

ERATO'S

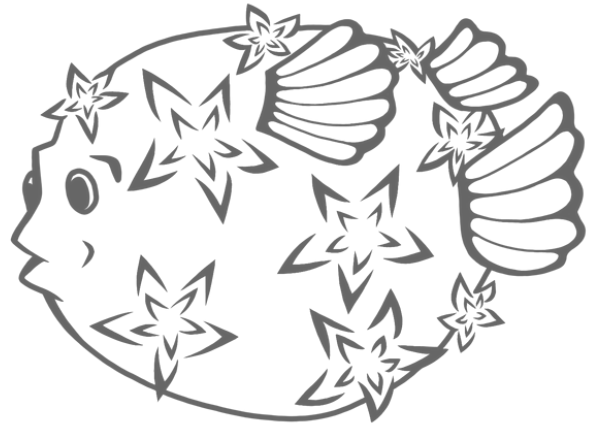
MAGAZINE



'I want! I want!' (W. Blake 1793)

Erato's Literary Magazine . Created for
&
by students





Dreams

With this second edition, we want to explore the theme of ‘dreams’. This theme reflects not only that esoteric world which we enter when we close our eyes — mirroring our happiest days, deepest desires, and darkest fears — but also the ambitions and ideals through which we will try to shape a kinder future.

Our theme reflects the season of spring: the transitional space between reality and fantasy, life and death; the warmth on your face when you finally blossom and achieve the end result that has been on the horizon for what seems like forever. We present to you works that explore inbetweenness, hope, and the long process of (not) achieving your aspirations.

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Foreword

A message from the editors

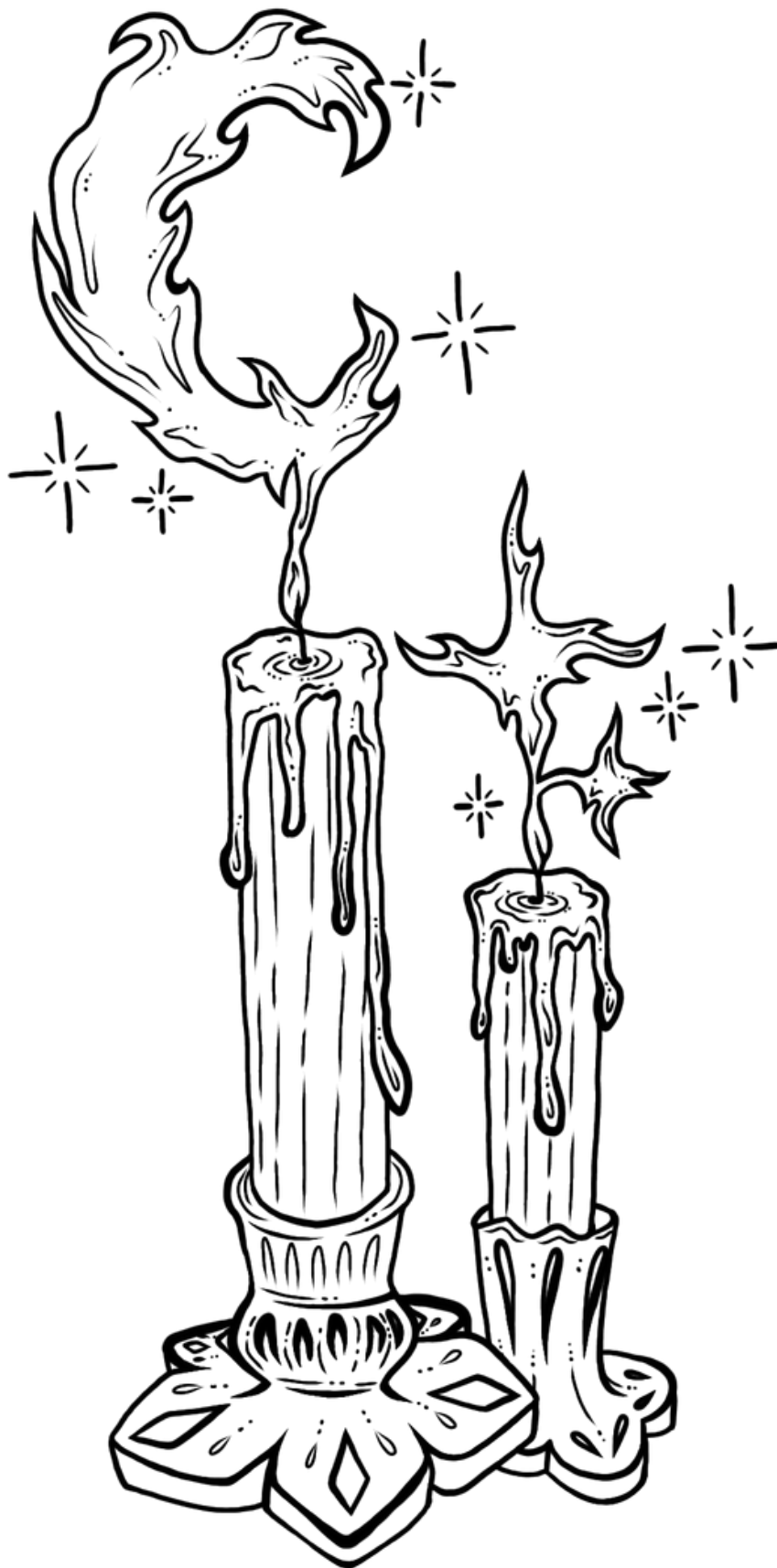
Dear reader,

The earth has completed another revolution around the sun and the time for spring has come again. And just like the ever returning warmth and vitality of spring, we have returned from our slumber to bring this edition of Erato's Magazine to you. We, the magazine committee of Euphorion, had a dream: to sustain the communal dialogue between students, writers, poets and artists that Erato's Magazine has provided since its genesis. So, we want to thank all the contributors to this edition for their enthusiastic efforts and for keeping our dream alive! May first time participants continue to blossom and may long time contributors continue to shine. And as always, thank you for reading, enjoying and supporting Erato's Magazine.

Let us keep dreaming despite it all: of a sustainable future, of a united community and of a better tomorrow.

Yours in Solidarity

Femke Kapteijns
Co-Chief Editor, Erato's Magazine Committee



If I Had a Wish

Nena Mandziak

I never say that out loud,
but I very often wish to be woken up,
only to find out we have fallen asleep on this trampoline.
Or that maybe I was just daydreaming fed up with June sun,
in which we lay guessing the shapes of the clouds.
We were surrounded by cheerful laughs,
the sound of the guitar,
birds singing in the sky.
You held my hand
tight like a child holds a balloon.
I held yours the same way,
afraid that you might fly away.
You did eventually
glided with the wind
that was already creeping through the green leaves of the trees.
We ignored it at the moment,
trying to feel alive,
dancing all night,
not knowing it was the last time we truly laughed.
I remember when the music died.

My hand felt free,
but at the same time
so imprisoned in reality.
I obviously still laugh,
listen to music,
and look at the sky.
But if I had a wish,
I'd wish to be woken up,
only to find out we are still laying on this trampoline
instead of in the world where you aren't mine -
where the air is too thick to breathe
and no one has fun.
I can rarely hear the birds nor see the colours changing in the sky,
and I wish to once again lay on this trampoline,
where it felt so easy to live rather than just be alive.



Fog dismantles.

Eyes fly open, and are instantly confronted with stubborn grogginess, lying in fetus position, tangled up in the sheets like so many Sunday mornings from the past.

No kiss from a rescuer, no active goals- just ease and comfort that should be illegal. It's 10 in the morning, and the mattress is just too soft, the pillow is just too cold, but your skin is still hot from rapidly fading memories.

The world returns to its illuminated state, colors fly back to their designated spots, and the blazing fire from down in the abyss turns back into its muse.

Someone you barely know, but admired from a distance, fitting well in with the twisted chaos of the dark (but only now do you understand, why the flames have always consistently stayed red).

But, all sobered up once more, you leave your cocoon with utmost difficulty, find your clothes, and join the other jumpers in the light that is the top of the cliff.

The fire neatly tucked away into a back drawer, preparing itself to make a cliff jump of its own. Its silhouette falling, retreating back into the darkness of the mind- before inevitably bouncing back up in 12 hours or less.

It'll take another while before its experienced elastic will snap for good.



Ágnes Asszony
a short story
by Naoka Kádár-Todo

From sunrise to late at night

There she stands in the water, next to her stool:

Her shadow is frilled by foam,

The wind tangles the locs of her hair.

Oh! Father of mercy, do not desert me.

Verse 22 of *Ágnes Asszony* by János Arany, 1853

She scrubs at the sheets, the clear tumble of the river filtering through the ripples of linen. The wooden washing board is set beside Ágnes and a basket of laundry, the triangle ridges blunted by years of scrubbing.

"I would cross the Tisza on a ferry-boat, a ferry-boat, ferry-boat," her voice floats across the small creak of the river, sheltered from the chatter of the other women washing by the wide bank. "My dove lives there, on a bank so remote...*"

"Mother?" a small voice pipes up, striding down the worn mud path to the river.

"Csenge," she smiles briefly, glimpsing behind her shoulder before turning back to her work. She steps away from the washing, approaching her daughter. The tumble of nutmeg hair slips out from the movement, the headkerchief struggling to bind Ágnes's wild bush of locks.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"They broke it," Ágnes catches the wobble in her small voice, placing the sheets down into a wicker basket. She wipes her hands in her apron, embracing the girl to calm her.

"Was it those boys again?"

"They pulled her hair off." Csenge bit her lip to stop herself from crying.

"I'll get this fixed," Ágnes reassured her softly, letting go of her daughter, stowing the doll cautiously in her pocket. "Don't you worry now, go play with Anna and Luca. They'll be around the courtyard."

*(Unknown) translation of a Hungarian folk song

"Mother, why is there blood on you? Are you injured?" Csenge paled as she could see the clumsy streaks of red across the sleeves of her mother's blouse, her eyes darting to the waterside. Red bled out from the sheets. Ágnes's head jolted, but she gently stroked her daughter's hair.

"István gave a large loaf of bread yesterday, and your father wanted some chicken stew with it."

"But why would a chicken bleed on the bedsheets?" Ágnes smiled - her daughter's mind was sharp, a little too sharp for her liking, even though she was so young.

"I left out a basket of sheets next to the cutting block," Agnes motioned with her hands around her neck, wiggling her fingers. Csenge's eyes glinted understandingly.

"Anyways, you better get going - your friends must be waiting for you."

Csenge nodded gratefully, thanking her with another embrace before scrambling off. The woman turned back to her washing, a violet streak dissolving into the water from the white sheets.

The village erupts with sound outside the windows, the dust rising from the passing of carts, and I know that something is wrong. There is no ill omen, but a gnawing apprehension that all is not well. Csenge had returned a while ago, her pudgy fingers wrapped around a large knob of gingerbread one of the neighbours had given her. Her flat soles are caked in mud, nimbly scurrying in and out of the house.

"You better not get full; lunch is almost done." I call through the corridor to my niece. Despite my apprehensions, I hide my restlessness from her. "I could do with some hands here, and clean ones, mind you," she darts out to the well, scrubbing her hands in a large basin - I can hear the fervent splashes two rooms beyond.

"Will you make some *nokedli*** with the chicken?" she eagerly scrunches her sleeves up, pulling a stool beside me.

"No, we barely got through the side of bacon that we have." A sudden sense of apprehension overcomes me. "Who told you we'd have chicken?"

**A type of noodle eaten with many savoury stews.

"Mother,"

"Is she doing the washing still? It has been quite a while since she left."

"I don't know," Csenge mumbles, cutting the bread with a concentrated silence. I place my own apron aside, looking outside the window as I leave her with the cutting. The sun is high, the sheep bleating in the distance of the sun-cracked plains, far beyond the busy rustle of movement in the streets. The dogs lie in the shade, panting, in the neatly kept yard my brother-in-law is so proud of.

Barks echo across the yard, and the Devil announces his arrival.

"Ancsa!" a cry darts down the garden path, the hens scuttering out of the way. István, the miller, is ramming his way through the yard. His tanned face is clammy, the caterpillar black brows furrowing. "There is trouble."

"What do you..."

"They found Mihály."

"What do you mean found?" I feel the truth sink in before he spoke, panic bubbling through me.

"There is not time for tears now, Ancsa." He grumbles gruffly, grabbing my shoulders with an iron grip. "Get a hold of yourself, and do not lie to me now: where is Ágnes?"

"What?"

"Where is Ágnes?"

"Why are you asking this all of a sudden?" I tug myself away from his clutch, stepping back towards the apple tree. The plump fruit lays scattered across the blades of yellow-green, sickeningly rosy.

"Where is she?"

"She's down by the river!" I snap back at him. "Where else would she be doing her laundry? God in the Heavens, her husband..."

"István!" A rising din of yelling and hoofbeats sound on the main street. "István!" A ploughman from the fields rushes through the open garden gate. "They caught her, the damned bitch! She was snooping off with that lover of hers!"

"What?" I feel the pieces fit together in a puzzlingly clear sequence in my mind. I had not realised that István is holding me firmly, keeping me standing on my legs.

"Ancsa! You need to listen to me now, lass! My wife and Lisanna will help you and the child settle in whilst this is over with."

"Why would I?"

"There will be a trial for the murder, and not everyone in the village will look at you with kind eyes." His haggard features soften with sympathy. "It will be alright, but... Come on now, there's a good lass."

I let him lead me, all sounds blocked out as he hoists Csenge up in his free arm. She cries, mourning the father she had lost, and the mother she was about to lose.

The walls are caving in, crawling and oozing and welded and endless and towering.

Ágnes sits on the golden hay in the cell, hazy moonlight rising on the horizon. Her clothes were bedraggled from the day of travel, as a pack of men swarmed around her and dragged her through the mud, screaming obscenities at her, tearing at her hair. They had also taken Szabolcs but she knew not where he was taken. To the cart? Through the crowds tagging after them until they were outside of the village, following them like ants gravitating towards honey?

Had it been minutes? Hours? Days? All Ágnes can tell is that the slither of the moon through the crack of a barred window casts its glare calmly upon her, and she cannot escape its light. She tucks her knees beneath herself protectively, her breath startlingly loud in the silence of the courtroom prison.

"Did you love him at all?" Ágnes looks up, and Mihály smiles down at her. There are no blotched stab wounds flowering across his neck or chest, and he is dressed in his usual clean garments.

"Yes," she replies after a while, unsure if she is dreaming or not. "I did."

He keeps smiling, his limbs gangly and spider-like as he lowers himself down beside her.

"István will take care of the girls well."

"So I'm going to be executed, aren't I?" she wants to lash out at him, but his calmness grounds her, just like every time they argued. Which was, Ágnes reminisced, unleashing anger on her end only. Mihály does not reply, leaning his neatly trimmed head against the stone wall. "Why are you here? If you want me to beg and cry, that won't be happening, and you know that."

"I know very well," Mihály responded. "I suppose this is a kind of limbo I have to suffer."

"What for? You pray every day and work hard. You... You didn't deserve to have a wife like me."

Again, Mihály did not respond, not looking at her once. Ágnes catches glimpses of his hair, the rhythmic fall and rise of his chest – frighteningly alive, yet so strangely dreamlike. She remembered how still his body lay after the frenzy of struggle he put up, and the amount of blood spurting across Szabolcs. She rubbed her eyes tiredly like a sleepy child, and Mihály had vanished.

She did not rise, lacking the energy to do so. Instead, she folds her hands, and prays desperately.

"Our Father, who art in..."

The words of her prayer ricochet off the walls, and the moon dominates its blinding light. Ágnes feels its scorching claws rake across her, groping and violating her. She continues her prayer fervently.

"Our Father, who art in Heaven..."

The moonlight pooled rapidly, beyond a speed she had anticipated, drowning the cell in a white blaze. It was no Devil that had come for her, the same Devil that had come to tempt her through a young man on the riverside, hair rich molten gold. Yet Agnès wished that it was the Devil – that it would claim her body and soul, just as Szabolcs had – on the early dark dawn grass of the river side.

"Our Father, who art in Heaven..."

The moon keeps its gaze fixed on her, ruthlessly cold, as she shakes on the stone floor. The ground had been blazing beneath her feet when she fled from the river, through the quivering heat of the grazing fields. Fingers seemed to rake across every inch of her body now, blisteringly cold, the enraged voices muffling all thought out from her. Bitch. Whore. Murderer. Traitor. Devil's spawn. All words beat through her quaking limbs, dragging scratches of guilt across her soul.

No Devil would come for her salvation. Ágnes howled from disgust, feeling the burning tautness of her skin. The moon, mocking, an occasional whisp of a cloud fluttering a hopeful shade to hide her, like a fox cowering from the hounds.

Yet the clouds float by, the light burning her, the voices growing louder, her husband's smile merging with Szabolcs's. The hounds drew in closer.

The hours pass, but the moon remains immobile, smiling down upon her.

Exhausted, she lay curled into a ball like an injured animal. Something hard bulged against her hip; searching her pocket, she tugged her daughter's doll out of her pocket. The broken doll stared back at her expressionlessly, a dried corn cob wrapped in a white-blue cloth blanket that she and Csenge had stitched together. A sob bubbled up in her as she hugged her daughter's doll to herself. She knew not what her daughter, nor sister, would think of her; she wept quietly, wishing that death would come, as her husband stood above her like a guardian angel. Blood covered her hands, and garments, the iron stench unbearable. Yet Mihály remained untainted, staring pitifully down at her.

Dream, Moonlight, and Awakening all merged into one, and the world fell upon her, tearing her apart.

The corpse hung outside the village square, golden moonlight catching on his skin, hair rippling gently alongside the wind.

I look at the corpse. The face is still distorted from pain, the youthful eyes hungrily seeking salvation towards the heavens. Most of the children have grown bored at gawking at him, the execution completed, for there was no entertainment in a lifeless body for them. It seems as though the world has emptied out entirely – all but for myself and the corpse, keeping one another company. The tendrils of the darkness seem to cower back from him as the moonlight slithers around the village square.

I ought to feel anger at him, or satisfaction that justice had been served – an eye for an eye. The crescent-shaped fingernails had been soaked in blood only a few hours ago, grasping the life out of Mihály, who was nothing less than a father to me.

I thought you would get used to funerals after the years. Grandfather and Grandmother's shrivelled solemnity, Mother and Father wrapped in white shrouds, black buboes showing as their bodies burnt, Aunt Flora and her little infant placed together into a coffin. The undertakers had done their best to prepare Mihály and clean him the best they could – but the jagged, blotched stab wounds had done too much damage to his face to preserve his dignity.

Csenge woke with nightmares every few hours at night, and I cannot tell the difference between consciousness and this lucid state of dreaming, this strange in-between as I stare at the limp corpse hanging down from the gallows.

Ágnes' trial had been quick, as István had told us over breakfast. She would be returned home in a few days, though for what reason we could not gauge, nor would be told of. Csenge had been elated, despite her awareness of her mother's crime - we had to tear her away from her father's body at the funeral, and she had cried herself to sleep each night, refusing to eat. Yet she only saw her remaining parent returning; a sister who is dead to me now.

"You need to rest, Anca," I do not look away from the corpse, as István stands by my side.

"Why is she let free?"

"I do not know," István admits, lighting his pipe as he looks away from the gallows. "Anca, I can help get it sorted for you and Csenge to stay with us for as long as you want."

I shake my head, crossing my arms as I look at the corpse of Ágnes' lover swing above me. He sways slightly in the wind, like a pale stalk of wheat.

"I know what she had done, but I cannot leave my sister alone with Csenge. Not with good conscience, until she can get married and move out."

"Let's return home. We will speak of this tomorrow." István says after a while, as we back away into the darkness.

"Csenge!" I call across the kitchen, but there is no response. I walk across to the hall and furnace where she sits, fingering some wooden beads that she bought with her friends at the market. Her hair is messy, the braid unable to restrain the rich locks just like her mother's. Her limbs, horse like long, sprawl across the clay chalky side of the furnace, just like Mihály had sat during the winters all those years back.

"Yes?" she asks, not taking her eyes off the beads as she links them through a leather string.

"Csenge, go call your mother to eat."

"She's not at home." she responds, linking a red-brown bead to the bracelet.

"Is she there again?" Anca places the beads down, and nods guiltily. I bend down, hugging her to me, before I pull my winter mantle and boots on.

The collecting snow had been shoveled away from the main road, but it was still a struggle to pass through it.

Yuletide was barely beyond the corner, the enticing smell of warm wine wafting through the street. I pray that things remain as they are, and that the gossips fade, rolling away with the ripples of the river. I know that they will hound us eventually out from this home too, but I am tired, and let the thought melt away. My eyes pass over the beautiful ebony beams of our new home, the cleanly polished windows snugly fitted with curtains. Mihály would have loved this home, with the piles of log piled welcomingly next to the blazing fireplace, rosemary drying in a bundle above the flames. I lock the door, checking the lock thrice, praying that nothing will happen whilst I leave my niece.

I know it is not normal to fear so much, yet since the move, I cannot help but feel like we are endlessly watched. Of course, only István's sister knows of the truth, helping us settle in after the move as though nothing was amiss. But I do not think I can rest. Not with the gossips around Ágnes' behaviour that I catch when I spin wool with the other women, nor with the glum look of the neighbours as I walk to fetch water from the well.

The river roars, the crinkles of ice layered across the ford. She is seated at her outpost, loyal as a hound to its master. Her hands scrub tirelessly at a ragged piece of fabric, worn from the abuse of her hands, her cuticles bleeding and full of scratches. The knuckles are raw and callused. Day in, day out, she sits by the river, since the day she had returned to us. I cannot get her to do anything else, nor can I get a word out from her to extract an explanation of her strange behaviour; all she offered was her demand that she had to wash the sheets clean from blood. To me, to the judges, to everyone – all she would beg was to scrub compulsively, endlessly, tirelessly.

"Come, Ágnes, it is getting cold," I kneel beside her and place my hand onto her shoulder. Her body is sickeningly cold to the touch, and she stares at me with her beautiful black eyes. I kiss her blistered fingers, and take her murderous hands between mine.

"I bought some potato bread from the miller, and I've made some lentil soup to go with it. Come now, you'll catch your death in this cold." I say a little more firmly.

"Father of mercy, do not desert me," Ágnes softly repeats, freeing her hand from mine. She shakes her head as though reminding herself of a task and sets to scrub the sheets again, singing softly to herself.

I resign myself to losing yet again, fighting against the shell of a person that had once been my sister. I place my cloak upon her and drag my feet through the snow as I walk away from the river.

Dream Hoppers
a poem/artwork
by Helena Costa Issa

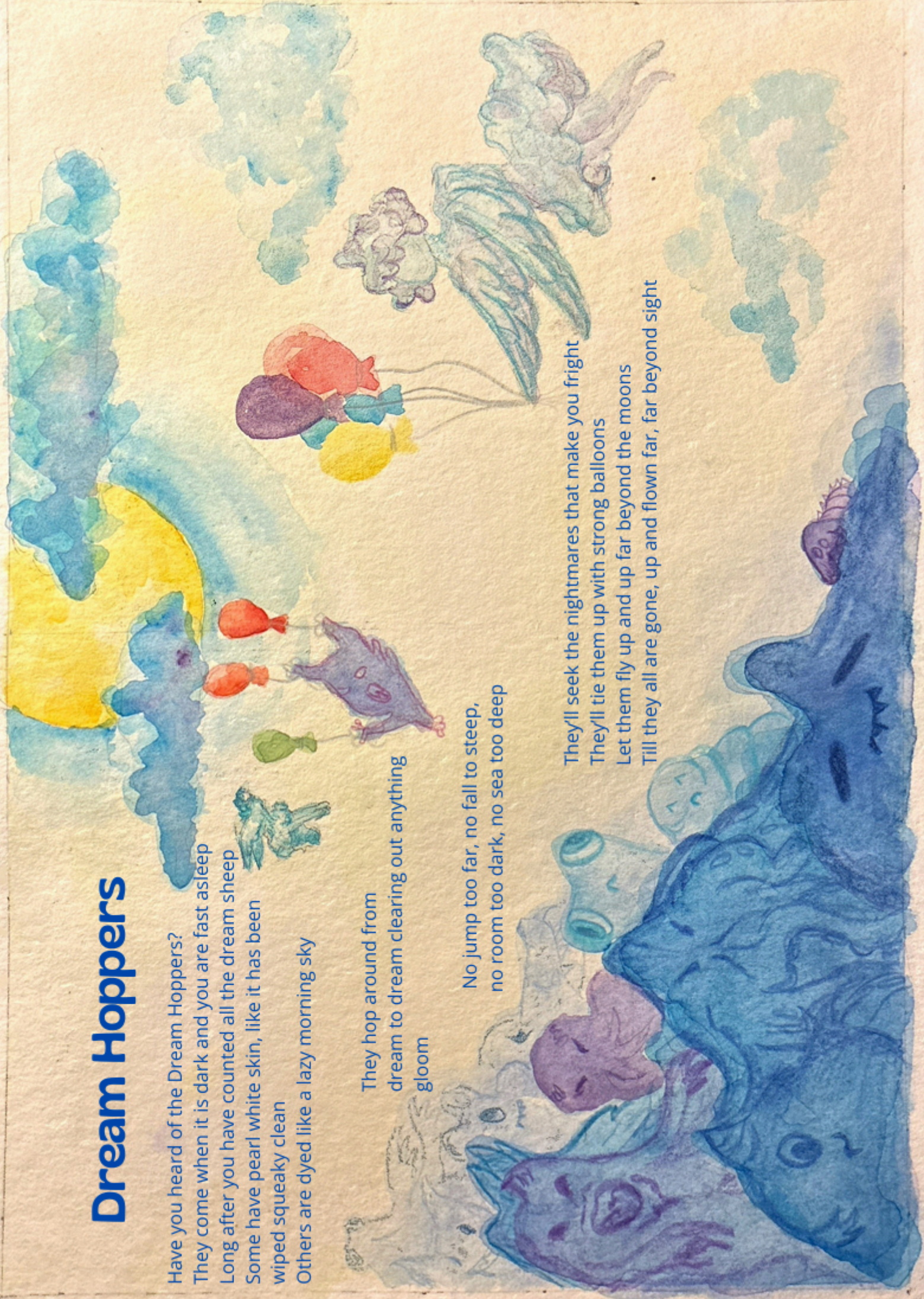
Dream Hoppers


Have you heard of the Dream Hoppers?
They come when it is dark and you are fast asleep
Long after you have counted all the dream sheep
Some have pearl white skin, like it has been
wiped squeaky clean
Others are dyed like a lazy morning sky

They hop around from
dream to dream clearing out anything
gloom

No jump too far, no fall to steep,
no room too dark, no sea too deep

They'll seek the nightmares that make you fright
They'll tie them up with strong balloons
Let them fly up and up far beyond the moons
Till they all are gone, up and flown far, far beyond sight





If they notice you start to wake and the nightmares are not all quite slain
They will send the Blanket Dragon to your room
She is soft as a cloud, and warm as the sunlight
She will slither in your blankets and warm it with delight
and hug you in a cocoon so that you sleep through the night

When all the nightmares have been flown away
and the dreams swing back to play
That is when Nyx sweeps in
Her eyes and freckles glim and spark
Her cloak is the dark that frames the stars
She leaves the aurora like a door ajar
Like the golden edges of an old grimoire
through which the sun slips up

Train 070Я Moscow-Chita

Ekaterina Gromova

I look from my window and see a train station, empty and deserted. I stay seated, don't really want to leave the train. I've always been scared of it. The second I leave the train, it starts clicking and clanking, as if it's about to dash, as if it's laughing at me for falling for its trick. Ugh, trains and their train tricks.

I hear a couple of stomps, some light bangs, and then I feel a gentle push. I ask my dad right in front of me if he felt it. He doesn't answer. He just sits there, opposite of me, pale and silent. He's sitting against the train's direction, facing the back of our journey, while I look forward. That's the only way I don't get motion sickness.

It is an early morning, so our two companions are sound asleep on the top shelves. I can hear the man's snoring, and it sounds so much like my father's. I just hope he doesn't wake up.

The train keeps going, slightly swaying from left to right. Choochooh-choochooh. Very calming, as if rocking me to sleep, but I know I can't. I need to watch my dad. I need to make sure that he gets there safely.

I look outside again and see the endless fields swooshing past us. Fascinating! Oh, look, a cow!! I get so excited I almost jump out of my seat. "Look, dad," I say. But he doesn't move. He can't. He doesn't see the cow. He can't.

The view stays the same for I don't know how long. I feel like we have passed the same cow a hundred times already. But I don't mind. I just wish my dad could enjoy the ride as much as I do. Usually, he is the one driving, but this journey is a little special.

Since my dad is not responsible for the steering wheel and the safety and the road, we can finally converse. There is nothing in the way, only the rare clanking of the train and the man's snoring. Very quiet and very unusual. Normally, my dad tries to cover the silence between us with music, the TV, laughter, basically anything, except conversations, the real ones. But here we are, silent and stuck together on this train.

I ask my dad if he ever wanted children, but he doesn't respond. I look at him in silence, stare even. Still, no response. He only seems to get paler, and his cheeks to get hollower.

"Irkutsk."

The train keeps moving. Suddenly, the pastoral views remind me of the city. I ask my dad if he ever dreamt of going to Moscow, of settling down. He doesn't respond. It looks like he listens to the snoring man, and not to me.

The train suddenly stops. It doesn't brake or anything, it just stops. The fields suddenly change to the blue and white station that looks like a miniature of The Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg. "Taiga" says the big sign on top of the station. "Taiga" repeats the conductor. "We're halfway there," says the sleeping man. Suddenly it hits me that we've been sitting for two days and a few hours. Somehow, I don't feel pain in my legs or my butt. I don't feel my body at all. I wonder if this is how dad is feeling right now. It is surprising that he hasn't started to smell yet.

I'm still afraid of leaving the train, and even more so of leaving my dad. So, I just sit and wait a little bit more. I think of the places we've passed, and the places we are yet to see. I wonder if my dad has been to every one of them. Maybe he has, I wouldn't be surprised. He is an extraordinary man. He was. He is. Still, right here, in front of me.

As the train goes back into motion, I take a good minute to look at my dad, maybe even study him. The person I'm seeing is so much different from the person I remember, that I have to keep reminding myself that no, it is indeed my father. He might not have his hair, his skin and flesh might have shrunk, his limbs might be stiff and cold, but he still has his glasses and his posture and his silence are the same. His silhouette might have changed, but his awkward quietness in front of his own daughter screams to me: "Papa!". I know it is him. And I miss him. The train keeps going, and I can't decide if it's incredibly fast or unbearably slow. I have so many questions to ask, that I don't know which ones to start with. Maybe, the practical matters should go first. After all, we are running out of time.

"Have you ever thought of your funeral, dad?" I ask. No response. "Well, yeah, you see, I just figured you would want to go home. It is a little bit silly to ask it now, but where is your home, dad?" He doesn't answer. I wonder if he feels at home with another family, another wife, or another daughter. I just know that he doesn't feel that way around us, around me. But he's too scared to admit it. Or maybe too shy. But it's okay, I'm not shy to ask, so I keep going:

"What do you think grandma would think of you right now? Would you want her to come to your funeral?"

"..."

"It would break the poor woman's heart, you know? Of course you do. You are good at it."

I don't even notice how bitter and upset I've become. Well, to be fair, his silence is simply rude. After all, I'm doing all of this just for him.

I stop asking him things. I don't ask if he wants to be cremated or buried. I don't ask what kind of tombstone he wants. I will see what I can afford on the spot. I just need to leave him to his family and come back to mine before his body completely decomposes in this train.

We pass Zlobino, Nizhneudinsk, Zima, and many other stations before the conductor finally announces:

"Irkutsk."



Family Albums

a short story

by Sam Hendrian

Ryan Echem had a phobia of photo albums ever since his parents divorced when he was 16 years old. They only contained lies, false prophecies of happily ever after with people who said they'd love you always just because that's what they were supposed to say. The smiles were literally fake, the mere product of someone shouting "Cheese!" and assuming you'd willingly comply. Whose bright idea was it to keep a record of happiness that would inevitably fade? Probably the president of Kodak or some other business tycoon whose sole moral compass was capitalism.

He didn't go to Homecoming, he didn't go to Prom, and anytime he passed a couple taking wedding photos, he nearly had an anxiety attack. Love might be real, but romance was definitely a scam; that much he was sure of. Rings were shaped like a circle, but not for the reasons people assumed; you always ended up where you started, alone. Okay, maybe this was too much cynicism. But he'd certainly earned it; he couldn't even listen to a Christmas song without suddenly hearing angry voices dueling in the background.

Nevertheless, he was almost equally scared of staying single forever, of waking up every day to a cluttered bedroom and snot-stained pillow he had no motivation to clean for anyone. He probably wouldn't get married, but some form of commitment would be nice; in his experience, open relationships just increased the number of closed doors. And he'd had enough of slamming his face against a wooden rectangle that briefly looked like fresh air; life was too short to leap from mirage to mirage.

"Meet anyone special lately?" his sweet but tone-deaf Aunt Wendy would ask almost every time he talked to her.

"No one worth mentioning," he usually replied with as much indifference as he could muster.

"Well, they're out there somewhere."

"I hope not."

Aunt Wendy would then sigh and try to have empathy for her nephew, who was far more sentimental than her and therefore anti-sentimental as a coping mechanism. It was her own brother who had set the divorce in motion because of several infidelities, but she had never thought much of it; adultery was just a fact of life. She finally settled on: "You don't have to become your father, you know."

"That's not what I'm worried about."

"Then why are you so afraid of falling in love?"

Ryan rolled his eyes. Aunt Wendy would obviously never understand, so why did he bother trying to explain every time? "Because it's really unimportant. And I don't have time for unimportant things in my life right now."

"That's a bit of a cop-out, don't you think?"

"No. It's just a difference of opinion. I don't think it's healthy for a person to waste the best years of their life searching for their better half, who will probably turn out to be their worse half. I want love just as much as everybody else, but I don't need another person to get it."

"Then who are you going to get it from?"

"Myself." Even Ryan wasn't sure if he believed this answer - self-love seemed to have the same staying power as a one-night stand without the added thrill of third party validation - but for now, he just wanted his persistent aunt to shut up. "I know myself better than anyone else ever could. So why would I expect another person to give me something I don't already have?"

"Well... Good luck with that."

Ryan had succeeded in annoying Aunt Wendy enough to leave him alone, but he spent the rest of the day second-guessing what he said. The universe usually seemed to work in opposition to people's plans; was he now doomed to fall in love then get divorced then spend his twilight years looking at smiling pictures that now only made him frown?

Oh, he didn't need to be thinking about this now; he had a job to do. It wasn't a particularly important job - he was a tour guide for a local movie studio doomed to be taken over by Netflix in the near future - but it still kept him busy, and he needed more than anything to avoid idleness. It was idleness that led him to open old photo albums and lament the lies of love. It was also idleness that compelled him to leave his lonely apartment and accidentally see beautiful women at the grocery store who kinda sorta made him want to fall in love.

Must. Be. Busy.

But it was impossible for a human person to be busy 24/7. Or if it was possible, eventually that busyness would involve other people. Case in point: grocery shopping. There was an Albertsons a dangerous one block from Ryan's apartment, and for whatever reason, it doubled as a sea full of Sirens.

Whoa. She is the most beautiful girl I've ever seen! A poised and joyfully somber-faced brunette had just accidentally made eye contact with him in the fruits and vegetables section.

Or had it been an accident? Forget about her, Ryan! You don't want to fall in love anyway. Of course, two minutes later he passed her again in the frozen pizza aisle. She didn't seem to be actually shopping for anything, just aimlessly strolling to pass the idle hours. Damn, maybe this is fate, she seems as restless as I am! No no, it's not like I can actually say anything to her without sounding creepy. Yet she passed him another time while he was standing in line for checkout, and just when he thought he had finally been delivered from her Siren's song, he approached the street that led to his apartment and saw her waiting for the orange crosswalk sign to turn white. Terrified of her thinking he was following her, he crossed the street faster than he'd ever crossed it before and soon arrived at the sanctuary of his idle apartment, cursing the myth of fate and the multitude of red herrings throughout his life that had convinced him love wasn't also a myth.

"Hi, Mom." These words always filled Ryan with anxiety, but he knew he had to say them at least twice a week. Preferably over text, although he acknowledged she deserved a phone call every now and then.

"Hi, Ryan. How was work today?"

"It was okay. None of the tour guests seemed like they actually liked movies or TV shows, so that was fun."

"Then why would they pay all that money?"

"Hell if I know. Maybe their entire bucket list consists of TripAdvisor's Top 10 Things to Do in LA. Anyways, how are you?"

Ryan's mom sighed on the other line. "I'm okay. I had to talk to your dad earlier."

"What for?"

"Alimony stuff."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"It's just what we have to do."

Ryan paused for a moment, searching for the most empathetic thing to say. "Was he mean to you?"

There was an equal-length silence on the other line. Ryan and his mother had always been in-tune with each other's pregnant pauses. "Not any more than he normally is."

"That still isn't right! Can't you have your lawyer talk to him?"

"She doesn't work for me anymore."

"What?"

"I only hired her to carry out the initial settlement. I knew I couldn't afford her after that."

"Oh. I didn't know that. Do you need some money?"

"Ryan, sweetie, I know you're broke."

"Well, I could cut down on all the junk food I buy to help me cope with work."

"No no, then you might develop a more harmful and expensive addiction. Eat all the cookies you want, Ryan. I'll be alright."

"Are you sure?"

There was another pause. "Of course not. But I've been in tight spots before. I've always pulled through."

"Well, I'm here for you anytime. S... Sorry I can't be there with you."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Ryan. I'd be even sadder if you didn't leave home."

Ryan wasn't quite sure how to take this. "Uh... Okay."

"Not that I don't love your company. Of course I do. But you're an adult now. You're supposed to fly the nest."

"Yeah. But in some Asian countries, aren't the kids eventually supposed to come back home and take care of their parents?"

"Maybe. But not until after they've had their adventure. And you're just beginning yours."

"Well, I'm not sure how much of an adventure it is. But I guess it's where I'm supposed to be right now."

"It is. That much I'm sure of."

Their tender conversation soon ended, but neither of them really felt better about where they were in life. At least his mother hadn't asked him if he had met any girls lately. Or boys; despite being raised evangelical Christian, she had bigger concerns other than whether or not her son might be gay. She wanted him to find love of course, but she also hoped he'd be spared the lies and heartbreak that she was still enduring. Was it possible to have one without the other? She was just as unsure as her son was.

Ryan went to dinner the next night with his best friend Marissa, who had recently married her high school sweetheart Rob but never felt the need to brag about it. "How's your mom doing?"

"The same. But she's getting through."

"And your dad?"

"I haven't talked to him in a while. Nor do I want to."

"Has he tried calling you?"

"Practically every day. Apparently he can't take a hint."

"Well, I'm sure he's just trying to make amends."

"I don't need his amends. My mom does. But if he doesn't care about her, I don't need him to care about me. Anyhow, I don't really want to talk about it."

"Fair."

"How've you been doing?"

"Oh, same old same old. Trying to quit the thrift store."

"I thought you liked it there."

"I do. But I can't work there forever. And two years is already starting to feel like an eternity."

"Where else would you want to work?"

"I'm not sure yet. I think I'm through with my customer service days. I kinda want to start my own business, but I'm nowhere near ready for that yet."

"What would you sell?"

"Maybe clothes."

"Clothes that you make?"

"Yeah. And maybe that I find too. I do like thrifting."

"Why don't you take over the thrift store?"

"Nah. The owner's a little power-hungry. Anyhow, that's a long way out. I'll probably have to do something else in between. Do you still like being a tour guide?"

"Nah, it's getting old. I've started applying to other jobs, but I haven't heard anything yet."

"What sort of jobs?"

Ryan blushed with slight inferiority. "Marriage counseling."

"Marriage counseling? You don't have a degree in that, do you?"

"No. But I have a lot of personal experience..."

Marissa shook her head. "I thought you wanted to stay away from all things marriage-related."

"I did. But I'm starting to think it might be my destiny. And if I were to fall in love with anybody, it would probably be a divorce lawyer."

"STAWP."

"I mean, it seems the surest way to make a relationship last. They know all the ins and outs."

"Not all relationships fall apart."

"Oh, you're such an optimist."

"I don't know how to be anything else. Hopefully it will rub off on you."

"I doubt it. But you can try..."

Marissa's optimism did start to rub off on Ryan, much to his chagrin. He even fantasized about bumping into the mysterious grocery store woman again. But it soon faded; his dad called him once more, and he decided to answer this time.

"Hey."

"I finally caught you! Busy man, eh?"

"Not really."

"Then how come you haven't answered my calls?"

Ryan quickly decided whether or not he wanted to give an honest answer. He decided that telling the truth was the best way to respect his dad, even if he didn't seem to deserve respect. "Because I haven't wanted to talk to you."

There was a pause on the other line. "I get that. I'm sorry for anything I've said that's hurt you."

"Don't apologize to me. Apologize to mom."

There was another pause. Ryan's dad also had to make the choice regarding honesty, but it was more about honesty with himself. "Your mom isn't as perfect as you think she is."

"I never said she was perfect. But you've hurt her a hell of a lot. And as someone who once looked up to you, I hoped you might feel some remorse for that."

"I do feel remorse. But it's complicated. Whenever I've tried to apologize to her, she hasn't accepted it."

"Maybe you weren't sincere enough."

"Or maybe she just has to accept that this isn't all my fault."

Ryan rolled his eyes. He expected his dad to be like this, but it was still disappointing. "Talk to you later, Dad."

"Wait a minute, Ryan. Please at least try to hear me out."

"Only if you hear *me* out."

"Okay. What other grievances do you have?"

"Where do I begin? You screwed a woman across the country and got away with it."

"What's so wrong with her being across the country?"

"You're missing my point. You thought you could have her and mom at the same time. You assumed Mom was stupid enough not to notice that you'd forgotten to put your wedding ring back on when you returned from your last trip."

"I didn't think she was stupid. I was stupid. I've never forgotten to put it back on before."

"Ugh, Dad, do you realize how selfish you sound?"

"I..."

"No, you don't. Why am I even trying? Goodbye." Ryan hung up on his dad and began to cry. He used to believe that no cause was hopeless; now he accepted that some people were merely past the point of redemption.

He really wanted to be born again. Not in the Christian sense, but rather in a literal one. His life was turning out to be average at best and miserable at worst, and he longed for a second chance. Of course, he wouldn't dare tell this to any of his friends who believed in karma, as he would automatically feel guilty; what did he do to deserve this? Maybe he'd been a homewrecking asshole in another life; like father, like son. Or like son, like father.

Of course, he knew being reborn was impossible, so he resolved to keep on living his one and only life with as much hope as he could muster. But hope was dwindling fast, and every time he saw a rope or a knife, he pondered their life-ending possibilities. *No one asked for this! Why are we expected to stick around until we are old and senile?*

Deciding he might as well add insult to injury, Ryan opened an old family album and began masochistically browsing its outdated contents. There was a picture of him and his dad swimming while his mom watched from afar. Another picture of all three of them playing Monopoly while Aunt Wendy drank too much wine in the background. And then the *crème-de-la-crème* of heartbreak: a group hug.

It was all a lie. His dad didn't love his mom, and after their last phone conversation, his dad didn't seem to even love him. Why did he exist? Because his parents got drunk and horny one night and decided that creating a child might be a fun idea? He definitely wished they'd made a different choice; he wouldn't know the difference whether or not he existed.

Deciding he couldn't take the cruel dishonesty of the family photo album any longer, he stood up and went to Albertsons to buy the first diabetes-inducing thing that caught his eye. It would probably be a pack of Oreos, but like his mother said, there were worse addictions out there. As soon as he walked in, he saw the mysterious Siren woman who kept crossing his path the week before. She seemed to also recognize him and tossed him a slightly humorous smile. Fancy seeing you here. Then she turned into the cereal aisle, and he never saw her again. But her smile was enough; for the first time in years, he believed that someone somewhere might care about him. And whoever that someone was, they would mean everything they said. False promises abounded in this world, but they weren't the only kind of promises out there. Love could still be true; it just took a hell of a lot of patience and discipline to make it so.

The End.



I LOVE YOU

Anonymous

I don't know what to do with it. I don't know what to do with IT. IT sits inside of me quietly, as if waiting for something. And I know what that "something" is. A moment of weakness. A split second is enough for IT to BAM! and escape.

IT hides somewhere in my throat, or in my chest, most certainly in my mind. IT scratches, bumps into my ribs, groans and roars into my ears. IT hums in my head all the time, and that humming just can't stop. Sometimes I can almost feel like IT suddenly starts running in my skull. IT quickly picks up the speed and then crashes itself into my forehead, on the other side of course. It doesn't hurt, it just happens, and I can feel it. I can feel ITs desperate attempts to get out.

I don't understand why IT doesn't let me know. At first, I thought it's because I miss you. I haven't seen you in a while, and IT knows it, feels it too. So, IT feels brave enough to come to me and remind me of you.

And then, I saw you again. We spoke and we laughed and we touched and we kissed. That's when IT hit me again, stronger than ever. "Oh no!", I thought. I can't let IT out. I know it's not ITs time yet, it's too early. I want to be careful with you, I don't want to scare you away. I've realised that I need to do whatever it takes to make sure IT stays inside of me, and that it's not going to be an easy job now.

But IT became unbearable. Truly. IT didn't even need a kiss now to start banging in my ears, slowly moving through my head, towards my mouth. Now, it was enough just to see you, to think of you. How you go silent when deep in thought, how your hair moves when you look away, how you burst out laughing, loudly and cheerfully, how you carelessly whistle, teasing my superstitious mind, how you look at me, how you hug me, how patiently you wait for your tea to cool down. Suddenly, all these moments became my hardest challenge. I started doubting if I can keep IT quiet, if I am capable of staying quiet myself.

I know I can't give in. I know that I need to be patient. And I swear I have been trying.

Until one morning, half-asleep and scared yourself, you said it. First. Suddenly, IT became so quiet. IT didn't run out of my mouth as I expected. Instead, there was just me, you, and the sun. And only a few long seconds later, IT finally escaped my lips, quietly, holding onto my breath.

"I love you, too," I said.

Untitled Drawing

an artwork

by Patrícia Luptáková



Dreams, Creativity, and Finding Refuge in a Surreal Reality: Why You Should Read Patti Smith's *Year of the Monkey*

Nicole C. Krieg

"The death of the last Rhinoceros. The ravaging of Puerto Rico. The massacre of schoolchildren. The disparaging words and actions against our immigrants. The orphaned Gaza strip. And what of existence only a reach away? What of the stoic writer who held a miniature of the world in the palm of his tattooed hand?"*

I can speak for most everyone when I state that our present reality is utterly surreal. What must we do?

This winter, as a U.S. citizen home for Christmas, I returned to my parents' house with a bitter feeling as a result of the country's current political state, plummeting face first into dilapidation from Donald Trump's decaying hands. Not only were conversations with old friends overridden with the aftermath of his every move, but the groups of the National Guard mindlessly grazing around Washington D.C. made the country's authoritarian reality evermore present.



As I tend to do when I am in search of some inspiration and whimsy in my life, I picked up a book by Patti Smith: *Year of the Monkey*. Patricia Lee Smith, commonly recognized as Patti Smith, is a poet, singer, songwriter, and visual artist, who is famously known for having influenced American rock-and-roll with her poetic lyricism in the 1970s.** Her fearlessness and activism have inspired many generations, and continue to do so, as she regularly shares her poetry and wisdom on several online platforms, such as Substack and Instagram. Smith began to write her

novel *Year of the Monkey* in 2016, when Donald Trump was first elected into office. In the novel, she attempts to encapsulate the "heart-wrenching injustices constituting the new facts of life:" which for her, consist of loss, political turmoil, and aging. The story begins with a conversation Smith has with a "Dream Inn" sign looming over the motel she is staying at in Santa Cruz. The sign follows Smith around through her travels, acting as a sort of guide and a reminder of her surreal present. Smith's wild, wandering mind is a means of escapism from her present, consisting of her grappling with the grief of loved ones: Sandy Pearlman, her friend and music producer who is dying in a coma, as well as an old lover, Sam Shepherd, dying of ALS.

*Smith, Patti. *Year of the Monkey*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

** "Patti Smith." *Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*, <https://rockhall.com/inductees/patti-smith/>.

***Smith, Patti. *Year of the Monkey*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

Smith deals with their suffering as she journeys through the American midwest for one year while on tour, blending reality with her imagination, dreams, fictional characters, and speaking to inanimate objects as she drifts into daydreams: “I don’t have a problem talking to inanimate objects” she claims in an interview at the 2019 Chicago Humanities Festival, as they are sometimes “more interesting than people.”**** The entirety of the novel feels a bit like a blurry dream itself, due to the randomness and confusion it leaves you with.

Year of the Monkey plays with the idea of how our reality is overridden with suffering, and Smith’s dreamscapes serve as both a representation of and a refuge from it. Dreams give us a second existence, a parallel existence, and are “just another angle of physical reality,”***** Smith claims. She provides consolation to her readers with her poetic outlook, as well as simply demarcating her curious daily rituals which add the substance she seeks into her life, consisting of daily cafe visits where she reads, speaks to strangers, and enjoys lots of coffee.



Most importantly, Smith constantly writes and notes her thoughts down, drawing the reader in with her eccentric train of thought: talking to her boots so as to give them life, or creating entire backstories to strangers she finds at a cafe. Her love for the mundane is further shown through her signature polaroid photographs, which are scattered throughout the book’s pages, depicting life through her eyes. Smith seeks simple solace in observing the clouds changing shape and the natural world in general, however, the lurking reminder of climate change haunts her... after all, “the trouble about dreaming is that we eventually wake up.”***** In addition, thoughts of growing older flood her mind: “I notice that my own tears burn my eyes, that I am no longer a fast runner and that my sense of time seems to be accelerating.”*****

As I am writing this now, back in Utrecht, I’ve been quite pensive about discussions I had in a course called “The Senses in Culture in Society.” In this class we’ve been discussing how the shock of modernity, originally referring to the aftermath of World War I and the effects of technology in a newly industrialized world, can be analogous to what has occurred to us, as a society, in the present. Humanity, as a collective, is shocked and overstimulated, even desensitized to life, and reality has become a sort of shared ‘illusion.’

****Chicago Humanities. “Patti Smith: Year of the Monkey [CC],” YouTube, 12 Nov. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEKTe5HI0yk.

**** Smith, Patti. *Year of the Monkey*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

***** Smith, Patti. *Year of the Monkey*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

***** Smith, Patti. *Year of the Monkey*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

Walter Benjamin, a 20th century German thinker and cultural critic, examined how the rise of fascism has taken advantage of this surreality. He claims that fascist leaders take advantage of a vulnerable and confused society by promising a sense of belonging, a restoration of order. However, these are false pretenses, and we must stay alert. Benjamin warns against the aestheticization of politics, through fascist propaganda, and instead urges the politicization of art and aesthetics, in order to induce critical thinking and serve the revolutionary interests of the people.***** I believe this is incredibly important now, more than ever. Smith's work and online presence is exemplary of this notion, and while she demonstrates how we can, and must, find refuge from our reality in order to not let it utterly consume us, we cannot remain blind to what is happening around us. For, if art is meant to be an expression of humanity, it must be political, as everything is. Smith constantly expresses her anguish and difficulty towards coming to terms with our present, but rather than creating more fear around it, she urges her viewers to stay connected within their communities, to continue to stay informed, and most importantly, to vote.

In essence, to conclude this erratic text which I am not sure whether to call a book review or simply a jumble of thoughts... I wanted to answer my initial question, in terms of advice I've gained from Smith. That is:

We must daydream. Write. Stay whimsical. Stay informed. Vote. Speak out.



I hope you will now find the urge to pick up any of Smith's works and let her take you through her alluring life and mind.

*****Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, New York, Schocken Books, 1969.

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Cut

Hugo Wolters

"Ellen! Come down here, you can start lighting the stove!"

"I can't! Taking a bath right now!"

"Course you are," I hear him mutter. I instinctively check if the door is locked before I return to my thoughts. Slowly, the room had lost its shape. Thick steam spread throughout, until all but my own body disappeared. It gave me a strange sense of comfort. As a kid, my parents joked about buying one of those leashes for children, since I always ran off. Benny's fading footsteps prompt mine to the bath. With an audible sigh, I step inside. Slowly, the water rises, reaching over my shoulders, halting just below the edge.

I had another job interview today, followed by another decline. This recruiter remarked, besides my lack of experience, my surname too. He asked if it was Moroccan and, when I mentioned it was Turkish, if I was aware of prejudice.

I breathe in deeply.

He went on talking about a trip he took to Egypt, saying how beautiful the weather is there, everyday thinking about returning there. Wonderful. He had not conceived I couldn't care less and that the reason for my visit had been professional, not to witness his geological dysfunction. He had barely looked at my portfolio.

I try to relax my hands again. Stress manifests in my body, my psychologist once told me. Before she could help me decompress, she had become too expensive. My parents told me to eat more fruits, as if I-

"Ellen! Turn off the damn noise!"

I jolt up and turn off the speaker, the bath's water in turmoil. Outside, the seagulls scream as loud as they can, intertwined with the foghorns wailing at the regular oil tankers cruising past. The water still in a frenzy, I submerge myself again. It had been a low point, accepting Benny's offer to work as his caretaker. It had been a decisive end to the quest for a job in cinematography. I had obtained a diploma, but apparently I needed at least two years experience for a role as an intern, pouring coffee. It means I will probably have to spend the summer at Benny's too. I detest how joyful my parents had been when Benny's house appeared upon arrival. A desolate wooden shack wedged between dunes. As my parents looked gleefully over the sea's expanse, it had become clear this was their impression of success: leaving their only daughter, secluded from friends, with an old, dependent man. As a final "told you".

"Hey, Ellen, I told you, no smoking here!" Benny yells. Startled, I awake from my thoughts.

"Maybe it's the gardener!" I yell back. "Don't think so! He's off for the weekend, cut it out!"

Frustrated, I press the cigarette out on the ashtray somewhere beside the bath. Once more I submerge myself, until I can only hear my breath. Benny came from a family of six. His father had a company making tires, now gone, his mother took care of the children. Benny and his siblings had all inherited their own home. He spent his days gardening dead cacti and explaining how modest his upbringing had been. He had laughed triumphantly when a president had crossed some overseas territory, probably because, being born right after the Second World War, he would now miss the draft for the second time. He refuses to listen to music of my generation, because he thinks that strengthens his character, and, frankly, it does.

Entangled in my frustrations, a loud, rumbling noise prompts me to open my eyes again. I look up towards the surface, the sea water faintly burning my eyes and lungs. A large oil tanker looms overhead. Even floating far underneath, the vessel looks huge, blocking out the sun.

Following the ship, the rumbling noise grows stronger and stronger, until the enormous gnawing motors become ear-deafening. I close my eyes, try covering my ears against the violence, feel my body being swept away by its currents. I had grown indifferent. Rich people were paedophiles. Surprise. Another war broke out. Surprise. Antifa was now a terrorist organisation. Interesting, as it is not an organisation. Something about oil. Oil, oil, oil, sold by people old enough to be flammable themselves. Surprise. But, restaurants in the area now use paper straws. Honestly, surprise. Benny pried long enough at my angry worldview until I kept it to myself. With no outlet, you need only so many depressing headlines until you decide to change strategy, to try feeling away from it all. Perhaps whilst you cradle yourself back to sleep with the illusion of future riches, or a nice vacation. Rapture, even. I float through the ocean, waiting for the sky to split open. Yet, I only notice faint streaks from a lighthouse, glossing over the water. I shiver, the current slowly pulling on me. Benny would look out over the ocean like an old sailor and tell stories of better days. Days past, as if it was a battle long lost. I wonder what he feels when he watches the ships pass by. He had seen many more than I. Has he ever thought of them as anything other than 'necessary'?

The current calms down again as the smell of wood burning permeates the water. It reminds me of my childhood, sitting next to a campfire. Even I start to think of past days as better days. Had Benny tried to light the stove himself? Turned it on and tripped? I turn to the seabed. Bright yellow and green seaweeds cover the seafloor, sparsely visited by fishes. Benny's drowsy voice echoes through the seas: "Come here, girl. We ought to put a leash on you. Where are you trying to swim to?" I don't know? Someplace else. Benny always reminded me of a barnacle, the way he prides himself in his firm clamping to ships and the way he enjoys the opening of the flesh. Inert, I float through the ebbing of the sea, my hair draped around me as if a veil. More memories float by. Swimming in the sea, for the first

time. Diving down, turning stones to see what fish were hiding. Beautiful ones, in all colours, undisturbed by the bidding of those overseas. Returning to the surface, telling my mother, her, far away on the beach, yelling back I shouldn't swim too far out, having never set foot in the sea herself that day. I remember being disappointed, wanting to show her what covers the sea bed, diving down again and again, looking for shells, but they were all lived in, until I found a beautiful empty one, curling into a sharp point, swimming towards the shore, showing my mother, and my mother, she only nodded, telling me that it wasn't mine, or for me, that I should throw it away. I held the shell to my ear, and only heard a loud, deafening rumble, of engines, gnawing, taking me home again, and the sea, becoming a memory again-

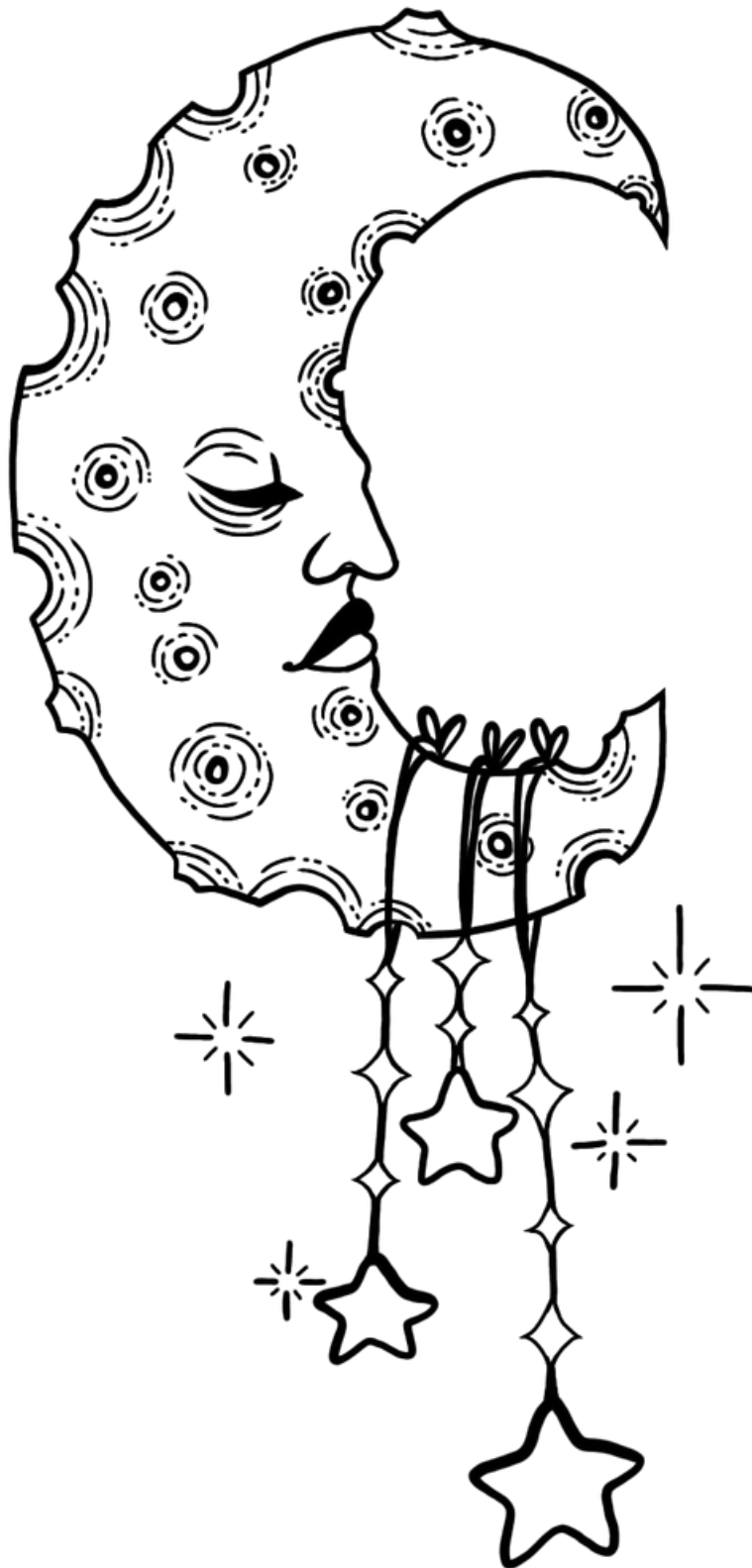
With a loud, softened thumb, I am thrown on wet sand. "See how beautiful it is here?" someone familiar yells. Gasping for air, I look toward the noise. It is the recruiter, sitting on a small stool on the beach. Standing next to him are my parents, pointing their thumbs up toward me. The recruiter laughs, before he yells: "And, action!" I hear a clapping sound. Still barely able to breathe, Benny's voice returns: "He fills you with warmth, doesn't he?" Suddenly, hands reach over my body, dragging me toward the dunes. I try to scream, but only gurgling emerges. Benny can only laugh, triumphantly. Taken over his shoulder, the surroundings become brighter as a cracking noise grows louder, before I feel the fire's warmth.

Benny puts me down, facing the fire, as a howling voice emerges: "You must smash your altars, your sacred stones. Six days you shall labour, but on the seventh day, you may rest." I attempt to catch my breath, as the deafening roaring of the fire grows louder.

A tear runs over my cheek as I reply.

"What else is there?"

The tear boils on my face, Benny's shack ablaze. It had been, for a while now.



*If It's Friday Again,
Burn Those Jeans*

a short story
by Yazan Berke

Alexia slammed the car door shut. It sounded like an ending. "He was tall, though," she said after a bit, staring at her phone screen in the back of the Uber.

"Yeah? Found his Instagram yet?" Britt leaned over. "Let me see."

"So if he's, like, mmh, like my index finger high on the phone, how tall is he in real life, like math?"

Britt snorted. "You're maybe too drunk for this. Give me."

"Okay, okay." Alexia handed over the phone.

"Something to compare, let me see." Britt scrolled through the pictures. "Okay, there's a dog. How tall is a dog? He's like 5 dogs high. Wait, never mind. Alright, nice. I think the cabinet in the background is the super popular IKEA one. He's like six of those cubes or something? Let's see."

Britt opened a browser and started typing. "How tall... IKEA cabinet... yeah, that one, Kallax. How tall... IKEA Kallax... one cube." She squinted at the search results. "Okay, 37 centimetres per cube. Let me put it times six... that's 2.22 meters. Huh. What?"

"What?" Alexia asked.

"What?" The Uber driver echoed, his eyes flicking to the rearview mirror. "Sorry."

"Maybe I'm too drunk for this too," Britt said, putting her phone down. "Never mind. Tell me, how did you meet? How was it?"

"He was nice, but a bit different."

"Why?"

"He came up to me and said he was stuck in a time thing and that he was living tonight over and over."

"Weirdo," Britt said. "Was he on drugs or just drunk?"

"I don't think so? He looked normal. He told me he talked to me like a hundred times before today, and that every time, I got super drunk and threw up on him."

"Terrible pickup line. Girl, just dismiss--"

"Yeah, yeah, but..." She sank lower in her seat. "I was kinda super drunk, and, you know..."

"Alex."

A muffled laugh came from the front. "Like *Pride and Prejudice*, nice."

"What? No? Maybe? Never mind," Britt said, waving a hand.

"Maybe I'm too drunk for this as well," the driver replied.

"What?" Britt's eyes widened.

"It's a joke," said the driver, enjoying their back and forth.

"Okay." Britt wasn't amused. "Back to the throwing up, Alex."

"He wasn't surprised, though. He was wearing a rain poncho, one of the cheap and ugly ones.

Who wears a cheap ugly rain poncho to a club?"

"It's not your fault, sweetie. Your stomach is sensitive, and you mixed a lot of stuff. Come here." Alexia leaned over, resting her head on Britt's shoulder.

"Not really. I didn't mix anything. I drank gin and tonic all night."

"It's okay; that's also two different things."

"I'm such a bad person. You always have to take care of me." Alexia put a bit more weight on Britt's shoulder.

"No worries, sweetheart. You're my friend." Britt put her hand on Alexia's back, patting her softly.

"He was sweet, though. We talked a bit before you picked me up. It's just-- oh no."

"Oh no what?"

"I don't have my heels."

"How can you lose your heels?"

"How can you not notice?"

"I don't stare at your feet. Okay, we should go back."

"No, it's alright. I'm too tired. Probably someone already took them."

"Don't be ridiculous. We're not that far away." Britt leaned toward the front seat and talked to the driver. A few minutes later, they pulled up to the curb next to the club and got out of the car.

"Hey, you're still here," Alexia called out to a figure sitting on a nearby bench.

The figure stood up, revealing a surprising height. His eyes widened. "What? How? You never came back before."

"Who's this?" Britt asked.

"That's the guy!" Alexia replied.

"Oh my, he might actually be 2.22 meters," Britt said. Her gaze dropped. "Wait. Those are her heels that you're wearing."

The guy, David, looked down embarrassed. "Yeah, sorry. Every time you leave, I just sit here and entertain myself until it resets again." He abruptly started taking off the shoes.

"Until what resets?" Britt asked.

"He means the time thing he talked about, the living the same day again and again thing," Alexia explained.

"I know this sounds crazy," David said, "but believe me. This is the first time you have met me, but I have met you so many times. Again and again, I fall in love with your laugh, the way you separate your hair from your lipstick, your jokes about the French."

"Oh yeah," Alexia chuckled. "What separates humans from animals?"

"Belgium", Britt interrupted. "Yeah, nice. Cool cool. Can we get the shoes?"

He handed them to her.

"The time loop stuff, kinda romantic, no?" Alexia said, drifting closer. "Tell me again."

David shrugged. "We always start by cleaning up."

Alexia winced. "Sorry. I mixed a lot of stuff."

"It's okay. I was prepared." David replied, pointing to his rain poncho in the trash can. "Then we vibe and talk for a while. Best night of my life. Every night. Every life. But then it ends without a promise for tomorrow. Sometimes I fuck it up, or get too afraid, too excited. Sometimes you leave when I'm in the toilet."

"You were so sweet, but I had to go," Alexia said. "I'm sorry. I wasn't feeling well. I just wanted to get out for some air, and then it felt easy to just leave. And I was craving a döner, which, actually, where did I put it?"

"I understand. I'm used to this," David said, his shoulders slumping. "Also, maybe I don't want something serious right now. I'm also busy. I don't know. I'm sorry. I feel more and more like this when I wake up in today again. Some days, I also run away right after we talk, because I'm convinced it didn't start as the story of my dreams. But honestly, I'm losing my motivation to try one more time. Countless times I've taught you how to pronounce my name, told you about my siblings, listened to your rants. I love it, but I also know that nothing will happen between us."

"Why not ask her out, say something, get her number?" Britt crossed her arms. "Are you stuck in the same day because you're too afraid that she will say no?"

"You're like 2 meters, my guy," the Uber driver added. "Face and hair could be improved, and maybe go to the gym a bit more often."

"By the way," Britt said, looking David up and down. "You lived this day a hundred times, and you wore skinny jeans each time?"

"That's concerning," Alexia said.

"Great," David grumbled. "Stuck in a time loop, and I still get mocked for my pants. They're comfy, okay?"

Britt rolled her eyes. "Sorry, back to your fear of rejection." Her voice softened. "It's a lame excuse to get stuck in time."

"Are you scared that I'd say no?" Alexia asked. "Why? Just ask away, what will you lose?"

"I'm not scared of you saying no." David sat back down on the bench and looked at the pavement. "I don't know how to say this."

"What then?"

"I think I'm more scared of you saying yes."

"But isn't that what you want?" Alexia asked, confused.

"Yes, but then what? We wake up the next morning and continue our lives together? Happily ever after?" David took an anxious breath. "I'm scared. It's cosy to live in today. I feel safe. I realised this after a couple of times. It's a terrifying responsibility to go forward in life, so why bother?"

Alexia and Britt sat down on the bench next to him, leaving a bit of distance, but sitting close enough to show empathy.

"Okay, let's say this is happening," Britt said softly. "Then what else? You have a lot of time. What do you even do? Do you read? Learn an instrument? Are you a genius now?"

"Well", David said, letting out a long breath. "I also thought I finally had enough time to work on my passions. But no, I've been scrolling most of the time. I have seen more AI brainrot than a human mind should be capable of."

"Then why come back here?" Britt asked sceptically. "Just go explore, do stuff? Memorise lottery numbers? You have infinite time."

"Lotteries don't pay the same day, but also, I don't want to be anywhere else."

"Why?"

"If I go somewhere else, I'll miss the highlight of my day." He looked at Alexia.

"Oh my god," Britt groaned, "you people are sometimes so unnecessarily dramatic."

"People stuck in time loops?" David asked.

"Men," Britt replied.

"Okay, I get it, but it's good. Today feels fine; I'm used to it."

"Then you're stuck here forever?" Britt said. "You're an idiot. I look into your eyes and can actually see someone who has lived through this a hundred times. What will change?"

"I was looking for a sign," David said, his voice quiet. "Maybe this is it, the universe made you get your heels back."

"Cinderella", the driver called out.

"Kinda?" Britt replied, turning back to the car.

The driver was cleaning the back seat. "Also, I found your döner."

"Oh, there it is," Alexia said. "I'm so sorry..."

"Cinderella had to leave before midnight, before the magic wore off." Britt continued.

"People start going out at midnight here."

"Pre-pre-drinking times," Alexia replied while turning her gaze to David, who was watching her with an expression she couldn't quite read. "But yeah, so you got your sign. Are we now supposed to kiss under the stars, so you won't be stuck in time anymore?"

"I don't know," David said, his voice barely a whisper. "Never made it this far. I'm not sure if there's a rulebook for this."

He looked at the night sky. "I guess I'm scared of the day after today being tomorrow."

"It's okay," Britt said with a calmer voice. "I get it. It sucks when too many emotions mix together."

"Not really," David said, trying to find the light-polluted stars. "It's just feeling optimistic without motivation."

"It's okay, that's also tw--" Britt began.

"It's okay, that's also two different things," Alexia interrupted, sitting more straight with clarity.

"I think I'm undergoing character development."

"Yeah?" Britt asked semi-proudly.

"Yeah. What I want to say is, I don't think life is a pile of good stuff and bad stuff. It's more of a cocktail. It's a pile of fun stuff and other stuff. And you can't always drink the fun stuff by itself. You need the other things to make the fun stuff feel less irresponsible, or you wake up with a headache the next day. But if overthinking future headaches makes your head ache the same amount, maybe just overdo it instead."

"Okay Alextotle," Britt said, hooking her arm through Alexia's and gently steering her toward the open car door. "That's a good amount of wisdom for today."

Alexia paused, one foot inside the Uber, and looked back at him. "Hey. If you wake up and it's actually Saturday, find me and DM me. If it's Friday again, burn those jeans."

The door slammed dramatically, then opened a couple of seconds later.

Alexia stumbled back onto the sidewalk and walked towards him.

"Hey," she said. "Just to be clear."

"Yeah?"

"I'm also terrified."

He looked into her eyes and smiled.

"Like, properly terrified," she continued, words tumbling out faster now. "You got to live Friday a hundred times, but I get one shot every day, and I'm already catastrophizing about how I'll mess it up, and also I will definitely throw up on you again, like—"

"Alexia—"

"And-- and I don't know if I'm ready for things, and my life is a mess, and I mix drinks and lose shoes, and I'm not—"

He hugged her. It was tight and solid. No stars, no fireworks.

"Okay," she said, wiping her face.

"Okay?"

"Yeah."

"Wanna be terrified together?"

Alexia laughed, looking back at David's eyes. "Tomorrow?"

"Yes."

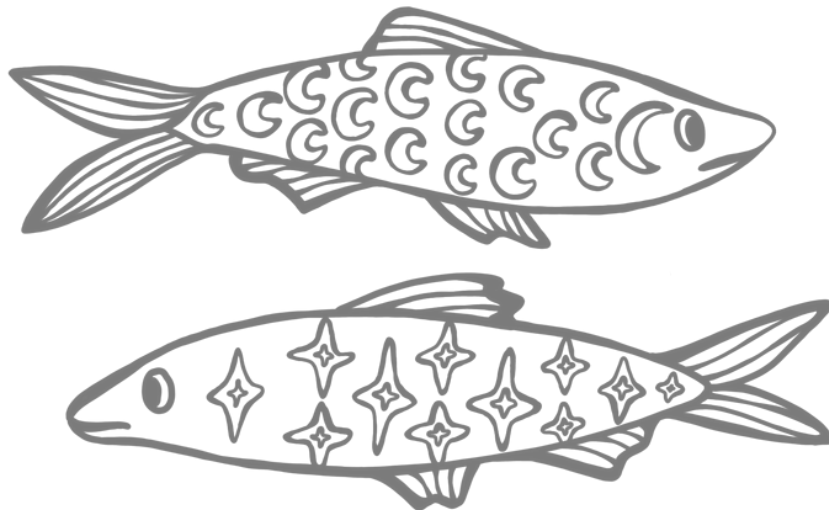
"Promise?"

"Promise."

She got back in and slammed the car door shut. This time, it sounded like a beginning.

Snapshots of Unreality

a series of photos
by Femke Kapteijns











Some Dreams Take Their Time

Allyson Geduld

When *Lolly Willowes* was published in 1926, a woman like Lolly was not expected to want a life of her own. Seen as radical at the time, Sylvia Townsend Warner's novel tells the story of a woman who rejects the life that has been arranged for her and chooses freedom through unexpected alliances. She becomes a witch, turning into a symbol of resistance against patriarchal constraint. This reading is important, because it still shapes how we discuss the novel today. However, there is another narrative in the novel that interests me; one that is mentioned less often.

Spring has a habit of celebrating beginnings that arrive on time. Buds break when they should. Youth is praised for knowing early what it wants. Desire is admired when it is loud, ambitious, and visible. Literature, too, often favours a young awakening: the first love, the first rebellion, the first moment of personhood. In contrast, *Lolly Willowes* offers a woman who blooms late.

Laura "Lolly" Willowes does not awaken in her youth. She does not rebel dramatically, nor does she escape society's expectation through romance or ambition. Her transformation comes after years of "usefulness" to her family. By the time Lolly begins to want something for herself, the world had already decided she no longer needed desire at all. She has passed the age of wanting.

That alone is a quietly radical theme.

For much of the novel, Lolly exists as an accessory. She is helpful, unobtrusive, endlessly accommodating. Her life is shaped not by choice, but by expectation; the kind that presents itself as kindness. When her father dies, she is absorbed into her brother's household almost without question, as though this were simply the natural course of action for a single woman. For a long time, Lolly seems to agree.

What makes *Lolly Willowes* stand out is how little happens, and yet how much those moments contain. Warner does not give us a dramatic breaking point. There is no single injustice that pushes Lolly toward escape. Rather there is an accumulation of small, polite sacrifices that quietly erode one's identity. Days blur into years. Life becomes something that happens around her. Lolly's awakening is not a sudden burst into bloom. It is more like thawing; slow,

almost imperceptible at first. A growing discomfort. A sense that something inside her has been kept dormant for too long. When Lolly eventually leaves London for the countryside, it is not framed as a triumphant escape. It feels tentative, even modest. She does not announce her transformation; she simply begins to live differently. She chooses solitude. She chooses quiet.

She chooses space. In a literary tradition that often equates female fulfilment with attachment to lovers, families, and futures, Lolly's desire is shocking in its simplicity. She wants less. Less noise. Less obligation. Less performance.

And then, of course, she becomes a witch.

To bloom late is often framed as failure, regret, or loss. Lolly rejects all three. Her life does not "catch up". It does not become productive or impressive. It simply becomes hers. Reading *Lolly Willowes* now, it is hard not to feel how relevant her resistance remains. In a culture that values constant visibility and measurable success, Lolly's late blooming feels subversive. She reminds us that not all awakenings announce themselves, and that some of the most meaningful ones happen quietly, after the world has decided you are done growing. Perhaps that is the gift of this novel. It asks us to reconsider what it means to bloom, and when. To imagine a season, traditionally known to belong to the young and certain, but now also to the ones that take their time.

Because sometimes, the most radical thing a life can do is begin; slowly, deliberately, long after it was supposed to be over.

And if you are reading this feeling behind, as though your dreams arrived too late or softened while you were busy surviving, let *Lolly Willowes* offer a gentler truth. Some dreams do not shout; they wait. They settle quietly beneath the noise of obligation and routine, asking only for time and a listening ear. Not all dreams belong to youth, and not all awakenings announce themselves. Spring does not measure how long a dream has slept; only whether you are willing to wake it now.

on becoming god

Rita Castro

on becoming god: to be fully oneself in one's body, something I can only ever dream of and that to me sounds godlike

How does one become god? I think it is as much a matter of psychosis as it is of spiritual transcendence. Melyn Chow, the creator of becoming god, understands this and seems to suggest that, at the final level of attaining holiness, the two are the same.

Chow was raised in a family of first-generation Christians in Singapore. She grew up with the Christian faith being strongly emphasised yet fraught, as her family's history with traditional religion was never fully broken. Her interest in the family's temple in Malaysia, where one uncle still lived, was always shut off by her parents, and all ties to her non-Christian heritage were made inaccessible territory. In becoming god, she revisits and visits that part of herself. Visits, literally, the research work for the performance having been done on location. She travelled to Malaysia to visit her uncle, a Chinese tang ki - a sort of medium through whose body the gods speak. The offering of one's body as an oracle is a practice called 跳童, loosely translated as "youth who dances under the influence of spirits". Chow transposes this embodied spirituality to the choreography as what connects the human and the divine.

The performance begins with the artists running across and around the room, dancing playfully and tracing shapes that appear random at first. Interwoven with the mass of spectators, the stage starts to form itself seemingly organically through the crowd's bodily responses to the dancers' movement. At some point, the audience is confronted with its own physicality, when legs start to feel tired, lower backs start aching and feet get sore. In what could be read like a pride contest, everyone endures their discomfort until one first person resigns themselves to the floor. Almost everyone else follows. The performance becomes, almost as if unintentionally, more floor-oriented, with major moments being staged for the sitting spectator.

Chow's half naked body, covered in red dye and beer, is strenuously moving two centimetres across from our faces. We cannot keep our eyes off it - looking wherever we please, with more self-conscious spectators making the effort to hold the gaze up to her face - utterly

magnetic. And yet she never faces us – would it get too sensually intense if she did? Her moving body doesn't mind the audience at all, who shrugs and shifts, uncomfortable in its spatial awareness, so as not to be hit by the frenzied subject. The mind and body of the performer feel entirely automated yet entirely devoted, absent and present in impossible coexistence. This moment, whatever it may be – religious frenzy, erotic apotheosis – feels too overly intimate to be displayed, but she wants to share it with us. This ability to build intimacy with a group of strangers is, to me, the ultimate signifier of holiness.

At the end, the performance reaches a climax, but the performers do as well. Growingly ecstatic looks on their faces, lifeless eyes fixated on the void suggesting that they themselves transcended and are existing on a different plane than the audience. After edging impossibility time and time again, they finally reach it by heaping into a human tower, or pyramid, or simply an undetermined mound, moving, flying, terrifying.

Everyone holds their breath _____pause_____ I am still holding mine.

becoming god is at the Frascati Theatre in Amsterdam until March 28th.

Find Me in the Clouds

a photo collage

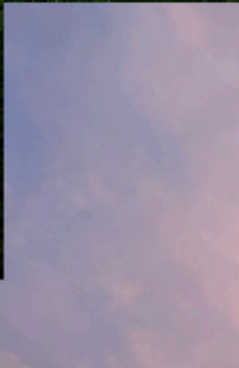
by Nena Mandziak



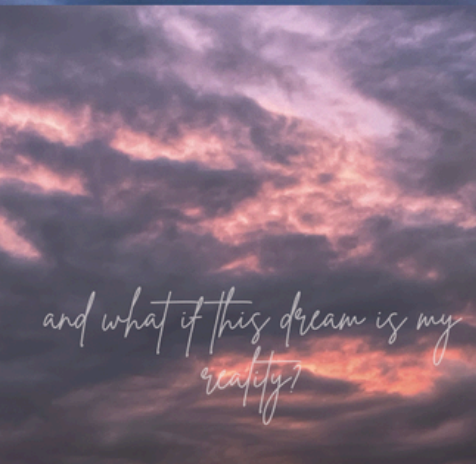
meet me at our meadow



dream
dream
dream



i don't want
to wake up



*and what if this dream is my
reality?*



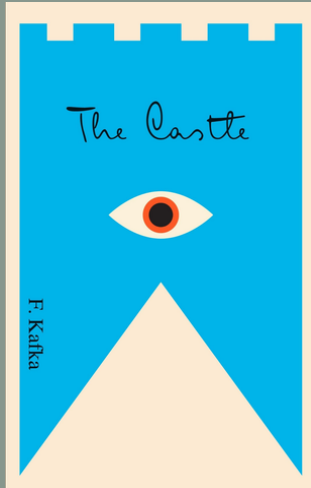
Literary Community Highlights 2026

by Femke Kapteijns



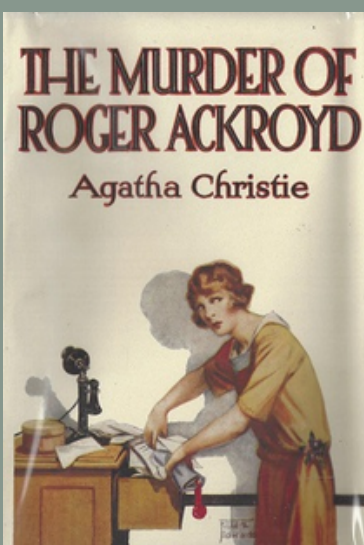
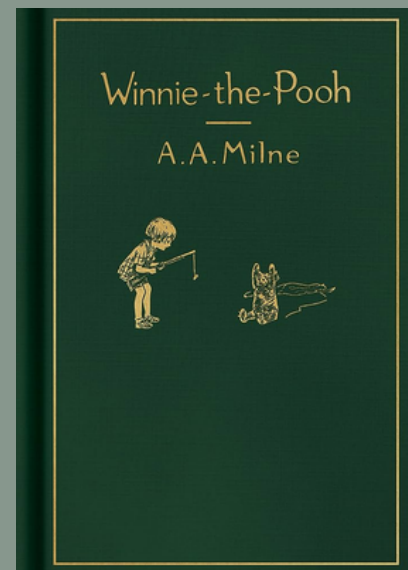
Book anniversaries

In the year of 2026, there are many novels which will be celebrating their anniversaries. Here are some important ones:



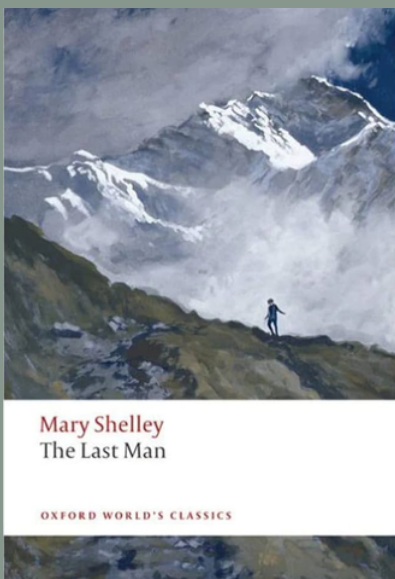
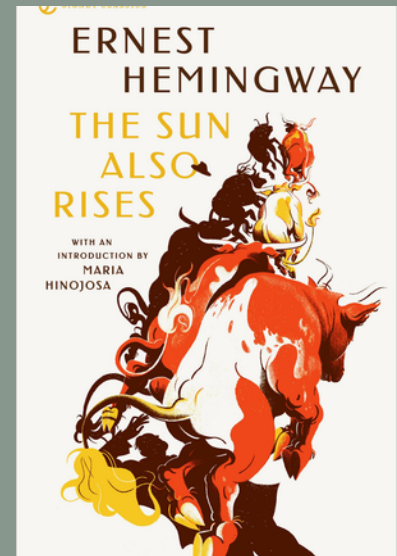
You may be familiar with the name Franz Kafka, but did you know that his novel *The Castle* is celebrating its 100th birthday this year? And, did you also know that this novel was never meant to be published? Before his death, Kafka instructed his best friend, fellow writer and intellectual Max Brod, to get rid of all his unpublished manuscripts. Despite Kafka's request, Brod published the novel, which ends abruptly mid-sentence, anyway.

The loveable creatures in *Winnie the Pooh* by A. A. Milne will also be 100 years old this year. With over 50 million copies sold and a few successful Disney movie adaptations, it can be safely assumed that the titular bear and his friends have brought comfort to many people around the world. Fun fact: Winnie the Pooh is one of the few fictional characters to have a star in the Hollywood Walk of Fame, along figures like Kermit the Frog, Snoopy, and Batman.



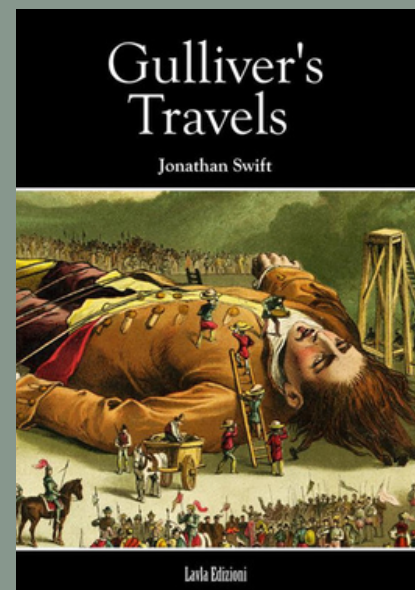
Next up, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie is celebrating its 100th birthday this year as well. In this third installation of the Hercule Poirot series, the retired detective is asked to investigate, well, the murder of Roger Ackroyd. With this novel, Christie managed to turn the conventions of the detective story on its head. Want to find out how exactly, give the novel a read ;)

Another novel to turn 100 this year is *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway. With this cynical exploration of the Lost Generation, the generation that came of age during the first World War, Hemingway managed to establish himself as one of the most significant authors of the 20th century. Some trivia: Hemingway credits Gertrude Stein, whom you may remember from the Literary History IV course, with creating the term 'Lost Generation'.



Her novel *Frankenstein* may be the most famous work that Mary Shelley has ever written, but her other novel *The Last Man* is just as fascinating. And what's more, it's turning 200 this year! In this piece of dystopian fiction, humanity has begun to die out due to an unstoppable plague. In the wake of humanity's disappearance, nature and other species start to reclaim the planet. Thus, Shelley asks the question which is becoming more prevalent every day: wouldn't the world be better off without the constant destruction that humanity brings with itself?

Lastly, the fictional travelogue *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift is celebrating its 300th anniversary this year. In this renowned work, originally titled *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World. In Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships*, the titular narrator Gulliver travels to the lands of Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa, Balnibarbi, Luggnagg, Glubbudubdrib, Japan, and the Land of the Houyhnhnms. Additionally, in the fourth part of the book Swift coined the term 'yahoo', meaning a rude or stupid person.



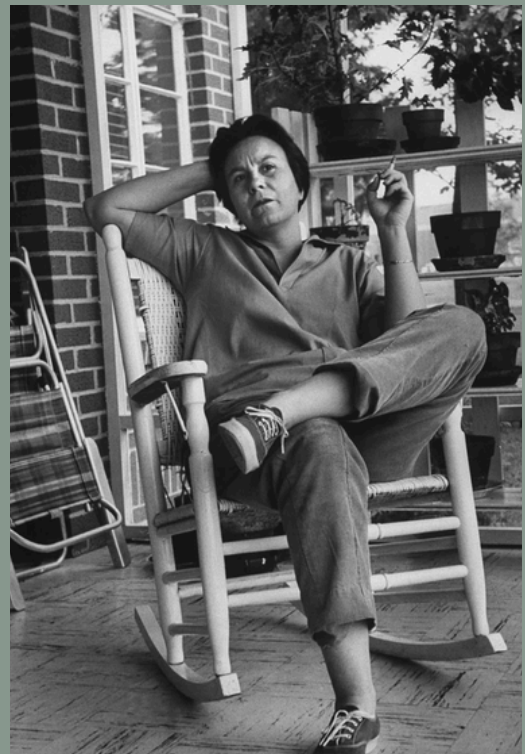
Author anniversaries

Now, there are also some writers who are celebrating their 100th anniversary, or their centenary as some might say.



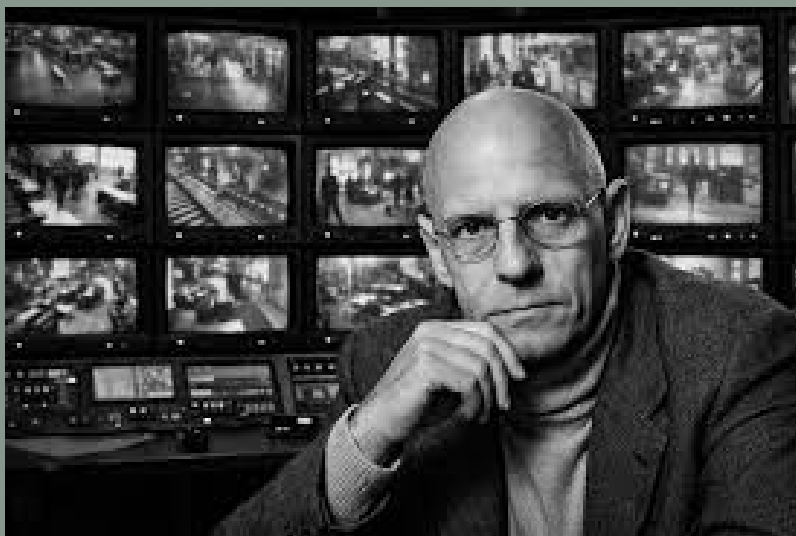
Who amongst us isn't familiar with the loveable raincoat wearing bear Paddington. His creator, the British author Thomas Michael Bond was born in 1926 and sadly passed away in 2017. Still, his legacy lives on in everyday pop culture. Fun fact: the entire *Paddington Bear* series is comprised of 29 official pieces of writing, including 13 main novels, a few short stories and some picture books.

Harper Lee, author of *To Kill a Mockingbird* was also born in 1926. Growing up in Alabama, her own experiences and those of her father, who was a lawyer, served as the inspiration for this famous novel. Her novel, which touches on the subjects of racial and judicial injustice in the American South, is still widely integrated in the school curriculums of the United States. Let's hope that it will stand its ground during the current onslaught of book bans going on in the USA.





Comic book fans will definitely know the name, but for those who don't, René Goscinny is the creator of the Asterix comics. Born in 1926, this author has been entertaining generations of people with his stories of the Gaulish Asterix, Obelix and Dogmatix and their defiance against Julius Caesar and his Roman Army. Fun fact: this series has been translated in 95 languages, including Latin, Esperanto and Occitan, as well as in 32 German dialects.



Opinions may be divided on him among literary students, but nobody can deny the impact that Michel Foucault has had on the world of Literary Theory. During your studies here at Utrecht University, you may have encountered his work on biopolitics, heterotopias, and power circulations in the prison system. Furthermore, Foucault has been a pioneering theorist on the concepts of sexuality and madness as social constructs.

Literary Spring Calendar

Once again, the year is packed full with all sorts of fun literary events. From literary fiction to comic books, there is something to read, see and do for everybody.

3 - 5 April: BeLEEF Boeken (Belgium)

11 April: Vertaaldag / Translation Day (NL)

17 - 19 April: Winchester Books festival (UK)

17 - 19 April: Festival du Livre de Paris (France)

19 - 25 April: National Library Week (USA)

21 - 26 April: Cambridge Literary Festival (UK)

21 - 26 April: Cork World Book Fest (Ireland)

21 - 26 April: Cúirt International Festival of Literature (Ireland)

3 May: Strips op de markt / comic books market (NL)

3 May: World Press Freedom Day

7 - 10 May: Stratford Literary Festival (UK)

7 - 10 May: Thessaloniki Book Fair (Greece)

9 May: MH Books Event (NL)

14 - 17 May: Book World Prague (Czech Republic)

15 - 24 May: International Literature Festival Dublin (Ireland)

28 - 31 May: Warsaw International Book Fair (Poland)

29 May - 14 June: Madrik Book Fair (Spain)

Afterword from the editors

And so our Spring edition comes to its final pages. You should take it as a kind of interlude between the seasons, something for you to spend some time with until - oh! The end of winter went away while you were distracted and now everything is softer, warmer, brighter.

A special thank you to all our contributors and the always committed Erato's team.

May Spring be all we trust it to be.

All the love,

rita xx

[...]

Last night it was still so cold

I woke and went out to stand in the yard,

and there was no moon.

So I just stood there, inside the jaw of nothing.

An owl cried in the distance,

I thought of Jesus, how he

crouched in the dark for two nights,

then floated back above the horizon.

“Spring”, Mary Oliver.

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'I want! I want!' (W. Blake 1793)