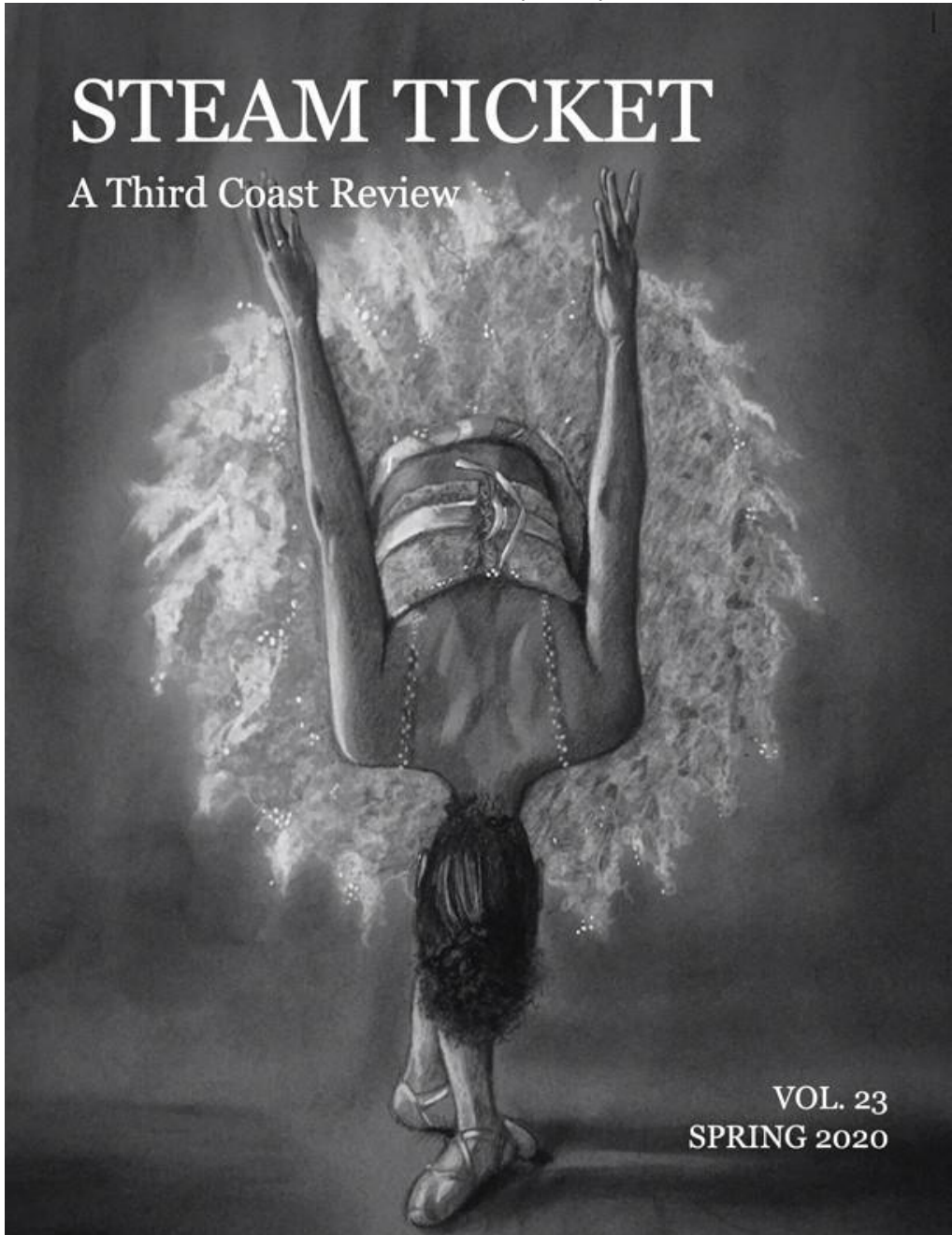


Volume 23 (2020)

STEAM TICKET

A Third Coast Review



VOL. 23
SPRING 2020

Featured Selections:

Poetry:

- 'uncoupled' – Peter Engen
- 'zero' – Peter Engen
- 'Sunshower' – Alaina Steffes
- 'Hibernation Season' – Alaina Steffes
- 'Night Janitor' – William Stobb

Fiction:

- 'REO' – Emily Rux
- 'Chrysalis' – Mackie Schwertfeger
- 'Hot Lunch' – Nick Yokanovich

Nonfiction:

- 'Real Surreal' – William Stobb

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uncoupled

Peter Engen

it wasn't supposed to end like this
but I buried us both in the water
after the fever broke
I pushed our feet into the river
and bent at the waist while
cradling the lifeless parts of us into the current
from the shore
she and I sank to the bottom like pig iron
and slid over the drowned logs and catfish bones
all the way to the delta mud
I imagine a piece of me there still
drifting even further out
I sat a while in the warm sand
at the edge of its wet sinewed tail
and didn't say goodbye
I just sat and felt it go
because my chrysalis heart
had slowly unraveled itself
into an august dragonfly
and I could feel the shimmer of its wings
beating in both my hands
begging me to rise

zero

Peter Engen

zero degrees and the stubborn arm on
the thermometer splits another morning in two
wedged between the horizon of a bruised dawn
and a bleeding sunrise

the skyline suffers its skin to the wind
every moment a mountain now with
summits as flat as fallow wheat-
fields in the crow-eyed obsidian stare

I reach into winter with an
arcane silence from the clove scented
cave of my mouth where white clouds of breath rise
through a henge of stone teeth out of
the hollow space that holds
a rumored human heart

Sunshower

Alaina Steffes

in your eyes
I see the moon
and sparkling
complex
constellations

thoughts
entwined in
darkness,
connected to
seemingly tiny
bursts of light

and just
as space is
void
of oxygen,
I cannot
breathe
when my gaze
meets yours.

I want to explore,
float among
your presence...

but the stars
in your eyes
are only visible
at night

and I crave
to see them
dance
amid the
sunshower

Hibernation Season

Alaina Steffes

If you knew the places
I've been,
would you join me?
Through the woods,
on fallen leaves,
and falling too?
With crisp autumn air,
painting our lungs
the colors of a new season,
new beginning.
But to start anew,
we must let the old days
crumble in the frigid air;
we must say goodbye
in order to welcome
a fresh hello.

Night Janitor

William Stobb

The vacuum goes on in the hallway.
The night janitor's clocked in.
You've passed his closet office
door ajar so you've seen his pictures
pinned to the board of a teenage girl
with a trophy fish, four
marines hanging out of a hum-vee,
a snow-capped peak, a Siberian husky.
You've thought of stepping inside
and looking through the desk to maybe
find a flask, or a magazine
or a more intense secret.
Someday you're going to do it.
You know you're not a good person.
He hates collecting left-behind
coats and mugs and water bottles.
You know because you've seen him mutter
and shake his head—he must hate
the carelessness he's paid to serve.
You know he worked at the brewery
because it's the only thing he ever said to you.
"I worked at the brewery
before," and you said, "wow,"
if you remember correctly.
You know how you can be.
Creating mean distances might
spare you the pain of real human connection
but you're lingering late
in the administrative building
because you can't face a person who won't
touch you anymore.

It has a loose
belt, the vacuum, and the squeal echoes
long after you leave
long into your night
like the bleating of suffering animals.

The bottom of Ivy's dress caught the breeze as she and Dom walked by the lake at sunset. Sophomore year of college was beginning in two weeks, so Dom asked her if she wanted to hang out one last time before the chaos of school began. She had a chocolate ice cream cone in her left hand and a purse hanging off her right shoulder. She was wearing spandex underneath her dress, so nothing would've happened had the wind tried something with her. She couldn't help but think of Marilyn Monroe in that moment. But her dress wasn't white, and her hair was nowhere near the stark blond Marilyn wore. It hung down in braids that reached just below her shoulder blades. Marilyn had something to flaunt, and the prospect of her dress flying up was enticing for most. Ivy was nothing to ogle at. Her face had a fraction of the amount of makeup compared to Marilyn's, and her chest was Nebraska in comparison: flat.

Dom's rainbow sherbet was melting in the heat; streaks of green and pink raced down his hand. His skin was just as golden as the sun reflecting off the gentle waves. Ivy preferred walking closer to the lake because she could see his face in the sunlight. His freckles emerged in the golden light; his hair glistened a golden-brown no painter could create. And Ivy liked it. She didn't have to squint to make up for the backlight of the sun. But she could also turn her head see the water and the ripples clearly without a six-foot-one, way-too-sweaty-for-how-long-we've-been-walking human in her way. She got the best of both worlds by walking next to the lake.

But do I? She thought.

Yes, the lake was beautiful. It reflected the light and cast silhouettes and bullshit like that. But it also smelled like fish and goose poop. And it's not like they were on a beach running with sandals in their hands. She wasn't holding onto her floppy hat; he wasn't trying to push her into the water as a playful joke, and she wasn't pulling him in with her so they could both get wet from the waves crawling up the sand. No. They were coated in a sticky layer of dried sweat and mosquitos were starting to emerge. Yes, she was walking next to a guy she enjoyed being around for the most part, but it wasn't like that between them. Ivy didn't picture her life with a guy like Dom, so she'd told him no when he asked her out on a date.

She didn't tell him no right away, though. Dom stood in the hallway outside Ivy's dorm room for ten minutes trying to convince her to sit outside with him while he shot a basketball. They had only been at school for a week and a half and didn't have much homework. She didn't know him *that* well. But she was tired of sitting on her futon watching Netflix while her roommate came and went with her friends. So she followed him outside and watched him dribble and shoot on the court just outside their dorm. She asked him questions like *where are you from?* and *what's your major again?* He told her about the time he burned his elbow while trying to fry an egg when he was home alone for the first time and about how he failed his driver's test three times and barely passed on the fourth. He talked a lot. Ivy sat on a picnic table as he made and missed his shots. She eventually joined him on the court, though she wasn't any good. He tried teaching her proper form and everything, but she didn't care to learn. She embraced that she was bad by pretending to be good, smack-talked like a pro. He didn't let her off easy. She jokingly dribbled around him, but he stole the ball and attempted to dunk on her at every opportunity. He asked questions like *what are your hobbies* and *what do you want to be when you grow up?*

She told him she didn't have any and that she'd always wanted to study whales. He stopped dribbling and looked at her.

"Whales?"

She shrugged; told him she'd always been fascinated with underwater life. "There's a whole other world down there, just below the water's surface."

He smiled and told her that he'd always wanted to go sailing, and that if she ever needed a sailing buddy, he could be her guy. He turned back and shot the ball and missed. She nervously laughed, told him she'd consider it. She never thought about having a sailing buddy. In her mind it was just her, the whales, and the open ocean.

They talked until the sun started going down. They decided to call it quits just as Ivy was getting lucky and made some shots. He walked her to her room on the second floor and stopped at her door. He was the first person at college she told anything more than her name and major. And she liked that... *maybe*. He made the new place feel less like a prison and more like a home, even if it was only for a couple of hours. They leaned against opposite sides of the door jamb and talked about 80s music and the crap food at the dining hall for another half an hour. He looked down at his feet just as the conversation came to a lull. Ivy mirrored him.

"Thanks for hanging with me, Ivy." His words had some weight to them. It felt like he was grasping for more to say, but silence was all he could find. It made Ivy's heart drop an inch.

"Of course," she paused. "Thanks for asking me."

He kept searching, but all he could settle on was, "I'll see you later, then." It felt like his words didn't quite say what he wanted. But maybe Ivy read the whole situation wrong. Maybe Dom was just bad at goodbyes.

"Maybe you will." She smiled at her own maybe-joke and turned into her room. He walked away with his head hanging low. She didn't notice how fast her heart was beating until she was safely behind her closed door. Her thoughts jumped back and forth. *He likes you. No, he doesn't. He wanted to say something. You're reading too far into this. He's your sailing buddy now. No, he's not. You don't even have a boat.* She flopped onto her futon and covered her face with a pillow. Ten minutes later, a yellow light flashed from her phone. It was a Snapchat from Dom asking if she wanted to go on a date. Flutters in her heart told her to say yes, but flutters in her gut told her to say no. She said sure. But after a week and a half of avoiding him in person and telling him "I'm busy, maybe we can go next week," they decided to call it off and remain friends.

And here they were a year later, walking side by side, with ice cream on their tongues and silence between their steps. Just friends. She thought about jumping into the lake. She could walk into the weeds toward the lake, pretending she wanted to get a closer look at a duck or something and whoops, flip right on over and into the water, chocolate ice cream and all. She never learned how to properly swim, but she could hold her breath underwater for 2 minutes and 43 seconds, according to the last time she counted. Her family owned a cabin while she was growing up, and she spent every summer afternoon treading water by herself among the algae. She decided one day to work on holding her breath underwater. She challenged herself with a minute and gradually lengthened the time. The longer she went, the longer she escaped the world of air. She liked the

world of water. It wasn't completely quiet, but the sloshing in her ears at least muffled her parents' screams from the house.

But jumping into the lake meant he'd freak out and take off his shirt and shoes and dive in after her because he liked being the hero of every situation. And he'd grab her by the waist and slop her back onto the path. Then he'd definitely do mouth to mouth, which was basically like kissing her. And he'd probably think of it that way too. That's not what she wanted. *Right?*

"The sunset's really nice tonight." His voice and the slurp of his sherbet brought her back to the path with him.

"Yeah, so's your ice cream." She smiled and gave him her napkin. They both giggled.

"I'm a child, I know." They both smiled. He was probably the more mature one. He was the one who had a job, even if it was just at the front desk of their dorm. He was the one who made sure they stayed on track while studying no matter how hard she tried to procrastinate. He was the one who talked her off the edge when she found herself in tears eating ice cream after she failed her stats exam. Even if she tried to go into the weeds near the lake, he'd probably tell her to be careful not to slip. He'd probably try to grab her hand or something too. His hands were probably clammy.

Dom had almost drowned the summer before their freshman year, a story Ivy learned the first night she met him. It was 8 PM on the first night on campus. Ivy sat on her floor sniffing and sorting through photos to hang near her desk. Her roommate had already left to hang out with her high school friends, so she was alone. She played music from her laptop and paced around her new room. A knock on her door made her jump. She glanced to her open door to see a guy leaning against the jamb wearing a basketball jersey, khaki shorts, no shoes.

"I thought I heard REO." He had droopy eyes and his words melted together. When he smiled, he revealed straight teeth held in place by a retainer. He was a bit drunk. She could tell. Her brother talked like that whenever he decided he'd had enough of his life and took to their parents' liquor cabinet or his beer and vodka stash under his bed. She was shocked this stranger in her doorway knew the song, but he told her he *fucking loved* 80s music. She recoiled a bit at the f-bomb, but she told herself this is what college was: strangers doing strange things in close quarters. She told him her name was Ivy; he said his was Dominic, but people called him Dom. She was a bio major; he was math. Ivy told him that was cool, and they sat there in silence. Dom broke the awkward tension by casually mentioning he almost drowned that summer. Her eyes grew wide, and he proceeded to tell her about how his brother pushed him in the river near his house back home and his foot got caught on something. "I was underwater for like a minute and a half and I was coughing up water when my brother finally jumped in and saved me. I'm so *fucking* glad I didn't need mouth to mouth from his stupid ass."

She laughed because a stranger was telling her this story as if they'd been friends since kindergarten and because she knew she could've lasted way longer without the threat of drowning. She let him continue telling drunk stories until his friends grabbed him to go out.

Dom looked at her. The sky was turning pink, and his skin was softening. The look in his eyes was softening too. The lake was becoming stiller and softer as people were docking their boats for the evening. He finished his cone, wiped his mouth with the crumpled napkin, and looked down

at his feet. He was grasping for something again. In the silence between them, he was searching for the words he couldn't say in person almost a year ago. Her heart started sinking into her stomach.

He sucked air in through his nose, "Hey Ivy, can I ask you..."

"Oh look, a duck." If she was going to jump, she had to do it now. She shoved her cone stub and purse in Dom's hands and made her way off the path into the weeds. She tried to pretend she was just casually looking for a duck—like she wasn't running away from him or his question—but her desire to get away took over. She disappeared into the weeds before Dom could grab her hand or stop her and say something she didn't want to hear.

She soon was at the lake's edge. The small ripples lapped onto the slimy rocks she stood on. She thought back to the cabin and how she'd sit on the edge of the dock, breathing. *Inhale. Exhale.* She'd close her eyes and let the sun warm her eyelids. *Inhale. Exhale.* She'd take deeper and deeper breaths, pushing air out and sucking more in every time. And when she'd hit the point where her brain felt like it was coated in a thin layer of cold air, she'd put her hands on her stomach and physically push all her air out through pursed lips until her body shuddered. Then she'd suck in all the air she could and slide herself into the water. She'd plug her nose the moment before her head submerged, and she'd let herself find suspension in the water. Then she'd give herself a moment to listen. The water pulsed around her. The pressure in her ears modulated the laps of the water and muffled everything going on above her. She'd hook her foot on the bottom of the dock and let her mind drift as the natural rhythm of the water pushed her to and fro. She pretended humpbacks and bowheads and blues and belugas swam circles around her. She pictured herself at thirty-four, riding in a boat with binoculars and waiting for whales to breach and say hello. She wondered what kissing someone felt like, what holding hands with a boy that liked her felt like. She imagined what it would be like to hear the words *I love you* from her father, what it'd feel like to nap on the couch nuzzled into his shoulder. She imagined what it'd be like having her brother next to her, holding his sober breath and her hand—imagining his ideal world alongside hers. The world of water gave her space to live an ideal life. And then the burn in her lungs would draw her out of her mind and up toward the world of air. She'd break through the surface with a gasp of air she wished she didn't need.

She turned over her shoulder to look for Dom. The weeds blocked her view, but she could hear rustling and his voice asking her *how in the fuck* she saw a duck that far into the weeds. She breathed deeper and deeper, waiting for her brain to get cold. She pushed on her stomach, took a deep breath, then slid herself off the slimy rock and into the lake water—making a tiny splash so Dom would hear. She didn't get the deep breath she wanted, but it would have to do. She used her arms to counter the water pressure and to lower herself down until she found a jutting rock she could hook her foot on. She listened to the water around her. The gentle sloshing and pulsing of the water calmed the pounding of her heart. Before she let her mind get away from her, she heard a muffled "IVES!" come from above.

Ives.

He was the only person who called her that. He asked her if he could at the front desk during one of his afternoon shifts. She had already been sitting on the wooden chair across the desk from him for an hour, and they were giggling—probably about some meme he showed her. He looked at her so sincerely and asked, "Can I call you Ives?" with his well-aligned smile. She didn't

know how she felt about it. She'd never had a nickname before, not even from her family. "Well, then it's done." He pulled out his phone and changed her name on Snapchat, "Your name is Ives, now." Her heart fluttered, but the gut flutters quickly took control. A nickname was a kind of attention Ivy wasn't used to.

Every Wednesday, without fail, Ivy would pick up a ham and cheese sandwich for Dom and a peanut butter and strawberry jelly sandwich for herself. She'd bring it to him at the desk, and they'd eat lunch together. Dom always made sure some popular 80s band underscored their conversations.

Ivy found herself in that chair at that desk while submerged in the lake. The gentle synthesized piano riff of an REO song softly played in her mind.

I can't fight this feeling any longer.

Dom sat across from her, smiling his retainer smile and creasing the splatter of freckles across his nose and cheeks. She was at the desk where Dom almost started a fire because he forgot he was cooking a pizza. She was at the desk where they discovered they had a mutual love for dill pickles and a mutual hate for grape jelly. She was sitting at the desk where he opened up about his grandpa's death, how he died in a car crash when he was driving Dom to a basketball game when he was eleven. She was sitting at the desk where Dom told her he was thinking of joining the army, or maybe the seminary, or that maybe he would drop out of school for a semester and backpack across Europe, and that she should totally come with him, and they could even make a stop to see some whales before they came back. She was sitting at the desk where he'd show her funny memes and videos to make her feel better after a rough chemistry test or a weekend at home when her parents weren't talking to each other or her brother called and asked if he could crash on her couch for the week, completely forgetting that she lived in a dorm that prohibited alcohol. It was at that desk that Dom told her he liked her eyes because they were either blue or green, depending on what she wore that day, and any guy would be so damn lucky to have her as a girlfriend because she was one of the most caring girls he'd ever met, and whatever path she chose to go down in life, she'd find success because she was so full of passion; that she was beautiful; that he loved her as a friend.

Just a friend.

What started out as friendship has grown stronger.

She told herself that she didn't actually have any feelings for him. She told herself that the heart flutters she got when he called her Ives or when he laughed at videos of babies falling weren't anything compared to the gut flutters she got when he talked over her stories or when he would go out drinking with his buddies. She told herself she didn't need a hero in her life, and a hero is all Dom cared to be for her. *Right?* She told herself that any ounce of care or friendly affection he showed was only because he was buying time to ask her out again. He just wanted to save someone. *But did he?* It didn't feel like it when all he did was tell his stories. *But do you even tell him yours?* It didn't feel like it when he sometimes got too drunk and knocked at 2 AM, so he could cuddle on the futon with her and try not to puke. *But you let him do it.*

I only wish I had the strength to let it show.

She never talked about her family with him. She never told him that her dad worked so much she would go days without seeing him. She never told him that her mom used to play REO or

Styx or Foreigner or Journey on cassette tapes in the car when she drove her to and from school, and how that was the only time she really saw her mom smile. She never talked about her brother, and how he was eight years older than her. She never told him that her brother had to get his stomach pumped when he was seventeen and she was nine, and that's why she swore off drinking and why she didn't want to celebrate Dom's 19th birthday with him and his buddies. She never talked about the days at the cabin where her parents would be fighting and her brother would be lying on the sand in a drunken stupor, and how she'd submerge herself underwater for 2 minutes and 43 seconds over and over and over again so she could live in a world where dads say *I love you* and brothers hold your hand. He didn't know her the way she needed him to. And she didn't let him.

I tell myself that I can't hold out forever

Her lungs started to burn. She didn't move.

I said there is no reason for my fear.

Her body was fighting against her mind. She needed to leave, but she hunkered down.

'Cause I feel so secure when we're together

She felt someone grab her waist and tug at her foot. Her body shuddered. Whoever loosened her foot started pulling her through the water toward the surface. As they broke through, her body convulsed and gasped for oxygen. The grip around her waist tightened. Her eyes were still closed as the water ran over her face and her ears readjusted to the pressure difference. Before she could say or think or do anything, she was dragged out of the water and carried through the weeds and set her down on the path. She leaned over her body, coughing and crying. The ringing in her ears soon subsided.

“Holy fuck Ives. Are you okay? What the fuck happened? Are you hurt?” Dom was squatted in front of her: shirtless, shoeless, water beading across his hairless chest. He tried to find her eyes, but she avoided his gaze. The sky was still pink, but everything looked a little fuzzier. Water dripped from every inch of their bodies and pooled on the pavement around them. Her dress gathered at her stomach, making her spandex visible. She didn't care. She slowly started to regain a natural rhythm of breath, but she was still crying.

“Ivy. Ives. What happened? Talk to me, are you okay? Ivy...”

I can't fight this feeling anymore.

They sat there for a while. His questions eventually turned to “It's going to be okay. You're going to be okay. Just breathe...” He reached his hand out and placed it on her rounded spine. *Inhale. Exhale.* She kept breathing—still crying, still quiet, REO Speedwagon still playing in her head.

I sat alone on the bench beneath the illuminated Platform 19 sign. At this hour the only other echoing footsteps in Union Station belonged to security, who had already told me multiple times that there was no train scheduled to arrive at eleven p.m. I checked my watch again: 10:57. I reread the invitation in my hand.

It had been printed on pure gold stationary. I found it on the bottom of the usual stack of circulations that poked their way through the slit in my door every afternoon around four thirty. The modest envelope had shown no sign of fantastic qualities, and it had been addressed appropriately:

To Ms. Elaine Evans
1501 N Park Ave
Chicago, IL 60610

However, upon peeling back the purple wax seal all sense of modesty was disregarded. Sparks flew up in every direction. Not flames, but delicate twinkles that shimmered and burned in the air around me. Astounded, I cautiously removed the single card inside. The gold stationary showed a blurry reflection of my red hair and lingering sparks behind its purple ink that read:

*Ms. Elaine Evans,
You have been exuberantly requested to grace
Sir Isaak von Etteldwyer of Northern Jupiter
With your presence at his Celebration of Birth
on April 15th
Please meet accompanying guests at
23:00 at Union Station, Platform 19
on April 14th*

*This invitation will serve as your ticket.
Baggage and RSVP are unnecessary.*

I laughed upon reading the invitation. I did not know a Sir Isaak von Etteldwyer of Northern Jupiter (and I was fairly certain no place existed in the United States, or anywhere else on Earth for that matter). I interpreted the invitation as some sort of joke and threw it in the garbage bin.

It took three full days for the invitation to resurface. And I mean that quite literally. It was the afternoon of April 13th when I arrived home from work and found the very same invitation propped up on my kitchen table. The gold stationary was blinding in the sunset. Confused and at this point a bit frightened, I hastily threw the invitation away again and emptied my waste basket into the alley dumpster. The next morning, I awoke to the invitation again propped up on my kitchen table. It was at that point I decided not to ignore it.

10:58. If a train would be arriving, I would hear it by now. The wind always arrives first.

10:59. From behind, I heard two security guards laughing, unaware that their mocking had a sensitive audience. I stood. *This is stupid*, I thought. *Absolutely ridiculous*. I looked down at the invitation and threw it out of sight, turning toward the gated entrance and laughing security guards.

"I'm afraid you're going to need this, Miss Evans." A firm hand grasped my shoulder. Shocked by the sudden voice, I turned quickly and lost my balance. The same firm hand caught me under the arm. "Sir Isaak has a fairly strict invitation policy."

To this day, I am fairly certain that what I saw was some sort of dream. In front of me, there on Platform 19, stood a brilliantly tall man. I say *man*, but he towered above me at nearly eight feet and fashioned a velvet emerald suit that clashed horrifically with his pale violet skin. He had long pointed ears. One of which fell low, nearly tickling the bottom of his dark brown goatee, and the other stuck straight up, twitching and turning with every sound. These ears, along with his nose, lip, and eyebrows, were all pierced with various gold and silver hoops. He smiled widely at me, offering the gold invitation back into my hands. I took it, unable to speak.

"There you go, my dear. Now, shall we?" He bowed low, crossing his impossibly thin legs into some sort of a curtsy and holding an arm outstretched. Behind the giant violet man was a matte black passenger train. Though it looked modern, steam of vibrant gold billowed out from underneath each cart. It filled the station with the unmistakable smell of lavender and marijuana. I inhaled deeply.

"Am I allowed to say no?" I asked, not taking a step back. I couldn't hear the security guards laughing anymore.

"My dear, why would you want to?" Somehow the man smiled more widely. "Take my hand." And with that, as if I were under hypnosis, he led me across the platform to the door of the first cart.

Inside was a gaudy gold spiral staircase, carpeted in red velvet. It led upwards toward a second level. I climbed, the violet man following close behind. The top landing opened to a grand lounge. Dark velvet chairs and couches were spread throughout, crystal chandeliers hung every few meters across the ceiling, the carpet was decorated with vibrant depictions of the cosmos, and the air was dusted with a sparkling purple haze. But the grandness or luxury was not what had me in awe as I reached the top of the stairs. It was the individuals crowding the lounge. To my right stood a woman dressed in a bright red ball gown. Her hair was dreadlocked and cascaded down her back in a hundred shades of blue. When she turned, I saw she had no eyes. Clear glass orbs spun madly in her sockets, purple and white veins tucked neatly behind. She smiled and winked at me before dancing away, holding tight to a wine glass. To my left sat a black and white adolescent giraffe. She was desperately thin and wore no clothes (as I'm sure no company catered to the needs of large hooved mammals); she had, however, applied vibrant red lipstick and wore a matching wig. She spoke loudly to an impossibly old man sitting on the adjacent sofa. He was also completely nude, covered in blotchy freckles, and had a magenta beard that fell to the floor in a dusty heap. This repeated all around the lounge. A lion was playing jazz piano at the stage to my right, his mane combed back, tail poking out from a pair of purple suit pants. There was an octopus dressed in black tie serving cocktails at a bar positioned in the back of the room, and from there every creature

imaginable and unimaginable were dancing, laughing, smoking from long pipes, and drinking from sparkling crystal glasses. I suddenly felt very underdressed and of the wrong species.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” the violet man’s voice bellowed from behind me, “I am so honored to announce the arrival of Ms. Elaine Evans, our exclusive Human guest.” The entire lounge burst into applause. The chandeliers spun, giving off millions of twinkling diamonds that hung in the air, and the crowd of mismatched humans, aliens, and animals raised their glasses, smiling at me. I felt my cheeks burn, and I didn’t know whether to smile or cry. “Miss Evans,” the violet man whispered in my ear so no one else could hear, “I have to speak with the Conductor for a moment, then I’ll brief you on our journey. As a human I’m sure you’re very anxious.” He squeezed my shoulder affectionately and disappeared back down the staircase.

I’m sure I looked absolutely ridiculous standing there in my maroon corduroy overalls, green boots, bright blue glasses, and tangled red hair. I shifted on the balls of my feet, surveying the lounge once again. This time the food caught my eyes. A tall man with vibrant red skin (he looked to be the same species as the violet man who escorted me onto the train) was weaving through the crowd serving...yes, there was no mistaking it, brain. He leaned over, offering the silver tray to the woman with the glass eyes. She gasped in eagerness, taking a piece and smiling while she chewed. My stomach churned. Where the hell was I? The train lurched forward, and everyone steadied their glasses. The man serving refreshments had swapped his tray of brain for a tray of sparkling drinks. He made his way to me, smiling wide to reveal razor-sharp teeth covered with gold and silver caps. He leaned down and forward, holding the tray at my eye level.

“Champagne, Miss Evans?”

“Call me Elaine please,” I said before I could stop myself. “And yes, thank you.” I figured I could comprehend the situation more clearly with a little alcohol. Which turned out to be very true. But this was not normal champagne. I took a long sip and was overwhelmed by the taste of honeysuckle. It felt milky in my throat and as soon as I swallowed, I felt as though I was floating. I checked to be sure my feet were still on the floor.

“Elaine! Come join us!” It was the woman with the glass eyes. She waved me over to a velvet upholstered corner booth where she sat giggling with men who looked not of this world. Then again, she didn’t look of this world either. I sat, being sure to leave a foot or so between myself and the man sitting to the right of the glass eyed woman.

“My name is Xahni,” she said, reaching across the man to shake my hand. I took it, but instead of shaking it she brought it to her lips and kissed my knuckles. “I’ve never met a human.” She winked and sipped her honeysuckle drink. Never met a human?

“And what, I mean, I’m sorry if it’s rude to ask, but what are you?” Feeling impossibly stupid I took another sip of my drink while trying to maintain eye contact with Xahni.

“Oh, my Sun, it’s not rude at all! I forgot how little humans know about the universe. I’m sorry, this must be so strange for you.” Xahni grasped my hand again, squeezing it tightly. “I’m an Angel. A Venusette Angel.”

“Venusette Angel?” The honeysuckle drink was giving me the confidence to ask the necessary questions.

“Oh right, one planet mindset. I’m sorry. I’m an Angel from Venus.” She must have thought this was enough of an explanation because she quickly returned to her glass and turned to the men chattering around her. I tried not to stare, but these were the strangest men I’d ever seen. They had pale grey skin that showed deep red and purple veins just below the surface. Their eyes were completely black, the size of mason jar lids. Each one had different colored hair; the one sitting closest to me had a white mohawk that stood two feet in the air. He wore a long, torn t-shirt that ended just below his knotted knees. His fingers resembled those of a gecko.

“Do you like the Honeysuckle Milk?” The man to my right spoke in a smooth French accent. He smiled and pointed to my empty glass.

“Honeysuckle milk? Is that what this is? Wow. I’ve had honeysuckle before, but it never made me feel like this.”

“I should hope not. This is Honeysuckle Milk from the Eastern Jupierian fields. The soil is rich in ancient star fragments, pre-Solar War XIX. Which is what gives the milk its, ah,” he smiled flirtatiously, “other worldly sensations.” He placed a hand on my thigh. I stood quickly and clumsily, nearly falling backwards out of the booth. Xahni watched with concern as someone caught me from behind.

“Miss Evans, I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.” The violet man had returned, helping me steady myself. “There was a misunderstanding about the evening’s timeline. I hope Xahni hasn’t been overwhelming you with questions?” He winked toward the Angel.

“Rikki, I promised! It’s not every day you meet a live human. I can behave when I need to!” Xahni giggled and smiled at the violet man.

“If you’d follow me, Miss Evans. We don’t have much time to brief you before the evening’s events begin.” Rikki offered me his elbow. I took it, staying close to his side as we weaved through the crowd. The haze had gotten thicker since my arrival, and the carpet was now littered with diamonds. I snagged a second glass of Honeysuckle Milk just as Rikki escorted me out the back door of the lounge. Through the door was a second lounge, but this one was much smaller and completely empty. There were only two armchairs, both black velvet with gold trim. Between them was a round end table which supported two crystal glasses, a pitcher of what I’m assuming was more Honeysuckle Milk Champagne, and a platter of assorted brain cuts and colorful mushrooms. I sat across from Rikki and drank deeply from my glass.

“Eat, Miss Evans. You must be starving.” Rikki placed a red mushroom and a slice of brain on a napkin and handed it to me. Not wanting to be rude, I took it. The brain was chilled. I could feel the condensation on my palm. I didn’t want to ask what type of brain it was. I eyed the mushroom curiously. It smelled like red velvet cake. I took a bite off the stem. “I should warn you, humans tend to have a stronger reaction to hallucinogens than most other species. I wouldn’t eat that whole mushroom.” I gagged and swallowed hard.

“Hallucinogens? What type of mushrooms are these?” I put the napkin down on the table and took a big swing of Honeysuckle Milk, as if it would reverse the effects of what I just ate.

“Velvet Redds, from Sir Isaak’s hometown. They are a specialty and go excellently with the Honeysuckle Milk Champagne and chilled brain,” Rikki took a large slice of brain in his mouth and

chewed joyfully. I watched, horrified. But the effects of the Honeysuckle Milk and now the mushroom were quickly dulling all sense of concern.

“So, Miss Evans. I’m sure you have a lot of questions for me, but I’m afraid I won’t have enough time to answer all of them. Is there perhaps one question that is bothering you most?”

“If we are on a train, where are we going?” The question came out before I could think. There were way more important questions I should have asked. Rikki smiled and set his glass down on the table.

“Nowhere, my dear. Sir Isaak enjoys the illusion of travel. We have no physical destination.” He laughed under his breath and turned around in his chair to raise a dark window shade. I was again in awe. Beyond the window of the train was nothing but space. Millions and millions of stars shone in colors I had never seen before, hurricanes of multicolored gas could be seen in the distance, and large meteors rolled alongside the rail cart.

“Our destination is a spiritual one which we hope to arrive at once the celebration begins.” Rikki continued to speak as if space exploration via passenger train was completely normal. “Sir Isaak takes his birth celebrations very seriously, and as you are his Human guest, I am obligated to warn you that you too shall be honored.” He saw the confused expression on my face. “However, that is the most that I am allowed to divulge. You see, Sir Isaak also values the elements of illusion and surprise—” there were three sharp knocks on the private lounge doors and Rikki fell silent.

A very large sable rabbit opened the door and poked his head in. He smiled to me but spoke to Rikki. “I’m so sorry to interrupt, but Sir Isaak is ready.”

“Brilliant.” Isaak smiled brightly. “Thank you, Abraham.”

“It’s time, my dear. Deep breath, you’ll do just fine.” Rikki lead me back into the main lounge.

I stayed a few strides behind him as we entered. The lounge looked very different. The furniture had been rearranged to face the stage. The chandeliers had been turned low, bathing everything in a deep amber light. Diamonds still covered the floor. Mismatched silhouettes occupied each armchair, and on the stage stood a large ruby oak table. Every guest’s eyes were fixed on what rested on the table. Lying on the table was a five-foot-long, four foot wide, flesh chrysalis. Through the thin skin barrier, I could make out the pattern of monarch butterfly wings as large as umbrellas. And human feet. It was pulsating. Thick red veins ran from the top of the chrysalis to the base, curving through blemishes, bruises and scars. It wiggled slowly, methodically. I heard guests chewing on squeaky brains as they watched. The chandeliers around the stage slowly brightened, and from the shadows, the lion began to play a moody ballad.

“Sir Isaak is a very unique breed of Jupierian, Miss Evans.” Rikki leaned close to whisper in my ear. His voice was barely audible over the piano’s crescendo. “He goes through yearly birthing cycles. Each year, on the nine hundredth day, Sir Isaak begins chrysalis formation. And on day one thousand, he emerges, reborn.” He nodded toward the chrysalis, which was now twitching and writhing on top of the table. Everyone stopped chewing. The chandeliers began to spin. The lion leaned deeper into his melody. And then the chrysalis began to split. It was not the beauty and grace with which a butterfly was born. Amniotic fluid leaked through the thin gap forming along the side. It pooled around the chrysalis and dripped off the table. The crowd cheered. The blood came next,

bubbling out through the veins which had erupted under pressure. The lounge smelled strongly of female discharge and urine. The guests cheered louder yet. The chrysalis pulsed quicker, pumping more amniotic fluid, blood, and urine out across the surface of the table. Rikki stepped out from behind me into the light of the spinning chandeliers.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, Sir Isaak von Etteldwyer!” Rikki’s voice bellowed above the music and cheers. Out of the chrysalis stood a towering man. Covered in glistening fluid, he had his back turned to his audience. Dripping down his back lay a pair of giant monarch wings. He stood for a moment, perfectly still for dramatic effect. And as the lion struck his final note, Sir Isaak flashed his wings, nearly eight feet wide. He turned, displaying his naked body to the audience as they cheered louder. His skin was a pale shade of pear-green. He was hairless except for long white eyelashes that framed perfectly wide opal eyes. His arms rose in gratitude, and he smiled brilliantly for a few moments. The smell of the amniotic fluid was giving me a headache.

“Ha! Ha, ha! My wonderful guests! My precious children of the universe! Have you enjoyed yourself?” Sir Isaak’s voice was sweet and rich, like church bells. The crowd cheered in response. “I hope you’ve enjoyed the appetizers. Honeysuckle Milk and brain really do wonders for the nervous system.” The guests laughed. “But where is my main course? Where is my gift?” Sir Isaak searched the crowd hungrily. Rikki stepped forward.

“Sir Isaak, may I present your gift and main course, Miss Elaine Evans.”

The term “cafeteria worker” was new to Ramsey Elementary and had been implemented entirely in response to Sam’s arrival. A twenty-three-year-old male did not necessarily fit in with the seemingly tenured cafeteria staff, and therefore, the administration, in a reactive demonstration to combat stereotypical gender roles, replaced the term “lunch lady” with “cafeteria worker.” A rebranding only one person took issue with, due to the fact that “cafeteria worker” severely lacked the phonetic satisfaction of “lunch lady.”

Upon entering the cafeteria, and setting up the long tables with eighteen small red stools attached on each side, Sam was greeted to four enormous cardboard boxes pristinely stacked next to the kitchen entrance. He tilted his head back toward the ceiling—the styrofoam trays. These trays were yet another recent administrative change to reduce the “absurdly high” utility bill that came with washing the reusable plastic trays. This decision was warmly welcomed by Sam’s cafeteria cohorts and was as widely accepted as the revelation that using the power washer to hydraulically obliterate any remnants of crust clinging to the strategically-shaped indentations of the trays was the worst job in the kitchen. So now, once a week, an unknown delivery person dropped off four boxes, containing five sealed plastic bags, each of which encapsulates fifty styrofoam trays for a total of a thousand trays to use throughout the week. An absurdly generous amount considering the enrollment size of Ramsey Elementary was 612, down from 633 the year prior; not to mention the estimated 200-250 daily students who brought lunch from home. Sam carried the boxes into the kitchen, set two boxes near the front of the serving line, and put the other half in the storage room, where the rest of the inevitable surplus of trays would eventually go as well.

Sam had not expected to end up at Ramsey Elementary after finishing his undergraduate degree at the University of Idaho, but he was glad he did. After barely making it through his senior year, he thought it would be best to take a year off before grad school. He found an odd catharsis in the innocence of an elementary school lunch period. It was a brief time that seemed to suspend the realities of the unrelentingly exhausting real world—which Sam felt were becoming increasingly impossible to evade. He pulled boxes of mozzarella sticks from the walk-in freezer and brought them to Sue at the warming station, who broke them apart, and put the sticks on the stainless-steel warming trays to have ready for the 10:50 kindergarten lunch. The familiar duo worked in a mechanized flow of operation, silently preparing a school favorite.

“I got it from here, Sam,” Maggie interrupted, gently putting her hand on his shoulder. “Kindergarten classes are gonna be here in about five if you want to prep the checkout.”

“Sure thing, Mags,” Sam replied. The checkout was not really anything that needed “prepping,” but Sam obliged. He turned and smiled as he saw Ms. Malberson’s Kindergarteners start to line

up at the lunchroom doors, all wearing their hilariously-puffy down-jackets, ready for recess as soon as lunch was over. About halfway through winter, Ms. Malberson decided she simply could not assist another Five-year-old with putting boots on or zipping up jackets, all while another stream of students unapologetically pushed their way into the cafeteria. So, she insisted her students get ready for recess in the classroom and wear their coats to lunch.

Word quickly telephoned down the lunch line that there would be a class favorite for lunch. Sam’s favorite job was working the checkout, especially for the kindergarteners. It was a nightmare

at the beginning of the school year. The concept of not only remembering but typing their three-number pin-code was equivalent to a kindergarten dissertation. But Sam showed them how to match the numbers on the keypad, to the ones next to their names on the master list, and although the rest of the cafeteria workers were not thrilled with how it backed up the normally efficient line, it paid off. At this point in the year, kindergarten lunch was nothing short of a mealtime masterpiece. “Thanks, Sam!” they would chirp, successfully entering their pin. While their accomplishment diminished in value over time, Sam still offered a latex-protected high-five to students who raised their hands for one.

The line dwindled down to just four impressively patient kids. At the checkout was Corrin Hoff. A student who Sam had particular soft spot for, as she was the first kindergartener in Ms. Malberson’s class to memorize her pin number and be able to type it in all on her own, thus setting the bar of excellency for her peers. “Hi, Mr. Sam! Thanks for making mozzarella sticks for us today,” Corrin said over the top of her fully zipped winter coat. “You are very welcome Corrin! I hope you enjoy them,” Sam replied. Corrin’s mitten dangled from its attached sleeve as she carefully typed in her pin. “3...5...8... enter,” she quietly mouthed. Instead of being welcomed with the normal robotic “thank you” from the machine, a short buzz sounded. Sam looked at the monitor which read “Hoff, Corrin. INSUFFICIENT FUNDS. DO NOT SERVE.”

Corrin looked up at Sam. “I didn’t enter my number wrong did I?” she asked on the verge of tears, worried about tarnishing her reputation for numerical accuracy. Sam quickly clicked “OKAY” on the screen and said, “No! Sometimes this old computer just gets a little cranky!” Sam pulled one of the green slips from below the counter, a gentle reminder for kids to give to their parents to pay off their lunch debt. “Just give this to your mommy or daddy, okay?” He said as he folded the paper, preparing to put it on her tray. Sam looked down at the styrofoam tray and the meal on top of it. Four mozzarella sticks pressed against each other, a carton of milk that was oddly wet from the fridge, a small puddle of tomato sauce, and three already browned apple slices. Sam started thinking. He thought of the boxes of frozen ready-to-reheat meals in the walk-in freezer, he thought of the corporations who had monopolized those meals on the school, he thought of how unhealthy each tray he served was for those kids, he thought of the trays piling up in the trash bins after a single use, and he thought about how much he hated being an integral part of each of these problems. How long had he been lying to himself about his own importance? Why had he taken a year off? To help finance corporate monopolies exploit underfunded school districts? To put 6 year olds in debt? “Okay! I will! I promise!” Corrin said, interrupting his thoughts as she walked to her seat.

Over the next twenty years, Sam would end up giving out hundreds of those little green slips. And every time these thoughts would momentarily manifest themselves in his brain. Until slowly his daily, district-prescribed dose of 150mg Zoloft-Sertraline kicked in, and he thought of how cute the kids looked in their puffy jackets.

I write this out of quarantine, having contracted the COVID-19 coronavirus that's currently permeating the globe. The sickness illustrates clearly a perspective that people tend to downplay: sure, humanity has a pretty sweet greatest hits album featuring The Pyramids and The Great Wall, Peanut M&Ms and the Voyager spacecraft, etc. etc. From the perspective of an enterprising virus, though, the combined mass of humanity is a kind of monkey-bars of meat. Contagion jungle gym. Taint ball pit.

At moments during isolation, I've experienced a kind of expansive, hallucinatory sense of sick-connect. It begins with a visual image of the planet's overwhelming system of nearly 8 billion humans, with a pinkish tint coursing through it—in this mind-movie, I guess I'm floating in outer space, viewing the blue marble of the planet from a distance, as a lightly pulsating color-burst of infection spreads across the continents. Along with the visual element of this experience, there's an accompanying pressure in my body, a kind of outward flex that I feel in my quadriceps muscles, oddly, as if I might weakly blossom up from the waist into some ill flower with nauseous stamen-arms flailing out to connect, transmit.

“Surreal” has become a regular word, used in just about any context. That dress is surreal. These crepes are surreal. That tiger dude's hair is, like... surreal, seriously. The word was invented just about a hundred years ago—it means, literally, *above* or *beyond* the real—by a bunch of artists in France who were sick of watching all cultural ingenuity ultimately employed in the production of war. Tristan Tzara, the mouthpiece of Surrealism's freaky cousin, Dada, put it best: “if I say ‘ideal, ideal, ideal,’ and ‘knowledge, knowledge, knowledge,’ and then ‘boomboom, boomboom, boomboom,’ I've provided a pretty faithful version of progress, law, morality, and all the other fine qualities that various highly intelligent men have discussed in books.”

What philosophers had been calling “The Enlightenment,” basically, was the systematic process of inventing atomic bombs.

The goal of surrealist art was to shake that system, those structures, break on through to another side where some life might exist beyond the complicity of mainstream technological production, something “as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table” (André Breton). Whoa, right? Encounters with the strange, chance occurrences, bizarre imagery—these could refresh the human imagination and enable new ways of thinking, which might carry us beyond the mere replication of violent “civilization.” (Obviously, though, the sewing machine is there to affix a tiny explosive device in the point of the umbrella, and then sew the umbrella shut so Doctor Strangelove can launch it in a sneak attack against the Podiatry department across the lobby from General Surgery. Boomboom.)

The Surrealist movement took place in the late 1920s / early 1930s, so... before the micro-chip, and fiber optics, satellites, wi-fi, cellular, drones. Ninety years later, we can bomb people remotely from halfway around the world. What's more technologically horrifying than the view from a camera mounted on a missile as it descends on a city block? Hand-in-hand with those military applications came really cool drone cameras for shooting high-end wedding videos. And advanced phones on which, just this morning, I took a virtual tour of an upside-down house in South Africa—yes, the toilets were empty—read about Colombian hippos that were jammed full of cocaine for smuggling, watched a dog named Gus tear up the trick route at a hoity-toity English dog show—ejected from the contest, his tail never stopped wagging—and heard five Canadians perform their national anthem at the bottom of a mineshaft, becoming the lowest altitude musical group in known human history. Meanwhile, in Italy, overwhelmed hospitals gave up trying to treat COVID-

19 victims over age 60, even if they were suffering severe respiratory symptoms. 400 people died overnight.

What's the art of a world like this? Once surrealism is clearly manifest as the *reality* of the world, how does art push forward? It's always the urgent question for artists in all times, in all situations: *what's next?*

I wish I had an answer—a positive contribution to the forward progression of culture. Honestly, though, I haven't been feeling like writing much. I'm among the lucky patients whose symptoms of the virus are mild, but one of the more pronounced ones is *anomie*—a kind of despair at the efficacy of any action. I can't quite find the existential conviction it takes to meet a global pandemic with a scribbled image, or an articulated perception, much as I ordinarily value those elements of my art form. I try to remind myself of the great writers and artists who produced signature works during hard times. There's the famous quote from Bertolt Brecht, who escaped into exile from the Third Reich: "In the dark times will there also be singing? Yes, there will also be singing. About the dark times." Frida Kahlo's first burst of mature paintings came during an extended period of bed-ridden convalescence after a bus accident. After decades of wild living, Ingmar Bergman chose to isolate himself on a small island, where he worked every day with intense discipline on his art.

But my favorite story is that of the theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who coined the phrase *heteroglossia* to describe the way that literature—any human utterance, really—is comprised of many voices, personal, historical, and cultural. The Bakhtin story that I love goes like this: first, the young, ambitious Russian scholar wrote an exhaustive book-length study of the literary Bildungsroman, a text that would, he hoped, secure his place among the prominent literary theorists of his time. Then, after completing the manuscript, he used the pages of its only copy for rolling papers so that he could smoke during the World War II depression in Leningrad. For me, that's the story that really captures the optimism and fatalism of being human. Part of you wants to say something to honor the genius of the species. But then another part knows that you might as well smoke it. It's gonna burn eventually anyway.