  
cupped in her hands  
like kindness, adjusting  
to the temperature of her skin  
the longer she holds it  
close

she tells me:  
this valerian root  
sprouting between us  
is not enough  
to extract all that  
we need--

stop speaking of  
my sweetness,  
and show me  
yours.

and places drops of rose water  
on my tongue  
instead

# THE WORD WANT | RICHARD RAY

for C.C.

First, let's start with what we don't want.  
We don't want a dichotomy that splits us  
into boys and girls who don't fit the picture perfect.  
Men and women of questionable race  
who sneak around in the middle of the night.  
A tangle of limbs, an aversion to deviants,  
a counterculture forming the category of merger  
that no one wants to talk about.

What we want is a blurring of the lines  
where the boundaries overlap, sharp reliefs  
where the areas of overlap solidify our relations.  
We want a language of the grey area  
where acceptance is a prerequisite  
and is thus rendered a meaningless fact.  
We want actions that stand for themselves,  
actions that don't have to justify why they are,  
but are willing to if someone wants to listen.

We want children that want to be doctors  
and educators, or else undercover assassins  
that will rid the world of evil;  
and if our children can't figure out  
whether they want to heal, teach or kill,  
we want them to build and maintain societies  
or attend to the breaking of rules.  
We want failures to succeed as artists and farmers,  
losers to ascend into middling management,  
and we want the disabled to show us  
what we don't know about ourselves,  
what hellfire slumbers in that fleeting twinge.

We want people who deeply feel  
and just as deeply care,  
and we want them to do something smart  
with all of those useless feelings.  
We want truth and justice and beauty,  
and we want death death death

to take a hike hike hike.  
And then, we want to know death  
as the backbone of life,  
to grow old with it like a spine  
that takes a lifetime to open and flower.

We want to feel firm in the conviction  
that everything happens in love,  
even the hatred that spits in the face  
of everything we've meant so far.  
We want to overcome all of our hidden  
resentment and malevolence,  
be it towards the mirrors on the walls  
or the mirrors eating and breathing  
everywhere around us.

We want our vulnerability  
to be as valuable as immortality,  
and the sense to recognize that it always was.  
We want to go forth without pain,  
and since pain is unavoidable,  
we want to take pain with us  
to where it will no longer be able to hurt.

## Explain This to Me | Patty Wylie

*-based on the form of Joann Beard's essay "Maybe It Happened"*

Often, young adults feel stuck and as if they have limited options in this world. Often, adults see this struggle and uncertainty as laziness. Often, they are wrong. You see, often, these kids are so overwhelmed with school and other expectations that they do not even have a second to breathe. Often, wanting to take time off, or take a step back, is because the young adult realizes they are not invincible. Often, it comes to a breaking point where the student feels that if they do not make a change, they will simply cease to function. Often, the struggles with rising anxiety and depression among college students are ignored. Often, it is those children who are afraid to go against the grain that suffer the most. Often, they leave school feeling disenchanted rather than empowered, and may never set foot in an institution again.

Please explain to the youth of this country why they must decide on a college major, on the trajectory for the rest of their life, at the very fragile age of 18. Please tell them that along with that decision comes automatic judgement about their intelligence, work ethic, and potential economic status. Please alert young adults that "taking a year off to work or travel" is seen as a weakness, and not a step towards preserving one's mental health. Please make them aware of how society will perceive the choices they make. But more importantly, please tell us kids that it doesn't matter what society dictates as the "normal" or "standard" approach to college and one's future. Please tell us that you believe in us, tell us that we need to do whatever is best for us, tell us that the universal cosmos will bring us the answers when the time is right and not when they are expected. Please give us this reassurance, but also embrace and believe the uncertainty for yourself. Please understand that if you are ever unhappy, it is never too late to make radical, drastic

changes. But please do not think it will be too difficult, because the relief that you will feel is worth every difficult second.

Realistically, it is inevitable that mistakes will be made and lessons will be learned. Realistically, everyone has doubts and demons that they have dealt with, but these should be embraced. Realistically, most kids will not follow the exact same plan they had laid out in their head as they walked across the graduation stage. It is unrealistic to hold someone accountable to a plan they thought out when they were still learning how to balance a checkbook or sort laundry. In reality, most people change their intended path at some point in their lifetime. Realistically, they could get judged for being lost; but I think it is more realistic to judge those that put on this act we call normalcy.

The challenge is to find the experiences, rather than the things, that will make you happy. Please know that it is okay to not be okay. Often, many people overlook their potential happiness in the quest for money, fame, or personal accolades. Realistically, too many kids will do what is right by society, instead of what is right by them.

# YESTERDAY'S PANCAKES FOR BREAKFAST | VALERI PAXTON-STEELE

He beat my head against the white plate drenched in brown syrup cold from yesterday's breakfast this morning before school. I hadn't eaten it the day before and to my horror was forced to skip both dinner and today's break- fast (I lunched at school) so he could be in control over me. He planted my face (like training a puppy to stop shitting in all the random corners)	rubbing my forehead in the day old pancakes and crying with humilia- tion. I went to school with the shame of syrup in my hair this is not love this is pure hate and he hated me because I wasted food because I wasn't hungry because I was small and he was a powerful, strong, angry man this posuer not daddy not mine not father he struck me down	off the kitchen stool- my face full of white and brown plate- too late to clean myself to the muck. I went to school in front of everyone disgusted at the sight of my own face in the lavatory mirror (that was what it was called back then) sticky and frightened of the mere thought of my plate after school.
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## THE WATCHMAKER OF 11 LISTOPADA | CHRISTOPHER WALKER

Karolina came from a large Polish family – as if there were any other variety.

She was always full of stories about this aunt and that uncle, and I followed her with some degree of interest until the names began to coalesce and I couldn't tell if Kasia was the one married to Jarek or to Marek, and since there were three aunts called Ania I soon gave up keeping track of which one was the happy housewife, which the satisfied housewife, and which the content housewife.

She told her tales in English wherever possible, though there were moments when her fluency was stretched beyond its natural limits and we had to resort to my English-Polish dictionary; this usually spelled the end of the conversation, as neither I nor Karolina could choose well between the myriad synonyms that seemed to blight our translations. It's significant that Karolina never attempted to teach me much Polish beyond what I needed when I took her to the restaurant.

Karolina was also loath to act as a translator, and when we began to find comfort in one another's presence and started to visit her family as a couple, this became an issue. Typically we would be invited to somebody's apartment in the suburbs or to a country house that, to avoid the payment of housing duties, lacked cladding on the exterior walls and so looked unfinished. We would be served a dinner of cutlets and boiled potatoes; then the homemade ginger-spiced vodka would be brought out, and the conversation would pick up and I would be left behind. Karolina seemed to enjoy herself at these outings, and when she was really having a good time she would pointedly avoid looking at me, worried I suppose that I would try to indicate to her it was time to leave.

I would have to drink at least one glass of this moonshine liquor, though I am not fond of strong spirits. After the first call of *'na zdrowie,'* the Polish 'cheers' or 'good health', we all had to down what was in our glasses and slam the vessels on the table, at which point they would be refilled in the blink of an eye. I had to act quickly to put my hand over the top of the glass to ward off the undesired hospitality of Karolina's relatives; it's strange what a thin line divides welcome from imposition.

One week we saw Julka and Andrzej, the next Piotr and Ludmilka, and then over one of the religious long weekends, of which there are many in Poland, I met Ola and Marcin and Sylwia and Jan and two women named Monika; the three Anias were busy with their offspring that weekend so I didn't get to ask once more how married life was suiting them.

There was one person who Karolina occasionally mentioned but who was notably absent from these familial gatherings. This was Aleksander, always referred to as Aleksander and never Olek; the diminutive apparently didn't fit his



character.

Karolina explained to me why we had never encountered this Aleksander, though her explanation was vague enough to lead me to wonder what sort of secret lay hidden in his character. He avoided large parties, she said, because he didn't have much to say to anyone when he was there. I was tempted to suggest that we already shared something in common. Then there was the fact that he was still a bachelor, and very much a confirmed one; he had never shown even an inkling of desire for starting a family of his own. This I guessed had baffled his siblings; it is a universal truth I have found that whilst in private parents will suffer the hardships of raising their children and complain bitterly to one another about how difficult it all is, in public a mask is raised to their faces, the complaints melt away, and the whole ordeal becomes something transcendental, a central part of life and one that nobody in their right mind would shy away from.

I didn't see anything wrong in Aleksander's implied selfishness and thought it odd that he had been ostracised for it; I made the naive mistake of sharing this opinion with Karolina, who immediately turned maudlin, as though she saw something of her uncle in me. Looking back, this was probably the conversation that planted the seeds of our eventual split.

Still, my curiosity had been piqued, and I resolved to meet this Aleksander before I left the country.

Karolina eventually revealed that Aleksander was a watch repairer. Oh, I said. What do you mean? Well, she said, he changes the batteries, he polishes the glass, he puts the time right. That sort of thing. From her description I imagined some grey-haired old man sitting in a cubicle-like workshop with a grimy window in one of the old Soviet-era shopping galleries. I saw his downcast aspect as he waited for watch batteries to run dry or for daylight savings time to come back around; then he would have a steady stream of elderly clients, making their biannual migration to his workshop to have the time set for them because they'd forgotten how, or their fingers shook so much they couldn't manage the little pin that turned the hour hand round. I guessed they might pay him fifty *grosz* for rendering this service, and he'd look up at them with watery eyes hoping they might grant him a whole *złoty* out of charity.

It just so happened that we were rapidly approaching my brother's birthday, a difficult time not only because I needed to find him a present but also because it served as a reminder of the different tracks our lives had been running on: my brother had a far better job than I did, earned vastly superior sums, and could essentially buy whatever he wanted to. Lately my brother had become something of a hipsterish dandy. He sported a fashionable beard that suggested 'woodsman' when in reality he worked in an office all day; his hair was slicked back and cut razor short down the sides. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and dressed in a vested tweed outfit that I picture E.M. Forster might once have adopted.

In short, he was the kind of person who would appreciate being made a gift

of a classic wristwatch. I even considered looking into fob watches for him, so he could have a gold chain and have something to tuck into his breast pocket; telling the time would become a performance guaranteed to draw the attention of those around him.

Why don't you buy something online? Karolina asked when I ran these thoughts by her. It's not the same, I explained. My brother would think much less of a gift bought through the internet, whereas if there was a story attached to the watch he'd never part with it.

Though she could not fathom why it was necessary to go to such lengths, Karolina could see that I was not going to be dissuaded, and so the next day we made our way into town to see her uncle. I noted as we walked along that Karolina made no move to take my hand, letting hers float gracelessly in the algid air between our bodies.

We ended up on November 11th street, or 11 Listopada if you were to read the Polish street sign. It was named to commemorate the independence of Poland; of course, for me the date marked the end of the Second World War in Europe, and I always forgot that the day coincided with the return to sovereignty for so many lands.

11 Listopada was the pedestrian artery that ran through the city centre. It was a cobblestone street generally closed to vehicles. In the early morning delivery vans would trundle along, dodging the still-sleepy homeless moving from bench to bench, and in the evenings there would be a police car doing its patrols to make sure the patrons of the various bars and strip clubs in the vicinity did each other as little harm as possible. But whatever importance the street had held in the history of the city, it had fallen far from relevance in the past decade with the opening of not one, not two, not even three, but four large shopping centres scattered variously around the centre. They had had what you might term a deleterious effect on the old 11 Listopada, though some of the original Eastern European charm had survived.

The watchmaker's looked entirely different to my expectations. It was not a cramped kiosk, and nor was it hidden down one of the offshoots of the street, damp and carrying the sweet stench of urine into the new day. Karolina led me to a prominent building halfway down the street; it looked like it could have been lifted straight out of old Vienna. The large wooden door with its decorative brass knocker gave onto a dimly lit hallway with peeling plaster on the walls, a rusted metal balustrade that wound its way up the staircase, and noticeable piles of old newspapers stacked over in one corner. The sight was typical of many tenement houses in Polish cities. The communal areas like these were maintained out of the collective pockets of the tenants, and the fund this produced never amounted to much. Almost as if they were reacting to the cloying spirit of the Communist age, if everyone had to pay for something then nobody did. The first time I had encountered such a mess it had shocked me, but I had learnt that the individual apartments with-

in the building would be far better maintained.

Aleksander's workshop was on the fourth floor, and I hate to admit that I arrived out of breath. I had not been helped by the long, flat steps on the staircase; each one invited you to take an extra full step to explore their length, but this made them shallow and as a result they were more work than they had to be. To give myself a chance to recover, I busied myself taking in my surroundings, looking up at the coving that I was pleased to see decorate the ceiling in the hallway.

We were received at the door by a man dressed in a freshly-ironed white shirt and dark trousers. He brought us into the vestibule with a sweep of his right arm.

When I stepped across the boundary, nearly tripping on the metal rung which held the shoe mat in place, I happened to look down and saw that the man was wearing neither shoes nor socks. His bare feet, sticking out from under the dragging cuffs of his formal trousers, looked delicate and feminine on the parquet flooring. Assuming that it was expected of us to also remove our footwear, I kneeled down and started unlacing my boots; when I stood up again Karolina gave me a look that I didn't much care for. What are you doing? she asked in a low hiss. I shrugged and kicked off my boots one by one, nudging them together with my big toe so that they were out of the way, and then I followed her and the man into the room that served as the watchmaker's workshop.

The room was tall, a remnant of an age when city dwellers worried less about their heating bills, I suppose, or when construction techniques did not allow for the squat, economical arrangements that we have to put up with these days.

At the opposite end of the room most of the wall was taken up with large windows that stretched up so high that Aleksander presumably needed a step ladder if he wanted to open them at the top. The central window I noticed was in fact a door that opened onto the balcony; beyond the glass door I could see a row of red flowers in boxes suspended on the railing. To my right there was a slightly down-at-heel sofa, the springs thrusting the fabric up in the middle of each cushion, and then collapsing down dramatically at the edges; and on my left in the corner of the room there was a large tiled block, about the size of an English telephone callbox, and which I knew to be part of an old-fashioned heating system. In the winter I could see Aleksander leaning against this, his palms flat against the ceramic surface, his body slowly recovering the heat snatched away by the cold draught let in by the single-glazed windows.

And everywhere there were boxes stacked, some spilling over into others, all containing either whole watches or their disassembled guts.

Aleksander was there, bent over his work with a magnifying eyepiece lodged in place, and a watch held delicately in a vise before him. He seemed almost to be sneering at his work, but this expression I realised was necessary if he wanted to keep his eyepiece from falling. He was holding thin tweezers in each hand and was manoeuvring a sliver of metal into place. I couldn't tell what func-

tion it served, this tiny metal arm, as Aleksander delicately lifted it onto an exposed bolt between a larger and a smaller cog. As he worked he held his breath, and I realised that I was holding mine too, a mimetic habit that I've always had.

It must have been fascinating to observe this man with a surgeon's bearing take apart and repair a watch from start to finish; but what struck me then was the gulf between Karolina's suggestion that her uncle was a glorified battery changer, and the man before me, so enveloped in his work that he had not yet acknowledged our presence.

Aleksander tightened a series of microscopic screws and his work, for now, seemed to be finished. Then he looked up, removed the eye piece, and blinked several times like somebody coming out of a cave into the harsh light of a desert. He smiled broadly at us and rose to shake hands.

I'm Aleskander, he said to me, as if the introduction was somehow necessary or expected. I told him my name and we shook hands a second time. He turned to Karolina and took her hand, but then he realised with a laugh who it was that had come to see him, and he took her in his arms for a generous hug. Karolina accepted this with good grace, but it was clear from the way her hands remained a few inches away from her uncle's back that she was somewhat put out by his exuberance.

Then they spoke to each other for a few minutes, Karolina answering the questions her uncle threw at her as he moved around the room transferring cases of watch parts from one table to another; he seemed full of nervous energy at this unexpected meeting. The well-dressed man who had greeted us earlier stood by, watching the scene with a neutral smile on his lips; he looked like someone to whom smiling comes very easily, the sort of person who would make a good politician or salesman. Maybe that's what he was, I figured, and looking around the room with its hundreds of watches in various stages of undress and repair and I began to think that Aleksander was a classical artisan-artist, so wrapped up in the minutiae of watch repair that he had neither the time nor inclination to pursue commercial interests; this I assumed he left to his companion.

Aleksander spoke in a rapid Polish that seemed more than ever to be all tongue-tapping t's and drizzled z's, and I struggled to make out more than the odd word here and there. Later I asked Karolina to tell me some of what he'd said - mostly family gossip, she stated succinctly - but she put down my lack of understanding to a fact I had overlooked: Aleksander, like the rest of that branch of Karolina's family tree, was a true Silesian and one who dipped merrily into the waters of dialect whenever the opportunity presented itself. I'd never noticed anyone else in her family do this before, but then I had never listened for long to their ramblings; I was equally lost in the woods of the Polish language as I was in the forests of the Silesian patois. It was only now, my curiosity about Aleksander prodding me, that I had paid any attention to what was being said around me.

And then at some stage I became the subject of the conversation. Karolina had probably diverted the talk away from family matters and towards our reason

for visiting, and now Aleksander was looking me up and down, perhaps trying to judge what kind of a man I was. My brother's name was also mentioned, and I heard the word *brat* which means brother in Polish but which causes ironic sneers amongst the English who study the language. Aleksander sighed, either in understanding or perhaps disappointment; I wonder if he'd have preferred to have seen his potential client instead of only his representative.

Aleksander took down a number of watches, blowing the dust from them before laying them carefully on a smoothed-down piece of tissue paper on the table. I took a look. They were all nice, heavy, and sported Cyrillic script. I asked if the watches were Russian; they were not, said Aleksander rather proudly. They were Ukrainian. Ah, I said noncommittally, wondering from where his pride in Poland's Eastern neighbour had sprung from.

The watchmaker nodded and replaced the watches on the shelf. Next he displayed some German watches; I recognised the name Glashütte, though I am by no means an expert when it comes to timepieces. I thought these would be more my brother's cup of tea, and so approached for a closer inspection. My eye was immediately caught by a MeisterSinger watch with only one hand. Aleksander, with Karolina's help, explained the principle of how it worked, though I followed the gist of what he was saying easily enough; soon I noticed that Aleksander and I had been left to it, with Karolina walking away to look out of the window at the street below.

So, returning to the watch, the idea was simple and intuitive and one I felt sure my brother would appreciate. Each hour on the face of the watch was broken into five-minute increments marked by way of minute etchings. Where the quarters and half hour marks lay was easy to tell, since these were represented by fractionally longer lines than the rest, and so, with a bit of practice, you'd be able to tell the time to within five minutes quickly and relatively exactly, and really it wasn't necessary to know the time any more accurately than that. Of course, I was overlooking such obvious occasions as when one is waiting for the bus or a train, but for a more comprehensive account of the time my brother had only to look at his phone.

I should also mention a strange thing that happened when I'd made my choice. Using my rudimentary Polish, and presumably without the polite preamble that is customary, I asked Aleksander bluntly what his price was. Aleksander seemed to wobble on his feet then, shifting his weight from his left foot to his right and back again, as though he was physically weighing up the cost of the watch against the profit he hoped to make from it. When at last he announced a figure in the low thousands of *złoty* I heard from across the room a sharp intake of breath, and then Aleksander's friend excused himself, saying something about a cup of tea.

I'd thought the price was reasonable, mostly because I thought Aleksander a reasonable man who would not wish to take advantage of his niece's foreign boyfriend. I agreed without any haggling, thinking that there would be something tasteless about trying to drive the price any lower. I was glad later that I had acted

with such tact. I looked the MeisterSinger up online and found that the second-hand market for the one-handed watch was particularly robust. A good, well-maintained specimen could easily fetch two or three thousand dollars. Whilst I doubted the one I had bought was quite as good as all that, it was clear that I had a real steal on my hands; this certainly explained the reaction of Aleksander's friend, especially if I had surmised correctly that he was the one responsible for the business side.

I spent the evening thinking of excuses for why I couldn't after all buy the watch. The generous discount Aleksander had given me, and for really no discernible reason, made me a touch uncomfortable in the same way that the generosity of strangers always did: I felt I had no means by which to reciprocate, and this put me at a disadvantage. But on the other hand, there was not much time before my brother's birthday, and it was important to me that I had something special to give him for the day itself, rather than, as had happened two years prior, only the promise of a gift yet to be delivered, finally rendered as cash.

Karolina had returned to the conversation in time to help arrange the details of the purchase. I did not carry such large amounts of currency with me, and Aleksander was not the type to have credit card processing facilities to hand, so it was decided that I would withdraw the cash from the bank and return the following day to collect the watch. Aleksander said that he was not ready to part with the watch immediately in any case; he said that it was a point of pride for him that his watches only left the workshop when they were completely ready, and he wanted to go over the unit one more time to make sure everything was trim and proper. He even offered to set the time for me, which I gladly accepted, though I did ask that he use the good old Greenwich Mean.

I went by myself the following day, Karolina saying that she had some errands to run. Why we couldn't have done those together after what was supposed to be a brief follow-up visit she never explained, but I didn't wish to press the point.

I walked down 11 Listopada, paying more attention to the other shops as I went along and making a mental note of anything that I thought could potentially interest somebody else in my family. My mother had always had an unfathomable fondness for crystal ware and so she would have liked one shop I saw that had a nice selection of decanters sitting in the window; but then there was a large sign slapped across the rest of the window announcing that the shop would soon be closing for good. The sign was in English, *Final Clearance, Everything Must Go*.

Many of the older establishments seemed to be heading the same way, or had already raced ahead into the oblivion of bankruptcy. A leather goods shop, a china shop, and a second-hand bookshop had all recently closed their doors for the last time. In the case of the leather goods shop, not only had it gone out of business, but the hastily put-together handbag shop that had taken its place was also now going into receivership. They had not even had time to scrape the old signs from the window.

Where shops had died depressing replacements had sprung up, each one giving me cause for concern not only for the street but for the people who glumly trod its cobblestones. There were pawn brokers with windows full of grimy mobile phones and laptops that their previous owners had had to get rid of to pay some bill or other; there were payday loan companies offering horrendous rates hidden in the depths of the small print pasted across the window; and a number of open-all-hours gambling dens with names like Top Shot, Hot Shot, Lucky Hot, offering up what seemed an alternative to the pawn broker but which in fact simply made the walk next door all the more inevitable.

I was saddened as well by the loss of so many brand-free shops, stores that had previously offered trousers and shirts that had presumably been tailored by somebody relatively local. Now if anyone wanted to buy clothes they had no choice but to head over to the big shopping centres, where they could buy something that anybody else in Poland, or in the rest of Europe, could also buy. The drive towards homogeneity was relentless and disheartening.

I reached Aleksander's and the thought occurred that here too was a business over which a death sentence hung. Aleksander was the embodiment of his trade, not just a watch maker but as the Polish put it, a '*zegarmistrz*', a watch master. The watches would come and go, sold in person or online or at auction, but the man would remain for as long as his eyesight held and he could keep his hands steady. But with no heir and no apprentice the time would inevitably come when Aleksander would retire and the expensive city centre location would have to go on the market, doubtless to be bought by some uninterested European bank looking for another branch location.

I had met people like Aleksander before, some of them artisans or artists in their own right, others simply teachers like me; their vocations lent meaning to their lives and when they were too old to continue they lost their appetite for living and shrank into themselves. It was especially painful to observe teachers going this way; they always talked about the energy they had once possessed in abundance, how even the children struggled to keep up with them some days, and then the time had come like the ringing of the school bell and their knees had gone or the breath had been squeezed from their lungs, or, worse yet, the children had left them behind, more fascinated by the downloadable English applications they could run through their smart phones than this grey old man with his puppets and silly voices. I saw in them my future self, or one such possibility I suppose; I was still uncertain that this was the career for me. But that is another story.

The intercom buzzed and I heard the soft click of the lock coming free. I pushed the grand door open and made my way up the stairs, glad that I would be having this adventure free of Karolina's raised eyebrow and her stern look. This time Aleksander greeted me himself, his companion nowhere to be seen, and when he shook my hand there was a warmth that I thought suggested the dawning of some kind of friendship. Aleksander, the member of Karolina's family who had

been cast out, was the most naturally amiable of the lot.

He led me into his workshop and showed me what he had done to my brother's watch. The difference was startling; the piece I had been so impressed with before had all the same worn its second-handedness as clearly as a frayed seam on a jacket, but now it could have passed for factory fresh. In the light cast by the desk lamp it gleamed, every trace of a scratch or a fingerprint obliterated.

Aleksander explained in a whisper so low it was as if the watch was a baby he was afraid to wake, that he had done this and done that; I could follow what he meant only from his actions, his hands passing over the face and reverse of the watch with an astonishing tenderness.

I smiled and tried to show my gratitude; Aleksander at least understood the words *Thank you*. But he hesitated as he was placing the watch in the box he had chosen for it, as though he was dissatisfied with our mutual unintelligibility. There was something more that he wanted to say, and since neither his friend nor Karolina was present, he appeared eager to open up without an audience waiting to judge him.

He uttered a series of words in English stitched together, basic words that one picks up almost by accident or that have been incorporated into Polish by linguistic osmosis. I noticed that his pronunciation was thick and heavy and not at all slurred by the Polish tendency towards *zh* and *sh*. If anything he sounded German, no more so than when he attempted to say *'and'* and reached instead for *'und'*.

Struck by a sudden inspiration, I said to him, *'Sprechen Sie Deutsch?'*

I have never seen somebody's eyes light up as brightly as Aleksander's did then, when he launched into a series of excited *'Ja, ja!'*s. Again he shook my hand, and then, as if he had forgotten what it was he had intended originally to say to me, he gave me a long recap of everything he had said before about the watch.

It was good that his mind had wheeled around like this. My German is far from fluent, and my ability to understand the language greatly outstrips my productive propensities. It had also been several years since I had had a reason to use the language and much of my vocabulary and presumably all of my grammar had turned comatose. Listening to him helped to shake my German back awake, and by the time Aleksander had finished I felt it roiling around inside me, ready to be brought to the surface.

Thank you for explaining all of this to me again, I told him. I'm sorry that I don't know very much Polish. It's a difficult language, and not similar enough to anything else that I've studied before that I could pick it up quickly. Aleksander commiserated. English too presented problems for him. Even though his German was excellent he said he could never comprehend the mysterious ways in which English tenses worked, and nor could he piece together the rules that articles were supposed to obey. We laughed at this together, as people do when they say something that is not funny but which is expressed in a language neither of them was born with; it is as if the very fact of reciprocated understanding makes the intention



of a joke more important than its graceful execution.

There then followed a few moments of silence. I smiled; Aleksander smiled back. I had no idea where to take the conversation we'd just started, and clearly Aleksander was faced with the same quandary.

Aleksander offered me a coffee, which I immediately accepted if only because it meant he would be out of the room for a few minutes. He showed me to a seat near his workbench, and I sat with my legs crossed, as we English are wont to do, whilst he repaired to the kitchen. I heard the coffee grinder being put through its paces, and then a few minutes later I could discern the gurgling of the espresso maker Aleksander must have been using. He returned with a tray on which were two dainty ceramic cups, a shiny silver espresso maker, a bowl of sugar, and an open tin of sweetened condensed milk.

He looked at me and took in my posture with a nod and a smile that suggested a sudden realization of something. Aha, he said, and then chuckled. I had no idea you were that way inclined.

I tilted my head to show my confusion. I'm sorry, I don't follow you, I said. With a limp flick of the wrist Aleksander indicated my crossed legs, the left folded over the knee of the right, my hands in my lap. I didn't realise you were a homosexual, he said. That's what I meant.

That's when his meaning became clear; not simply that, however, but so much more besides, as though the floodwaters had been released, the little boy growing bored of sticking his finger in the dyke.

Thoughts flashed through my mind; I was taken back in an instant to a time I had completely forgotten about, a minor event from my first weeks in Poland. It had happened thus: I had gone out for drinks with another teacher, a girl I had been seeing. Our relationship had not lasted long, and if I remember correctly that might have been the night of our reasonably amicable break-up. I was walking her home, as any gentleman might, when she had stopped in front of a bar and said that she'd just have one more whiskey. She disappeared inside, and since it was a balmy evening and the bar looked immensely crowded, I opted to stay where I was. I sat on the edge of a knee-high wall, crossed my legs as usual, and waited. Within a minute a young man had approached me, offering his hand with the same downwards angle that I had seen Aleksander employ just now; it was like a secret signal. We shook hands and exchanged names, and he asked almost immediately if I was waiting for my girlfriend. I replied that I was, and he seemed surprised though not discouraged. He then told me about his wonderfully appointed flat in Wrocław, and how he had just had the latest model Segway imported from Germany. All of this sounded marvellous, I told him, and then the girl turned up and we left. It was only a while later that I realised I'd been chatted up.

I must admit that I had been intrigued by the young man. His confidence was something I could only dream of emulating; it was an exceedingly attractive

feature. Had I been more, let's say, curious, I would have been looking at train tickets to Wrocław the very next day. As it was, I considered myself privileged to have attracted his gaze and saw it as a massive compliment. I had been feeling down about the conclusion of yet another relationship, and this was just the remedy I'd needed.

And now whatever had been playing in the back of my mind about Aleksander broke through.

No, no, I said to him, smiling, always smiling. I'm not that way inclined, though I don't mind anyone thinking that I am. It's no skin off my nose, as we say. I told Aleksander the anecdote about the young man from Wrocław, and as the picture formed in his mind of me as an Englishman so often mistaken for a homosexual, he began to chuckle and soon to laugh.

So I suppose this means that you... I said, letting my sentence trail off into a comfortable ellipsis. Yes, Aleksander replied immediately. And so that means that your assistant... I said, not needing to finish my next sentence either. Yes, Aleksander said. We've been lovers for, let me think, more than thirty years. We studied together at university, we travelled together. In public we maintain appearances, but in private we couldn't be happier with one another.

I'm very pleased for you, I said. It's rare to meet somebody who has the patience and perseverance to maintain a relationship for so long, and even rarer to see the light in their eyes when they speak of their partner. Thirty years and the light hasn't gone out; that's admirable.

Thank you, he said. But as though a cloud had passed before the window and the workshop had been suddenly cast into shadow, the smile on his face evaporated and he turned as solemn as a widower remembering with fondness his dead wife. It has not been an easy thirty years. I have always wanted to tell my family who I was, but I never had the nerve. Instead, I made up a little fiction that has always served its purpose.

I raised an eyebrow, bidding him continue. I tell this story, he said. I was once in love with a girl, but I have always been in love with timepieces. That has been my one true fascination. And when I was young and in love I was faced with a truly imponderable dilemma. For you see, whenever the girl was around me my heart beat faster with the love I felt for her, but this interfered with my work. I was always steady and relied on my heartbeat to guide me as I set the watch to tick so regularly. But in my excitement this I could not do. When I worked in solitude I could give you a watch that lost a minute in a year. When she was around, I grew so agitated that the watches I made were useless, they would be five minutes wrong in less than a week. So I had to choose between her and my watches, and I chose the watches.

That's a fascinating story, I said.

It has served me well for most of the last thirty years, he said. You see, I have never been very close to telling the truth of my life. The funny thing is, the

story actually is true. When I first fell in love, my heart beat so much faster that it threw my work completely off. I had to re-learn everything that I knew, but I was conscious from the start that it was worth it. He was always so charming, and he has always been so good to me. I can't imagine my life without him.

I added a touch of condensed milk to my coffee, which Aleksander had just then thought to pour out. The spoons that lay on each saucer I noticed were antique silver, headed with a German coat of arms. I looked closely at the one I held; it was divided into two parts, the top half representing a couple of the tools commonly used in the watchmaker's profession, the bottom half a clock with a smiling sun at its centre. Curiously, the clock had no hands.

Perhaps you would like to keep that, he said to me, noticing the interest I was taking in the spoon. I have many more. It is a tradition, if you like, to buy one with every visit, and we visit Glashütte perhaps twice a year. Thank you, I said, thinking that it would be easier to gracefully accept than to decline his kind offer and have to have it repeated several times. He took the spoon and wiped it down with a cloth, cleaning it with the same slow, deliberate movements that he had used when dusting off the timepieces he had shown me. I liked how studied and purposeful everything was that Aleksander did, though I felt deeply sorry for him; it seemed such a shame to have lived so long in fear of his secret getting out, when that secret was only that he had been one of the luckiest men ever to have lived and loved.

I finished my coffee and fidgeted in my seat the way that one does when preparing to leave. Aleksander took note and rose first, smoothing the way for my egress. At the door, when I had retied my shoelaces, I stopped to bid Aleksander farewell with a true, firm, Polish handshake. We shook hands, and then Aleksander laughed and came closer so that he could hug me. My friend has been so jealous since he first saw you, he said, still laughing. And when I offered you the watch at such a low price, he didn't speak to me all day. He thought I had eyes for you, but you will be relieved to know that that is not the case. I have, and have always had, eyes for one man only.

I pressed his shoulder and said that relief was not the right word. If you had liked me that way, I said, it would have made me neither sad nor angry. How could I feel that way? It would be like a betrayal of my soul to become angry simply because I had had a positive effect on another human being.

These were the words I should have said to the young man from Wrocław, I realised as I was walking down the stairs and out of the building. Yet as soon as I had reached the street I had forgotten all about it, as though I had said everything only mechanically. A deep sadness filled me. There was something heavy that lay in the pit of my stomach, and I realised when I checked my phone to see if I had missed any calls – I hadn't – that I was not looking forward to seeing Karolina. I decided to break things off with her as soon as I could find the right opportunity, and if one did not present itself I would certainly engineer one.

For when I was with Karolina, my heart did not beat faster.

## LIFE IN THE JUGULAR | HEATH BROUGHER

You're nearly alive—  
there is no such thing as purity anymore,  
at least as far as we're concerned;  
we are flakes of the past fast-life  
playing bingo at the church on Friday nights  
and occasionally forgetting to say our nightly prayers  
instead dreaming of that long-lost time of triumphant youth  
and seeds sprouting to erect fully blown euphony;  
we keep coursing through the days,  
now rarely looking back, almost always looking  
blank, stifled by time, the downbeat songs  
slipping from our mouths to the floor

as we look in the mirror to see our withered selves  
a dethroned king glaring back in confusion,  
in longing, as our joints turn on rusty hinges  
walking toward the dying-room light

you prepare the food, kiss the children,  
sit back in steep yet aching smiles  
and know that you're safe  
and nearly alive.

## #NOTMYPRESIDENT | C. STEVEN BLUE

I was there that night . . .  
the night when Democracy fell.  
I was there when hate trumped love  
and I don't know what will happen now.

I see a dark mist rising,  
a chilled wind is in the air.  
I don't know where we stand  
going forward,  
but I know that hope is still there.

So hate and oppression  
have won out over love and compassion  
for just this little while,  
but we will never accept that, Mr. Trump,  
no matter how much you sniffle and smile.

You are not my President,  
nor will you ever be.  
I will never approve of racism and hate  
. . . or misogyny.

I will never be in collusion  
with Russia, our greatest enemy.  
They would take us over in a heartbeat  
from sea to shining sea.

As long as there are freedom fighters,  
we will look you in the eye

and say . . .

“A dictator may control your destiny,  
but this will never be our way!”

Hatred, racism and misogyny  
have no place in our land.  
As long as America has been here  
the good-hearted have always taken a stand.

You may try to quell our voices  
and drive us to despair,  
but we always rise up again  
stronger,  
to make the rest of you aware

that freedom means responsibility,  
for those less fortunate than you.  
The rich and the greedy  
think they control it all,  
but this will never do.

So you must rise up  
for what you believe in.  
Never bow down to the gun  
that kills you and your children  
with poverty and sickness,  
tries to keep you in fear  
and on the run.

I have fought this battle



for over 50 years,  
but now it is time for the young  
to take up the struggle of equality.  
We have only just begun!

I hope they do a better job than we did  
to bring it out into the light,  
that bigotry and hatred will not be tolerated,  
for equality is our right.

I was there that night . . .  
the night when Democracy fell.  
I was there when hate trumped love  
and I don't know what will happen now.

But he is not my President,  
nor will he ever be.  
I will never approve of racism and hate  
. . . or misogyny.

\*written the day after the election (11/09/2016)

“WHAT ABOUT YOU IS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION?” |  
ACE BOGGESS

[question asked by Marged Dudek]

I, the Derivative Man;

I, the ten thousand grains of salt in a vessel—

I've unmade & remade myself from original clay  
hardened around thumbprints.

My teachers taught me mathematics, &

I've learned I'm fractions & remainders.

Family showed me places to hide in shadowy alcoves.

Friends saw me fishing, conversing, &

came to stand beside me while I mumbled to the sea.

I've walked alone in the wilderness,

brushing dust from shoulders,

plucking shards of glass from my hair.

# Exclusive Poetry from the Incarcerated Youth Participating in the Free Minds Book Club

Free Minds uses books, creative writing, and peer support to awaken DC youth incarcerated as adults to their own potential. Through creative expression, job readiness training, and violence prevention outreach, these young poets achieve their education and career goals, and become powerful voices for change in the community.

In DC, children as young as 16 can be sentenced as adults for felony crimes and incarcerated in the DC jail. Typically from the city's poorest, most violent neighborhoods, these kids see criminal activity as their only recourse. Reaching more than 350 young people each year, Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop uses books and creative writing to empower incarcerated youth to transform their lives. Teens attend twice-weekly book club sessions (most report that they have never before read an entire book) and when they move on to federal prison at age 18 – mostly far from home – Free Minds sends cards, newsletters, books, and feedback on their poetry. The re-entry program offers apprenticeships, GED prep, and job skills training to support young men and help them stay on track. The recidivism rate for members is only 24% – one third the national rate for juveniles sentenced as adults. Your support helps these young people turn their lives around, creating a better world ... for all of us. (<https://goo.gl/GAmlfD> )

## BURIED ALIVE | WILLIE (THA SENSATIONAL POET)

There are times when I ask myself if I've been buried alive  
In a body to which I am not connected  
Because it is subjected to a shape that can be reflected  
So reckless

I must have been to fall so low with all I know  
And all my drive  
I've been buried alive to revive a species that died  
Their vibe

Is offensive and disgusting, but their beauty keeps angels lusting  
For their chance to dive and get buried alive  
I tried

To dig my way out of the body that covers me  
The skin that smothers me  
How can lovers be

In love with self, if senses of five keeps everyone buried alive  
You strive  
But the struggle to inhale is like being in hell  
You yell  
But there is no ear near you to hear you

So no help will arrive  
Leaving you buried alive  
To survive alone and see just how strong  
You really are

## POLICE TERRORISM | JOSEPH

Installing fear and terror in the minds and hearts  
Of mothers and little children  
Fearing one day they'll get the call  
That their son or father has become a murder victim  
It's a shame, who knows if this will stop  
Being young and black in Amerikkka  
My thoughts are, "Will I get slain by a cop?"  
Police brutality  
Has evolved into mass police terrorism  
This is the harsh reality  
Look at the times in which we're living  
Police getting away with murder  
Never having to see a day in prison  
It's everywhere for the world to see  
Via the Internet and television  
So many hearts and homes are broken  
With the terror of breaking news  
Police abusing their authority  
How many lives must we lose???  
For several generations  
Countless lives have been taken by the hands of the police  
Police terrorism will cease  
Once love overcomes hate  
And then maybe we'll find peace  
Until then, it's Just Us  
Looking and fighting for Justice.....

## MAKES ME STRONGER | LINDA

The cuts and scars each tell a story  
Sometimes the stories are too hard to listen to  
Sometimes the stories make us stronger in all types of ways  
What doesn't kill me will only make me stronger  
The scars that run deep is called my lifeline  
Does it make me weak to be able to not remember?  
The fights, rape, the knife fights...and so on?  
In the end it all made me stronger



## PERCEIVE | RAFAEL

I am one who has been judged unfit to live in society  
Locked away to serve so-called justice to so-called crimes.  
They say I am unfit yet I twine my ink with tears forming every line  
It truly saddens me to see the country in such division  
Hatred and violence, can anyone see - does anyone share a broader vision?  
We are spiraling down a rabbit hole that leads to naught but destruction.  
Can anyone realize what all this hate leads to - does anyone see the repercussions?  
It's like a cancer greedily eating away at this country  
Home by home, community by community, city by city, state by state  
We are being consumed by this hate - and it saddens me.  
It brings tears to my eyes to watch kids at school chant racist remarks  
Is this where we are going back to - is this when the war will once again start?  
A war that has consumed so much blood, sweat, and tears  
A war that left so many in their homes after dark - cowering from their fears  
Is this where we are going? If so it saddens me - me who has been labeled unfit  
for society  
Me who see the beauty of life and country - helplessly watching this smog of hate  
smother us causing the world so much anxiety.  
It saddens me and I weep - weep at the blind hate, racism, and violence that plague  
this country like a medical patient  
It saddens me so I weep - weep at the crumbling of a beautiful nation

## LIFE | CARLOS

Life is precious

Life is sweet

Sometimes we get ourselves in too deep

Knowledge is power

Power is knowledge

I never got a chance to go to college

Tryna' stay positive and live the right way

I never got a chance to say what I had to say

Thinking 'bout the good times I then had

Missing my family makes me sad

When I feel like I failed them, it makes me mad

Allah gave me a second chance, so it makes me glad

Time is running

Clock is ticking

I think my anger needs some fixing

Sometimes people feel sad and feel pain

Life's got obstacles

We all walk through the rain

Gotta' keep pushing and stay strong

One day am I gonna' get a chance to make it home?

## REBORN | DEMITRICH

I've walked down many roads  
But this one has to be the longest  
The mellow cool breeze and the beautiful sky  
With the peaceful sound of birds chirping is the calmest  
Feeling at an all-time high  
Relaxed and relieved of stress  
Now that I'm renewed and clear  
I can truly say I'm blessed  
Now I feel bold and confident  
Because I overcame my fears  
I used to feel expectant and challenged  
Because of the pressure of my peers  
I no longer feel like that lost little boy  
I was scared and so alone  
Now I am a man  
Brave and anxious to right my wrongs  
The road used to be a million miles long  
Now it's a joyful walk  
On my short journey home  
I hated myself for a long time  
Feeling bitter and scorn  
Now I'm open-hearted  
And my insides are cozy and warm  
I love feeling empowered and satisfied  
Now that I'm reborn

# A LETTER TO MYSELF | SAMUEL

Dear Sam,

Get it right  
Time is ticking away quickly  
Stage IV  
5 cm. x 7 cm.

Get it right  
Spend as much time with her as possible  
Don't explode  
Make allowances

Get it right  
Get out of here ASAP  
Kick the habit  
Don't come back

Get it right  
Make the time count  
Love her like never before  
Hold on tight

Get it Right!

As always,  
Sam

*(The measurements refer to the size of a tumor)*

## THOUGHTS IN THE NIGHT | DA'VON

Soon...I'll be 30 years old  
None of my songs  
Will ever have been sung  
That lifetime journey  
Will never have begun  
I guess nothing will be left behind  
4 daughter or son  
Dear God, I'm not liking this life  
Can I have another 1?  
None of my poems  
Will ever be recited  
It's too much darkness  
4-1-2 just fight it  
At times, I get scared too  
And it's hard 4 me 2 hide it  
None of my letters  
Will ever have been read  
And if they were  
Immediately, soon after  
It was all forgotten  
What was just said  
Thoughts in the night  
Rollin' in my head  
Listening 2 white noise  
While laying in my bed  
2 quote Edgar Winter  
I'm just repeating  
What was said,  
"You know I wonder  
If they'll laugh...  
When I am dead."

## CHANGING THOUGHTS | DANIEL

As I sit here tired, alone, but peaceful in my cage  
It gives me time to reflect and to let go of the rage.  
I see so many guys, different races, different colors,  
Makes you wonder why we all messed up,  
leaving behind our children, lovers and mothers.  
What were we thinking while committing our crimes?  
Look, it's left me here...trying to write you this rhyme.  
I'm so sorry I left you, so scared and alone,  
I'm so sorry I left you in a fatherless home.  
I sit here and reflect in all the things that I did,  
And how I, not anyone else, cause me a 25 year bid..  
So I give you the promise of a much better man,  
'Cause in 12 more years I'll be armed with a real plan.  
I'll always be there for you in a time of need,  
I'm starting now to plant the positive seeds.  
Seeds that will flourish into a beautiful flower,  
Giving me the strength and knowledge to help empower.  
Just because I made mistakes, and lost my way,  
Doesn't mean because you're my daughters, you're destined the same way.  
So keep your heads high, be proud, and strong...  
Daddy will be home; it seems like forever, but it's really not that long.

## INWARDS | ANTWON

Staring into a mirror  
I see a man that's spirit is far from dead  
A man that refuses to allow his situation  
To put more wrinkles on his soul than his forehead  
And as he goes through one helluva dilemma  
He tries to keep his heart from turning cold like the month  
Of December  
And it's so hard  
So hard, he says  
Being around men who are physically active  
But mentally dead  
Lost inside a time  
Because of doing time  
Possessing infinite wisdom  
But choosing to think with hoodlum minds  
Can't even phantom the thought of tomorrow's  
Pulling down their own people like crabs in a borrow  
Won't listen but quick to talk  
Type of brother that cries in the dark  
Yeah, it's hard being me  
I can't give up  
Even though, freedom is looking more n more out of my reach  
Pain is real  
Being away from my family is real  
God himself would have to cut open my chest  
In order for the world to see how I feel  
Cuz, fighting my demons is a never-ending battle  
Youth centers  
Juvenile Blocks  
My life has never been settled  
And every time I think it's over and done  
Something always happens to remind me that the fight has only begun...



## THE HEART OF THE STRUGGLE | MARCUS

How can you understand the heart of the struggle,  
if you never been in poverty?

Struggling to make ends meet so you can pay the bills and put food on the table.  
Working at dead end jobs that don't care if you making it through or homeless

We pray every day hoping 4 better days then this hell hole we live in.

We keeping hope alive 4 the new generation that is coming.

So, we keep pushing 4 goodness and righteous deeds 4 ourselves and the commu-  
nity.

So, don't keep your head down for the status they gave you.

Until that day of success come,

Keep on Marching.

## SOMETIMES I CRY | DELONTE

I told a million lies now it's time to tell a single truth  
Sometimes I cry!  
It's hard dealing with my pride not knowing whether to fight or flee  
Sometimes I cry  
Hard to maintain this image of a tough guy  
When deep down inside I am terrified!  
If I ever told you I wasn't scared I lied  
Struggling to make it back to society and my family  
I cry  
I cry for my son who I barely see  
Due to these mountains  
And me and his mom's beef  
I cry for my siblings who never knew their older brother  
Because he stayed in the streets  
I cry for my grandma who is now deceased  
I cry for my life, half of which they took for me  
I cry for my anger and rage the only emotions I can show in this place  
I cry for how we treat each other inside these walls  
I cry for the lack of unity we have most of all!  
When will it end I want to know  
Till then all I can do is let these tears flow...





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