

The Kleksograph

An international review of art and the subconscious

issue 17, May 2025



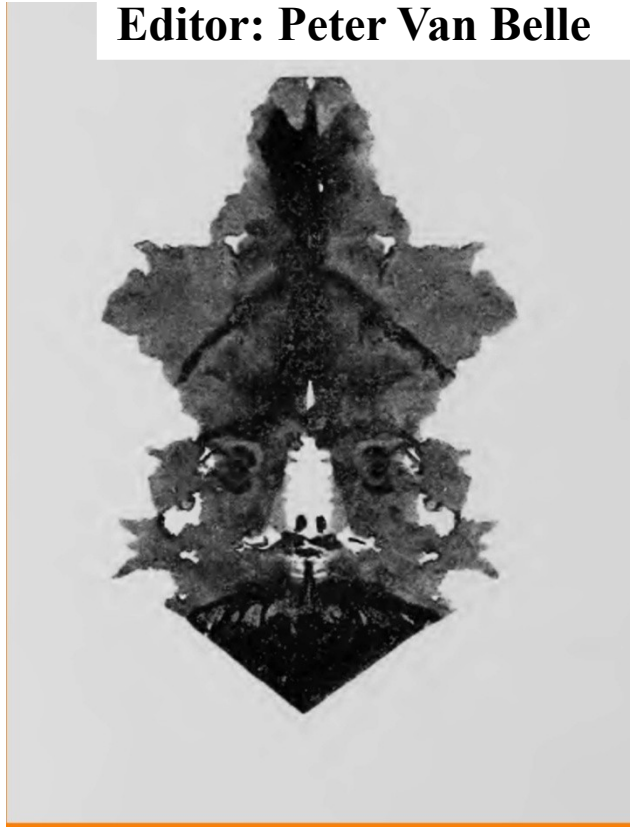
Poetry by Craig Kirchner, David Ryan,
Gerry Fabian, George Moore, Rikki Santer, Peter
Van Belle, David Radavich, Maria Arana, Phil
Wood, Heather Sager, Paul Murgatroyd, and
Martin Elster

Prose by Kevin MacAlan & Annie Bell

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THE KLEKSOGRAPH

Editor: Peter Van Belle



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In the mid-nineteenth century, Justinus Kerner, published his book of “Kleksographien”. Later psychologists used similar ink blots as a means of accessing the subconscious of their patients. The Kleksograph is dedicated to exploring and celebrating the relationship between the subconscious and art.

Cover: Pastel Dreams, Jessica Ballantyne, 2025

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All stories and poems in this magazine are works of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons and events is coincidental.

This magazine can be downloaded free from www.kleksograph.be

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Craig Kirchner

Monolith

I'm early twenties in the sixties,
at a row-house bash in the basement.
The party splits into cliques
the guys from my crowd gather
at the end of the room nearest the keg,
and around one of those six-inch poles
that are probably holding up the building.

Leaning on it, striking matches on it,
shoulders, arms, hands -
at some point everyone realizes
they've touched it, it's part of the crowd,
and starts stroking it, holding on,
squeezing as though it is *it*.
If you're not *in*, you are *out* and sinking.

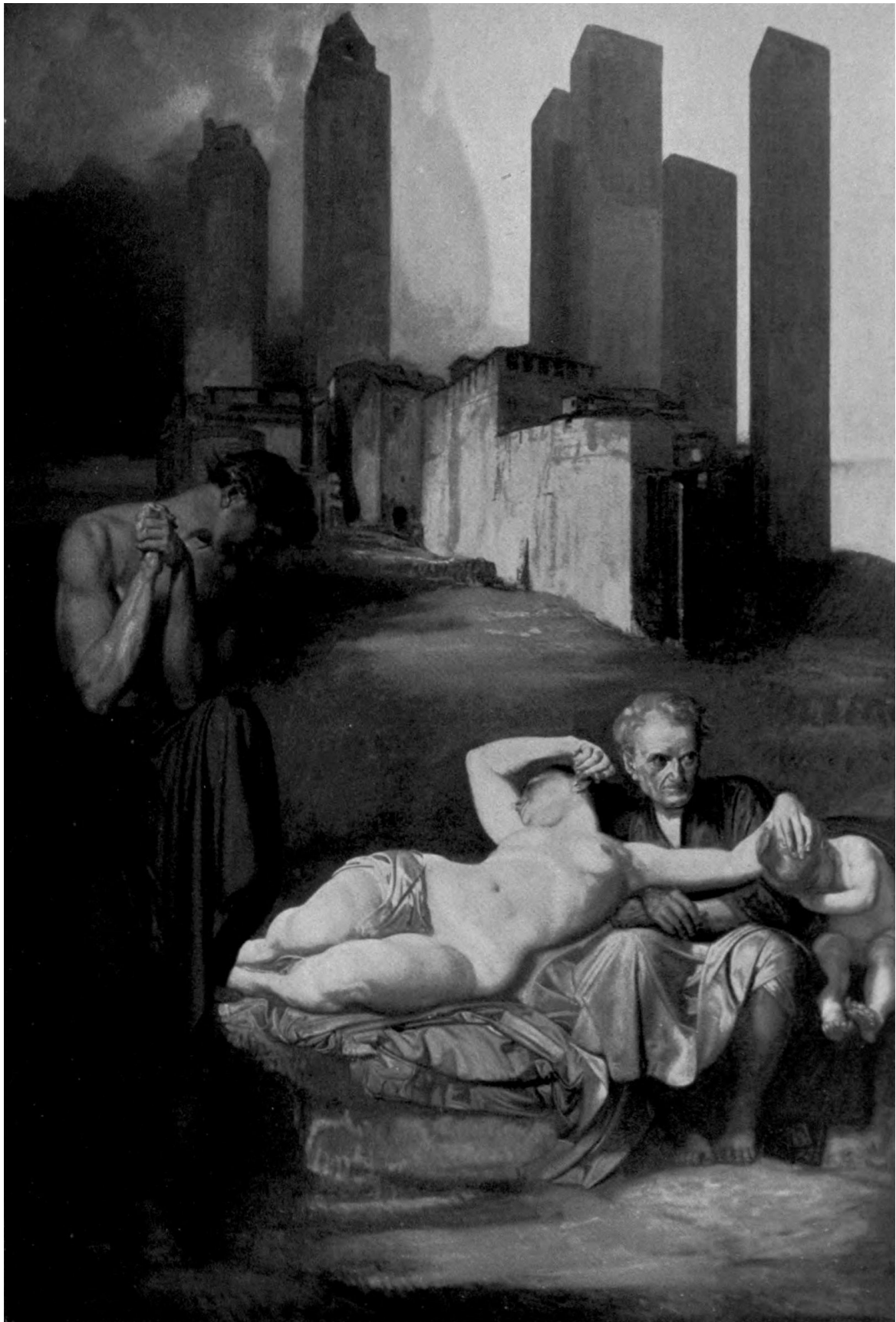
Everyone seems to grasp the 'it' concept
at the same instant, but it remains unsaid –
the sense of epiphany lasts less than seconds,
and then 'it' becomes hysterical,
we eek, carefully approach, caress,
jump back - like the apes in 2001,
freaking around the monolith.

I'm on the floor in a fetal pose with tears,
in between gasps that feel through broken ribs -
every couple of minutes I make sure to touch home,
hold on, high five. Years later the guys,
most of whom can't remember half their firsts,
still talk about the pole party, the green mescaline,
the hardest they ever laughed, feeling like Kubrick.

David Ryan

Excerebration

Perhaps the time for thinking is over.
To discard our thoughts.
Throw our thoughts, onto the fire.
Independent thought is, wrong.
There is no i, only we.
It is dangerous to voice opinion,
Or disagree.
Let's wipe our brains clean.
We could replace the grey matter with brown.
Group thought is the way,
The truth and the.... let's give up the fight.
Let's plug into the mainframe.
 With a chance of those fifteen minutes.
Who needs a free press anyway?
Who needs to question anything anyway?
Let's click the like button.
And let's just watch that thing.
Everybody else is watching.
Let's disorganise humanity
Let's homogenise thought.
Let's sterilize it.
Discard it.
There.
There's an end to our thinking.



Rudolph Jettmar, The Towers of Pride

Gerry Fabian

Missing Lexicography

I've limped
through various situations:
(the blood of an accident victim,
a wordless speaker for a hushed crowd,
a child about to be beaten,
a lie no one realizes,
an empty room,
a missed menstrual cycle,
a stranger in the wrong crowd,
a problem without answers
a lost friend,
a coffin viewing,
an insulting phrase,
an insincere love affair,
and, of course,
a poem no one reads.)
Sometimes,
the words just don't fit.

Kevin MacAlan

The Real McCoy

Malcolm McCoy's features softened, relinquishing more of their twisted expression of terror with each reassuring stroke of his mother's gentle hand. He relaxed, sinking back into the soft pillow, and gave in to the benevolent tugging at his hairline as her palm brushed upwards from his moist brow into his tousled greying locks. Mrs McCoy senior knew how to ease his fear, teasing at his temples with her cold bony fingertips, in a way his wife, the other Mrs McCoy, had never understood. So, at the age of forty-seven, Malcolm, after waking from a bad dream, was soothed once more by his doting mother.

The next day Malcolm didn't wake until early afternoon, this had been happening recently following his disturbed nights. He rose cheerfully enough, and threw on brightly coloured summer clothes. Outside the sun shone. The Alanstown streets were dusty and hot. Dry dirt, blown off the road by passing traffic, stuck to his clammy skin. The house had been empty, apart from his wife, who had been her usual uncommunicative self. Thank heavens they were childless. This was by choice; they had wanted to focus on each other. Right now, he loathed her. He had to get out. Why couldn't she be more like his mother? The house was untidy, even smelly. He cooked her meals, which she left, and they hadn't slept together since their last terrible row. He couldn't even remember why they had fought.

The town was too hot for comfort. Malcolm walked along the service road bringing noisy fume-spewing trucks to the industrial site, he turned down the backstreets past the railway station heading to O'Donovan Rossa Quay and the possibility of a cool breeze blowing off the estuary. Down one lane, The Coliseum Cinema, the pre-cineplex jewel in the crown for Alanstown filmgoers, clung to commercial life by offering air-conditioned comfort and non-stop adult matinees. This month, a retrospective of vintage porn was advertised with arthouse style pride. Malcolm felt drawn, he sought the coolness, but feared the trap that he sensed had already been sprung.

Déjà vu prickled his skin, disturbing the hairs at the back of his neck, as the ticket girl called him 'lover' and took his money. "Making the most of this last week, eh?" she beamed. He climbed the steps into darkness, and was put off balance by the tilted floor in the auditorium. A ten-foot image of a woman's breast bounced in slow motion on the screen which filled the end wall of the plushly decorated theatre. Beneath the screen which Malcolm felt compelled to not look at, a small stage with a recess housing an ornate organ gave clues to a forgotten past. Figures shuffled in the

shadows. Malcolm found a seat, not too close to anyone else, and rested with his eyes closed, in the cool but stale atmosphere.

“You’ve not come to give me grief have ye?” A familiar voice disturbed Malcolm’s peace. Instinctively he opened his eyes, and glimpsed on the screen a woman pulling a near-transparent negligee about her. He gripped the arms of his seat, and scrunched his eyes hard shut, but the scene was well known to him, and from the soundtrack alone he watched it play out inside his head.

“I’ve come for my money,” replied a tanned man in workman’s clothes, his pronounced musculature poorly hidden beneath a tight white T-shirt.

“I don’t have it,” Malcolm heard the woman say. “But I’m sure we can come to some arrangement.”

Malcolm’s eyelids were heavy after his sleepless night. The air-conditioning was enticing, but he felt he should leave. This all had a very familiar ring to it. Had he been here before? Was his argument with his wife about money? Loud music crackled, groans and sighs were dubbed on top, but the dialogue stopped, and Malcolm was able to compose himself. On screen he saw the woman’s grimaces, hard to define as either pain or pleasure, but he closed his eyes to them and took comfort from the anonymous confusion of sound and dark, the comfortable chair, and the chilled air.

“So, this is a dream,” he reasoned. “Ireland’s never this hot, and I’m an accountant!” he remembered, as if pulling prickly facts from a tarpit of bewilderment. “I have a job. Although... did I come here with someone from the office? For the craic?” He thought of a time before the madness, when he had loved his wife. She had reminded him of his mother. Visions of his mother as a young woman haunted him somehow. She’d been an actress, but never made it to the top. She gave up when she married Malcolm’s father, but Malcolm knew she had tried. She’d scratched a living, hanging on for her big break. It never came. Years later, after marriage and after his mother’s death, Malcolm had seen a short film his mother had made when she was younger. In the film, she was the spitting image of his wife. That’s how the visions haunted him. He lived with them. Even married them.

Malcolm opened his eyes. The image on the screen dissolved, first into a psychedelic kaleidoscope, then a split screen mirrored pair, both portraits of the same woman, one reversed, both naked, rocking back and forth astride the workman, from the workman’s point of view. The intended artfulness of the scene came from reducing the colour pallet to just the primaries, then slowly bleeding out the hues to leave two pulsating monochrome reflections divided by the vertical axis, like an animated Rorschach test. Malcolm remembered this part of the dream. Remembered

it was all fun and games, him and Patrick, until the image before him now. A tangle that had haunted him. His wife and his mother, both portraits of the same woman. The woman on the screen. Malcolm's heart raced, his breathing deepened, but the air was thin. He felt faint, but daredn't leave the cinema until he could remember what happened next. A month of sleepless nights had foretold of this moment, and now he couldn't remember what was the dream, and what was real. He forced himself to watch.

The next scene showed Malcolm with his hands around the whore's throat. He couldn't help it; it was written for him. He hadn't wanted to, but as he looked at the stirring crowd he knew he had them; they were his so long as he did as they asked. They willed him on, urged him to do it. His wife choked.

"Oh!" voiced Malcolm in shock, and he woke himself from a light slumber. He jolted upright, noisily. The screen flashed pictures of a woman in a shower.

"Keep it down back there!" somebody yelled from the front. A murmur of laughter passed around. Malcolm had to leave. The ticket girl winked at him as he stumbled down the steps into the incandescent street.

The sun on his back put more of a spring into Malcolm's step, especially as the breeze had picked up and the world seemed very real. Of course this was no dream. That film was at least forty, maybe fifty years old; he could have seen it at any time. What did it matter if parts seemed familiar? The important thing was to get by this nonsense with his wife.

His walk along the service road was less challenging than earlier. The industrial estate was quieter, there was less heavy traffic, and he could think. Was this a case of mistaken identity? Maybe the argument shouldn't have been with his wife at all. Obviously he was troubled. Had he lashed out over something entirely unrelated?

He needed to make things right, get back to work, get back to normal. He walked with the breeze to his back, and passed a yard visible through a chain link fence. A thousand crows gathered on an ancient wall. They unleashed a cacophony of caws and hoarse grating barks as they took to the air. He had never seen so many crows. A murmuration of crows. He dismissed as pareidolia the portrait of his mother they painted in the corner of his eye. Her long dark youthful hair playing in the wind. Her trusting smile slightly twisted into an ironic smirk. His dreams were always like this. Battling. Startling. Struggling in a verisimilitudinous world. He thought perhaps his mother didn't let him have big, comfortable dreams. Strangling his desires because after him her dreams were gone. Maybe one remained, grandchildren. But motherhood had always seemed like a cross she bore.

Malcolm collected groceries on the way home. Perhaps one last effort at making his wife a reconciliatory meal would be successful. He missed her. They were good together. Better than his mother had ever conceded. They needed to talk things through. The two of them. The three of them? The thought chilled Malcolm. He stood at his front door, key poised, unable to enter. He remembered what came next.

He remembered shaking his wife's lifeless body. He remembered his mother, on her deathbed, cursing his marriage, and cursing his wife for not wanting children. And he remembered going to The Coliseum with Philip from work and seeing that exemplar of motherhood on the silver screen. "You've not come to give me grief have ye?" Malcolm whispered, holding his door key in the lock, but not wanting to enter the house.

But wasn't he just being foolish? Hadn't he left his wife, only today, sullen maybe, but alive and well? Hadn't he made her supper last night, as every night this week? In the summer afternoon, standing at his own front door, with the friendly rumble of traffic passing his garden gate not twenty feet away, Malcolm found the courage to turn the key. The hall introduced a much cooler atmosphere, curtains shaded the sun, double glazing silenced the traffic. That smell, he knew.

At the end of the hall, the kitchen door rested ajar. Malcolm lowered his bag of groceries onto the hall table, his eyes fixed on the kitchen, the pulsing drum of his heart in his head. He moved slowly, deliberately, to the door and swung it open, standing back as it arced away from him into the quiet. He sighed audibly, his wife was seated at the table. He turned back for the groceries.

"I've got them son," his mother stood in the hallway, the Centra bag in her hand. Malcolm froze, then staggered into the kitchen. He reached for his wife. Could she see this? Surrounded by plates of congealed food, her pathetic, bloody smile etched permanently onto her trusting face, his wife saw nothing.

"No!" Malcolm's wail punished the air, he stumbled backwards over a chair and crashed to the floor. He looked to the hallway. His mother dropped the groceries and ran to be by his side. Her advance sent Malcolm into frenzy. "You were the audience," he screamed. "It was you willing me on. But I was angry at you!"

"Come on," said his mother, kneeling behind him on the floor and using her lap to cushion his head. "Don't be silly. You can't be angry at your mother."

"But..." Malcolm resisted and tried to get up. He struggled. The tarpit returned. His features softened, relinquishing more of their twisted expression of terror with each reassuring stroke of his mother's bony fingers. He relaxed, giving in to the benevolent tugging at his hairline as her palm brushed upwards from his moist

brow. Whatever it was that had been troubling him, Malcolm McCoy was soothed once more by his doting mother.



Pieter Breughel the Elder, the Seven Deadly Sins: Anger

Rina Thea
automatic drawing: Centaurs



Rina Thea

automatic drawing: Illusory Creatures Capture Spring



Peter Van Belle

Automatic Drawing

The first mention of an artist using an automatic technique comes from a ninth-century Chinese treatise on Painters of Renown. An artist called Wang Mo is mentioned, also called Wang Po Mo (Wang the Ink Thrower), who would get drunk, dip his long hair in ink and then splash it onto a piece of paper. He would then use the splotches to craft his painting. This technique had its basis in Ch'an Buddhism (later called Zen in Japan). The purpose was to develop spontaneity and so let one's true Buddha-nature be revealed. It set off the tradition of the Untrammelled Brush in the Far East, exemplified by Xu Wei, Zhu Da in China, and Sesshu Toyo in Japan. I've written more on this in the fourth issue of The Kleksograph.

In the West there was Alexander Cozzens, who pressed crumpled pieces of paper dipped in ink, then turned these blots into landscapes. His goal was to allow him and his students to avoid slavishly copying from previous artists or nature.

To get to a more profound consideration of the technique we have to look at its uses in the occult. The Spiritualists and especially the Theosophists of the late nineteenth-century used it as one of their techniques to access a hidden reality. One of its main practitioners was Hilda af Klint, who also produced some of the first abstract paintings in the West. On a side note, both Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian started off both religious and interested in Theosophy.

One occultist who explicitly wrote about automatic techniques was Austin Osman Spare. In a nutshell he believed in the idea of Zos, the organic being, being in opposition to Kia, the reservoir of spiritual energy. The mage tries to connect to and draw power from Kia to change reality. This involves the use of sigils and states where the conscious mind is exhausted. Telling though, that in his Book of Pleasure from 1913, he stresses that the technique can only be used effectively by someone with artistic training.

To me the concept of Kia seems related to Jung's idea of the Collective Unconscious, especially as he described it in his work on Synchronicity. Paul Klee also wrote about the subconscious being a link to the spirit (Geist) of Nature.

To the Surrealists, automatic techniques were grist to their mill. Yet their pope, André Bréton, distanced them from their occult roots. This was, in part, to retain the group's Communist credentials. Another reason was that these links between Modernism and esoteric beliefs were used by anti-Modernists to discredit

the movement. Yet the fact remains that many Surrealists studied by the occult. A few of them, like Crépin and Lesage, even claimed to be channeling spirits.



Spiritualist painting; Georgiana Houghton, Portrait of Our Lord Jesus Christ

George Moore

Catastrophe Theory

We were the first of the animals to speak
in a language not natural to the forest:
in tall letters that became buildings,
and in-between a punctuation
of emptiness. The view

from the seventy-fourth floor
is grand but cloudy.
I can almost remember
a drink with a friend in the tower
before it came down.

Some believe it was an act of God.
Some that it foretold the end
of godly actions. Others
did not believe at all, or simply
rushed in and fought the fires.

I remember the palm trees
in the grand lobby, those great Egyptian
monuments to desert thinking.
We surveyed all that lay before us
before riding the elevator up.

Small changes finally
did us in. Someone somewhere
forgot to look, or to remember.
It was us in the end. Our monuments
are only theories.



Albrecht Dürer, Lot's Flight

George Moore

Nostalgia

If you look back, you can see
very little, only a slice of the yard
through a broken window.

No yard exists but in memory,
even at the time that the dog
runs up to the porch.

Notice the distance between scenes,
how that grows into a lifetime.
And they say the century has gone to the dogs.

I can look back and see
a man raking leaves in a Jersey yard.
He is no one I knew. A father.

We moved out of state
when he died. The ground was
not deep enough. The wind

scattered the leaves. But I see
a Boy Scout troop camping beneath
a snowcapped peak. Everyone

yelling and yet not a word
can actually be heard. It's just a feeling
crawling up your leg like a squirrel.

So, I have to ask, is this the world
you want to drag back into life?
Waiting each morning

for some little sound upstairs?
Nostalgia is a grapheme.
A sh without the it.

George Moore

Saturday Night Downtown

*Any sound is welcome
The cars go by the late drinkers
The dragass lovers...*
Vern Rutsala, "American Dream"

As evening cured in the city's heat
toughened to steel, we were out the door
on the streets, moving toward the center

the glass sheets of buildings sheening
in the sunset. The cars were old and beat-up
but carried half a dozen familiar faces,

rolling down toward Broadway
and the empty canyons of a summer's eve
in a chorus of low rumbles as testament

to the street gods. We whistle and shout
and swear in our jacked-up dreams,
and the night surrounds us, just barely

street-legal, tailfins turning down main,
boys in their breakneck fevers
and girls singing love songs from backseats.

Doing nothing, not even drinking, just
cruising in the cool evening breeze
after a long hot summer's day

mowing lawns or taking orders or
delivering things we would never see
just to feel the rumble

of bulky Fifties sedans and new, sleek,
throttle-heavy Corvettes and Mustangs.
But who cares, our beaters gleamed.

You wait, listening, know without seeing,
feel within the low sound of pistons
hitting bored-out heads.

Everything was there of Saturday eve,
and no one had thought to disperse us,
no one could dispel the ambient truth

we were invincible, blood-kin,
all of an age, milling between steamy days
and a single, Saturday night.

Suddenly sidling up next to a slick new Ford,
and the faces singing out of windows, or
hands across the invisible line

that later divides us,
always circling back in time
never now asleep or silent.

Rikki Santer

Everything Roadtrip

A day like other days
when galaxies spark of insect innards
caught by your speeding windshield
and a graffitied water tower
declares that nothing is safe.
When tufted humps of land parade
along the browned freeway median
where on its starboard, carpets of
lavish kudzu suffocate the trees.
When a long truck with naked lady
mud flaps passes you by with pigs
crammed into its low cages. Then
Alleluia for that roadside heap that
recasts as tire skin not creature
and the sun breaks through a tender
rainfall when you take the exit
to a back road where your Fiat
rumbles through a rainbow that bends
down to the welcoming dirt.

David Radavich

At Kloster Reichenau

The painter works by candlelight—
ink and gold leaf and a blush
of red that blooms the script.

Even in darkest night
eyes flame with love, requited.

A day of prayer and meager
food settles into pictures
that will walk through centuries.

I open the volume now,
carefully, and lift the heavy
pages like truth itself,
still with us through wars
and droughts and heresies.

Light streams through the high
windows, colored, and I think
of him hunched over and intent,
some magus in his music
that plays on in choric silence.



David Radavich

Orpheus Again

Somehow I can't turn away
from the seduction of death.

Its possible return,
its impossible beauty.

Your face lives just out of reach,
I can almost feel your hand
beckoning back. What

would I do if I captured my dream?
If reality were not split into shards?

I walk back alone
and make more songs.

Inadequate laments.
Impossible longings.

And here along the waters
I see clearly: this depth
of emptiness,
sun splattered over waves.

There is no better echo
than singing.



Hans Memling, The Allegory of the Virgin

Annie Bell

Tippex

Sunlight beams through the open window, illuminating the typewritten manuscript. There are patches of Tippex, re-inked – micro palimpsests in a sea of fresh words.

*

Morgan had had enough.

As a media teacher, she'd spent years teaching teenagers to analyse how newspapers used rhetoric to coerce people into believing things. Back then, she'd had hope: hope that one day, educators, like her, might empower people to discover the truth beneath the headlines.

Now, she doubted anyone could stem the flow of fake news.

She'd spent her life believing in her 'Britishness'. She had always felt proud of her open and inclusive society. Having lived in France and Germany and learned to speak their languages, she was, at her core, a European. Knowing that over half the people around her didn't share her values started to make her feel unsafe and unwelcome. Her identity compromised, she no longer felt she belonged.

*

Next to the manuscript, other items are strewn over the writing desk. An eclectic selection of pens, rammed into a mug, a couple of crystals – labradorite and rose quartz.

*

For years before Brexit had ripped the rug from beneath her, Morgan had suffered nightmares, anxiety attacks, and the feeling that her veins were on fire. Bullied at work, she constantly relived those moments. Worst of all were the intrusive thoughts that tormented her any time she was alone, especially when she tried to sleep. They told her the bullies had been right about her. She convinced herself that she didn't deserve the love of the people she cared about. She couldn't remember the last time she'd gone to sleep or sat alone, without the sound of her TV, blaring out a bland sitcom to drown out her internal monologue.

Morgan's friends and family supported her. They were the flotation devices that prevented her from drowning. She knew the value of a night out with her friends or a gym visit. A comedy show or a game of Cards Against Humanity still gave her joy,

cocooning her behind a soft, sandy wall, but beach forts never hold the tide back for long.

Many people assumed recovery from psychiatric injury was simple. They thought, having been a bit down in the dumps once, themselves, they understood. Morgan just needed to pick herself up by her bootstraps and carry on.

She found strategies to cope with her illness. Seeing the friends that understood that she struggled sometimes, lifting weights at the gym, and spending time in the love of her family provided welcome distractions. Her Mum often took her to her favourite café, to buy her a scone - her favourite - reminding her that she needed to eat, whether she felt like it or not. It always made Morgan feel a little bit better, no matter how bleak things were. It reminded her that small things could still bring colour to her world.

When she finally had the space to heal, Morgan had a semi-colon tattooed on her wrist. She visited her counsellor regularly but found it impossible to release the emotions she had encased between layers of Tippex. She found it too painful to pick at the white crust, let alone to look beneath it, even if the emotions did leak out in the form of random panic attacks in the supermarket.

Morgan took on a new post, working with school leavers, who had struggled with their education. When they lashed out, Morgan recognised their panic attacks and used her own experience to help them, sharing strategies that had helped her to break the cycle of constant anxiety. She received positive feedback on her work, and felt trusted as a professional. Inspectors praised her. The directors of the company valued her.

Morgan's friendship group grew. Any time things got too much, a heartfelt hug or a good belly laugh brought her back to a happier place.

*

Next to the writing desk, a chair stands empty, a double dent in its cushioned seat. Half a mug of tea sits, cold, on a square coaster; milk separating, pooling like a white ink stain in the liquid.

*

Morgan took the decision to escape Brexit and so she moved into a caravan in the grounds of the thatched cottage she intended to restore. Discovering Ireland was Morgan's medicine. West Waterford made her feel better. The beauty that surrounded her had a healing energy that she sensed in every place. It filled her with hope.

Then she connected to a stranger, in such an instant and profound way that everything that had ever happened to her exploded all at once. It was as though her mind was being washed under the Mahon Falls in January. It was freeing but pure agony. Once

the initial storm passed, her heart balanced itself and Morgan began to write a new chapter.

She felt Ireland was drawing them together. The first time they kissed, a shooting star sped across the sky and they laughed at the absurdity. Standing in Whiting Bay, they pondered the infinite possibilities that lay before them. They sat on a bench in the Nire Valley as the sun set, gazing at the mountains, smitten with the landscape and each other.

Sadly, the path was as rocky as the beautiful Comeragh mountains. She fell too deeply, too quickly. The timing was wrong. Neither of them were ready for the intensity of what had happened and she had no choice but to let him go. They both needed time to heal. Morgan hoped he might return to her, but she didn't really believe that he would. The little voice in her head returned - reminding her over and over again that she didn't deserve to be happy. She couldn't see why he would want to be with her. Carrying on without him felt like scaling the stone walls of Lismore Castle, but slowly she found her path and her friends and family supported her climb.

She decided to pursue the career in writing that had always been her dream. Her favourite journal accepted some of her poetry and she received positive feedback from literary agents, even when they rejected her work. Receiving praise from strangers, who owed her nothing, gave her a little more confidence and again, Morgan began to heal.

Against the odds, the one she loved returned. He wanted to be with her. She stopped worrying about whether she deserved love and started to believe the people who knew her, when they said that she was a kind and good person. Peace settled upon her like the Blackwater River on the stillest of days.

Then the pandemic struck.

*

By the mug, a plate contains the remnants of a fruit scone. The butter has darkened and cracked. The jam is mouldy and flies buzz about it.

*

Even though she was isolated, Morgan decided to use the time to write and submit her writing to more journals and competitions. She could still meet her friends and her boyfriend, albeit for a socially distanced, Victorian style walk. She could survive that.

Then lockdown was tightened - Construction was prohibited, as was meeting people from other households and travelling more than two kilometres from home.

Morgan spoke to friends and her boyfriend, engaged with video chats and virtual pubs, performed her poems online. She pretended life was normal.

Separated from every strategy that had previously helped her to cope, Morgan could feel the flimsy walls of the caravan becoming saturated with the mildew in her head. On the tolerable days, she managed to get out of bed, clean her teeth, shower and dress herself. On the worst days: the unendurable days, she questioned why she was here.

Morgan joined her local pandemic support group on social media, hoping for solace from people nearby but the posts were the opposite of what she needed. Morgan felt loneliness tighten its grip as she read post after post decrying and shaming anyone struggling with the effects of isolation. All over social media, she read how everyone must endure the situation; how others had it much worse. The most vulnerable people were dying alone, isolated from their loved ones; many people weren't safe in their own homes and had no refuge; Doctors and nurses were working hard, risking infection. All Morgan had to do was stay indoors, away from other people and "watch Netflix." How hard could that be?

It felt like nobody cared how the situation affected people like her. In the face of all that, complaining about how desperately she needed human contact seemed a selfish indulgence, so she hid her misery. It deepened. The relentlessness of lockdown persisted.

Morgan used every tactic she knew to combat the creeping blackness. Distraction. Denial. Dissociation. All failed her. That was the trouble with Tippex. The slightest stress made it crack, revealing everything hidden underneath.

Morgan sat at her typewriter and wrote her whole story.

*

Wrapped around the typewriter's cylinder, a sheet of paper, filled with words, flaps in the breeze.

Peter Van Belle

The Harpy in the Zoo

His bowed head raises the hackles
Over his back turned to a hollow world
Unwilling to see his barred sky.
His world is now a pungent floor,
the worn log that mocks a tree,
the carcass in its cloud of flies
He tears at with dramatic beak.
His flight, now a brief hop
From block to meat, then back,
To sit hunched in a shrug of defeat
His forest dreams eroding.

Peter Van Belle

A Cold and Unspeakable Beauty

Past the empty houses, the trees stop
Now it's just the moss, like a sponge, waterlogged
Looking back, he sees, between the trees, snowy
Mountains towering, and trudges on as for a dare
Or punishment for laziness every step is
penance, boots become dull
With the water and brush but ever on
he can't turn back, its never killed him.

On the bare top now, no trees
Just wiry bushes and snowdrifts
A wind so cold it seems to skin
A wind straight from the Pole across
Those snowy mountaintops now level
He struggles on in this wind, in this water
At a moment he feels he can't go further
nor back either, and lost if he stays.

Sinking slowly in the swamp, on, still
On, always lacking choice he's crossed the ridge
Ahead steep rocks and glints of water
Between the weeds; sink further down
And think of dying in this place like
A wonderland of stunted birches
Wriggling up around, ahead, far away
A dirt road to the huts he reaches

Jumping over a stream he stops for
The first time to let the water run
From his boots, wring his socks
And look at his feet, cold, the color
Of ice and weak in this sunlight
They look like washed viscera
Clinical, diseased on the sand
But as he looks round at the ridges

The sky so blue it looks like neither
Day or night, a glory seems to pour
Down, a love for the whale that holds
All this in its belly, the grass is a hard
Brush and stones start to cut my soles
Time to put back the boots and head
To shelter, time to face up to himself
Not knowing it's himself out there
And others lurk indoors.

Maria Arana

My Face

broken bone
torn flesh
scars that mar
complexion and want
they notice
they fear
am I real?
tonight, we dine
our faces match
but underneath
the haunt continues
and our bodies misfire
a pound of flesh
a pound of bone
am I the mediator?
or is my face eclectic?

Maria Arana

Things Pile Up

picture frames that need mending
socks that should have never been
bracelets left behind by a mother or a sister
boxes to rummage through
and then the guilt appears
what are these things?
why do they speak in hushed tones?
just to tell me I'm still alive and you're not

Phil Wood

Who am I?

I bundle my clothes under the aspens
and stare into space

Over the bridge
is where the rough kids fight
with sticks and stones and knives

Across the road
is where the posh kids rule
because of their dad

Next door's garden
is where the louder kids scream
above the telly noise

Over the school yard
is where the crying kids run
and fail to hide

On the rugby field
is where the bigger kids play
to make them men

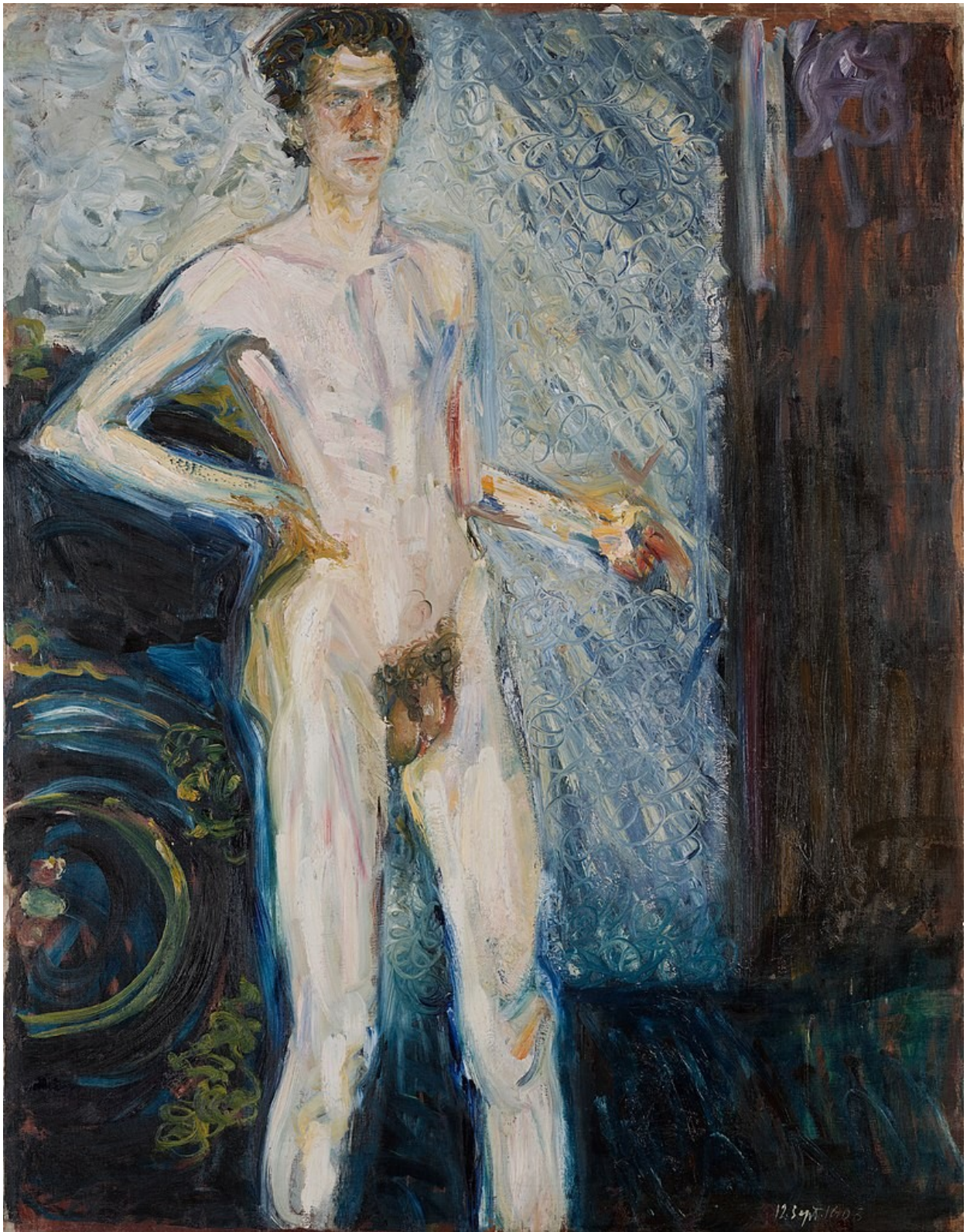
Within the classroom
is where the clever kids find answers
in the back of books

Behind the boys toilets
is where the coughing kids smoke
and talk of sex

Beyond the spiky fence
is where the sleepy kids skip French
to practice nothing

Beneath the climbing tree
is where the dead kid whispers
into my ear

The shadows label me onto a shelf
and I stare into space



Richard Gerstl, Self-portrait with Palette, 1908

Phil Wood

Jigsaw Therapy

Marc Chagall conjures a circus -
breathe in that hectic glee, he says.
So I - forming in painterly ways,
a whiff of exotic places – breathe.
Where is the lion tamer? I ask.

Henri Rousseau tempts a tigress,
not shy or sly, her devouring grin
about to pounce on prey beyond
the frame. Startled, this voyeur sweats
in tropical heat. I may not flee.

Henri Matisse dreams a smiling cat,
a harbour where whispers anchor
restless boats. There's a bowl of fruit
basking in citrus light. The green hour
is ticking away. I bottle up.

And find you lounging on the divan,
sleepy head on a yellow pillow,
your limbs as white as Franz Marc's cat.
Am I hearing his wormwood purr?
I offer you a jigsaw piece.

Heather Sager

Stressor

The brown hills and gray town

The room with a window
that daily you walk by

No one ever yells at you
when you walk,
oh the silence so enjoyable...
the lack of rage

So that even when
the huge garish sun is deflating,
setting afire the fire station,
you don't feel the least bit nervous

The shadows grow long,
and we're all trapped here,
and we all refuse to remember
the disasters lurking in our minds

You forget better than the rest

Heather Sager

Grip

Wave goodbye
and drive at sundown,
gripping the wheel,
family members
behind me, I hugged each,
then I forget
Gaze at fields, average,
dumpy houses,
cows and cloudy sky
Remember a lover,
a handshake,
a disappearance
Today's goodbye
leaden like all the others
I float
amid the world's radii,
watching a crow land
on the horizon.

Paul Murgatroyd

You Talking to me, pal?

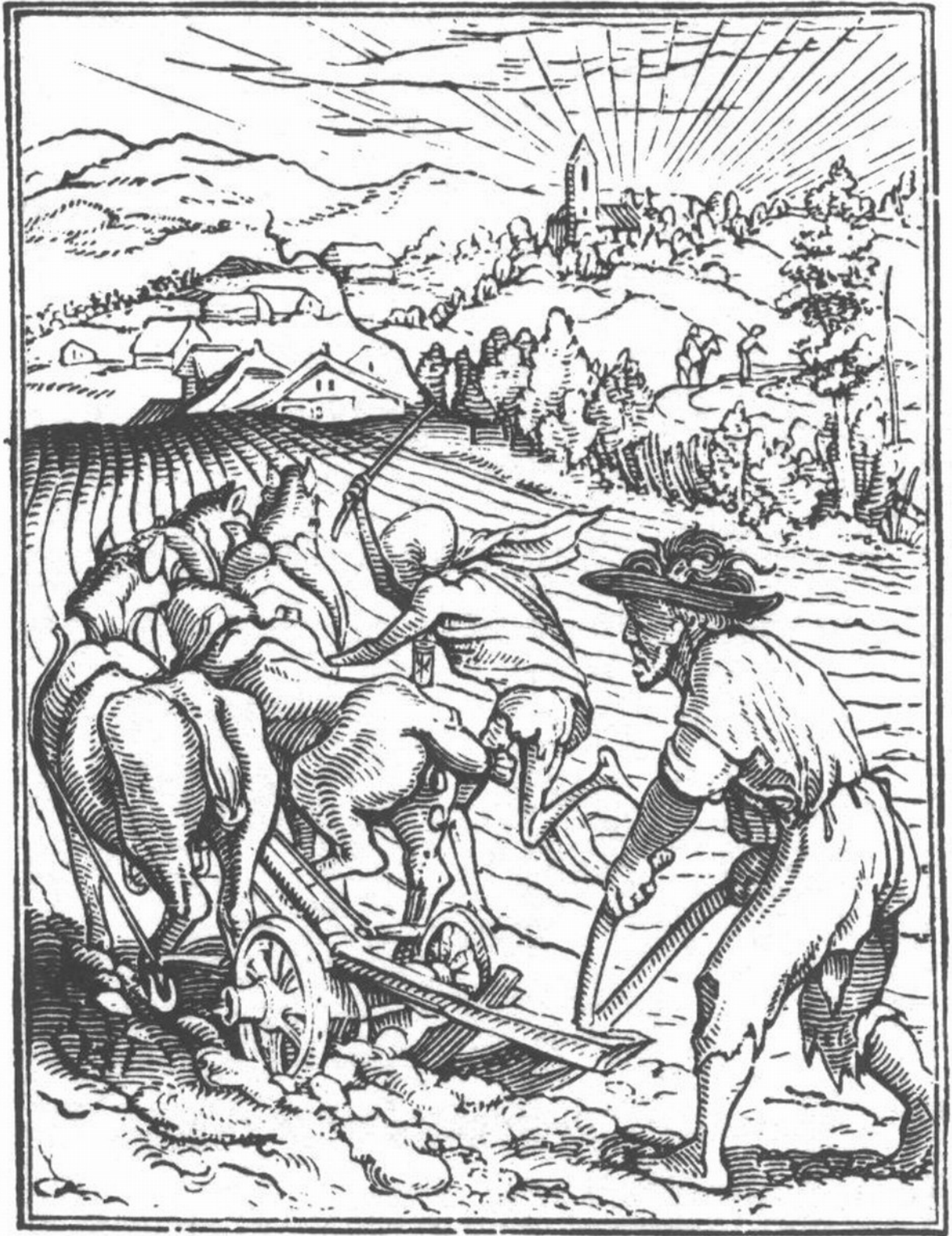
Human, human, soft as shite,
Oh so frail, and oh so slight,
No immortal hand or eye
Could create such vanity.

Many think they're beautiful,
When the human body's dull,
Monochrome, monotonous,
Graceless, furless, ludicrous.

You invented physics, phones,
Logic, commerce, drama, drones.
Think you're clever, think you're shrewd?
All you are is frigging food.

Think god gave the human race
Land to loot, pollute, deface,
Seas to smother, poison, drill,
Beasts to hunt and cage and kill?

Time to end this tyranny,
Time to end humanity.
Bomb each other, blast away:
Set my people free today!



Hans Holbein, Totentanz, the Farmer

Martin Elster

The Wrong Place to Dig

DANGER: HIGH VOLTAGE on the tablet's face,
and there's my Jake now sprinting toward a hole
beneath it. Once he's found something to chase,
he's loath to leave it. Chipmunk, rabbit, vole,
even a fly — when Jake is on patrol
best keep your head up. He is a rat terrier,
a breed whose role in life is pest control.
I hope to heaven there's some kind of barrier
between his teeth and current. Jake should have been warier.

Between his teeth, the current, and the warier
rodents, a pair of living wires whip
like springs up from a crevice. Even hairier
than otters, flicking tongues of fire, they grip
his throat and try to throttle him. I whip
and whip them with the leash, struggle to pry
my dog away but, as the trio slip
beneath the slab, another grabs my thigh.
I'm in a corridor. Although it's mid-July,

this corridor's far colder than July.
The snakes have disappeared, along with Jake.
I'm hopeful the transformer's power supply
will switch on my alarm and I'll awake.
A hissing voice causes my limbs to quake:
“You and your dog will never reunite.”
The voice is deafening enough to make
my eardrums ring. Though barely enough light
to sidestep roots and squirming earthworms, I will fight

among the roots and squirming earthworms, fight
to find my terrier. "Is that you, lad?"

I recognize the voice. "Are you all right?"

He reaches out to me. "Is that you, Dad?"

The man takes to his heels. A weaponed legion
of astronauts rushes past. He tries to flee.

He's caught. They're gone (perhaps to another region
of space-time). I begin to walk and see

a shape beyond a screen. It's Jake. He's watching me.
Beyond the screen stands Jake. He watches me,

then jumps through a small breach between two rocks
and vanishes. "Son, I will set you free."

I look up at the silhouette who talks
as if he knows me. A snakelike object knocks
into my head: a rope. He says, "Ascend!"

I grab it and, as quick as any fox,
I'm out. Again I see the man extend
his hand. The sun proclaims the day is at its end.
The sun proclaims the day is at its end.

The grizzled guy starts to apologize
for leaving me on Earth. "Will you transcend
this world and come with me?" His glowing eyes
suggest his form is no more than a guise.

Now Jake comes running to me and we race
across the field. Amid the fireflies,
he spots a creature near a slab to chase.

DANGER: HIGH VOLTAGE gleams from the transformer's face.

(Originally appeared in Scarlet Literary Magazine.)

Martin Elster

The Cosmos Takes a Breather

Upon a bench of polished stone,
gazing beyond the lake's veneer
of star-flecked waves, you fret, alone.

Tall pines and poplars murmur near,
and out at the horizon glide
pink wisps of cirrus. You can hear

lusty cricket-creaks collide
with lonesome katydids, the odd
glunk of frog-splash. In the wide

twilit heavens, a healthy pod
of narwhals weaves through nebulae
more radiant than goldenrod

at noonday, swimming smooth and free,
igniting agitated cries
from blue jay, crow, and garganey,

for in the sky, like butterflies,
in jazzy green and neon red,
with purple fins and amber eyes,

dance all the planet's fishes, fed
on asteroids and antimatter,
frolicking, romping, fins outspread

and flippers flailing across the platter
of the world. But now the blare
of avians has eased, their chatter

scattering saneness through the air
while, on the lake, a loon wails on,
giving those phantoms such a scare
they wither with the mists of dawn.



AI-generated image, prompt: The Gate of Saturn, public domain

Martin Elster

The Song on Planet Plu

At dawn we sang on planet Plu
a song the cosmos deemed taboo
as cobalt blue gave way to pink
and a finch-bat blinked a sleepy blink,
suspended in upended slumber.

While vole-grouse rushed in boundless number
to unlit holes in sunlit hills
and all the owl-whippoorwills
broke off their chorus round the planet,
we crooned a tune — and war began. It

floated like a bloated moon
one afternoon, a bronze balloon
that, as we watched it, detonated.

(We should have been annihilated;
instead, their malice made us chortle
thanks to the fact that we're immortal.)

Then when the sky cleared up at last,
we blessed those brutes that brought the blast.
They left us then to sing in peace
what they well knew would never cease.

Yet these days others come — with missile,
musket, laser-gun — yell, "This'll
teach you crackpots not to chant
such sacrilege. You shan't! You shan't!"
They come and leave us, leave us vexed
and, being vexed, we holler, "Next!"

And every dawn, as cobalt blue
turns pink, all animated Plu
trills out a dulcet, silvery song
the cosmos deems profoundly wrong.

CONTRIBUTORS

Born in sunny South Africa, **Jessica Ballantyne** moved to London in 2009 after graduating with a BA (honours) in Fine art from the University of Pretoria. Specialising in oil painting, Ballantyne creates art that revolves around the main subject matter and passion of her work: the body mind. Influenced by Surrealism and psychoanalysis, Ballantyne creates artworks which combine her love of automatism (a surrealist technique of free-association or creating without thought or plan) with spirituality and the subjective experience of being.

Craig Kirchner is retired and thinks of poetry as hobo art. He loves storytelling and the aesthetics of the paper and pen. He has had two poems nominated for the Pushcart, and has a book of poetry, *Roomful of Navels*. He houses 500 books in his office and about 400 poems in a folder on a laptop. These words tend to keep him straight. After a writing hiatus he was recently published in *Poetry Quarterly*, *Decadent Review*, *New World Writing*, *Neologism*, *The Light Ekphrastic*, *Unlikely Stories*, *Wild Violet*, *Last Stanza*, *Unbroken*, *The Globe Review*, *Skinny*, *Your Impossible Voice*, *Fairfield Scribes*, *Spillwords*, *WitCraft*, *Bombfire*, *Ink in Thirds*, *Ginosko*, *Last Leaves*, *Literary Heist*, *The Blotter Magazine*, *Quail Bell*, *Variety Pack Ariel Chart*, *Lit Shark*, *Gas*, *Teach-Write*, *Cape Magazine*, *Scars*, *Yellow Mama*, *Rundelania*, *Flora Fiction*, *Young Ravens*, *Loud Coffee Press*, *Edge of Humanity*, *Carolina Muse*, and the *Journal of Expressive Writing* and has work forthcoming in *Valiant Scribe*, *Chiron Review*, *Sybil*, *Timalda's Diary*, *Vine Leaf Press*, *Wise Owl*, *Moria*, *The Argyle*, *Same Faces*, *Floyd County Moonshine*, *Coneflower Café*, *Impspired*, *Borderless Crossings*, *Hamilton Stone Review*, *Kleksograph*, *Dark Winter*, and *The Main Street Rag*.

David Ryan has been writing poetry for 15 years and draws his inspiration from Shelley's calling out social injustices, History, Expressionist Art, Punk Music and dreams.

He also produces collages and writes songs. He is working toward a first collection.

R. Gerry Fabian is a published writer and poet from Doylestown, PA. He has published five books of poetry: *Parallels*, *Coming Out Of The Atlantic*, *Electronic Forecasts*, *Wildflower Women*, *Pilfered Circadian Rhythm* as well as his poetry baseball book, *Ball On The Mound*.

Kevin MacAlan lives in Ireland. He has an MA in Creative Writing, and has contributed to many journals in Europe and the U.S., including *The Waxed Lemon*, *An Áitiúil*, *Howl*, *Infinity Wanderers*, *The Madrid Review*, *The Belfast Review*, *Mini Mag*, and *The Wild Umbrella*.

Rina Thea was born in South Africa. Her parents decided to move to the UK due to the repressive Apartheid Government. She would often escape from her childhood domain into other worldly places, often entering a reverie.

This led Rina, into her private world of creating small scale Automatic Drawings. Sometimes, at night creating 4 - 6 drawings. This creative exploration continued from childhood through adolescence into adulthood. All of these drawings/ images are something unknown and unrecognisable; detached from her reality.

Rina, studied Fine Art at the Sir John Cass School of Art and then specialised in Printmaking at Wimbledon School of Art. Rina, has self-published two books and is currently working on her third book 'Awaiting A Time of Grace'.

Peter Van Belle is the editor of The Klecksograph and has published poems and short stories in Great Britain, Ireland, New Zealand, Canada, the US, and Belgium. As a child he lived in the US, but now he lives in Belgium.

George Moore's recent collections are Children's Drawings of the Universe (Salmon Poetry 2015) and Saint Agnes Outside the Walls (FutureCycle 2016). He has poems in The Atlantic, Poetry, Stand, Orbis, and Colorado Review. He taught literature at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and lives on the south shore of Nova Scotia.

Rikki Santer has been published widely and has received many honors including several Pushcart and Ohioana book award nominations, a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and in 2023 she was named Ohio Poet of the Year.

She is a member of the teaching artist roster of the Ohio Arts Council and a past vice-president of the Ohio Poetry Association. Her collection, Resurrection Letter was grand prize short-listed for the Eric Hoffer Book Award and her forthcoming collection, Shepherd's Hour, won the Paul Nemser Book Prize from Lily Poetry Review Books. Please contact her through her website, <https://rikkisanter.com>.

David Radavich has published a variety of poetry, drama, and essays. His latest books are Unter der Sonne: German Poems (Deutscher Lyrik, 2021) and Here's Plenty (Cervena Barva, 2023).

Annie Bell writes on topics including the afterlife, mental health and local history. Originally from the UK, she lives in County Waterford, Ireland. Annie's work has been published in 'A New Ulster', 'The Poet', 'The Kleksograph', 'The Waxed Lemon', 'Colchester Writenight Short Prose Collection', 'Aimsir Press', 'The Wilfred Owen Association Journal', and the 'Mental Health Vol. 2' anthology. Her website is <http://www.jobellwriter.com/>

Maria A. Arana is an editor, writer, poet, and teacher. Her poetry has been published in various journals including Spectrum, al-khemia poetica, and Fevers of the Mind. You can find her at https://x.com/m_a_Arana, <https://aranaeditingservices.com>, www.booksbymaarana.com

Phil Wood was born in Wales. He has worked in statistics, education, shipping, and a biscuit factory. He enjoys painting and learning German. His writing can be found in various places, most recently in : Byways (Arachne Press Anthology), The Lake, The Shot Glass Journal, the Black Nore Review.

Heather Sager lives in Illinois where she writes poetry and fiction. Heather is a previous contributor to The Kleksograph. Her other recent poetry in the surrealist vein appears in TYPO: The International Journal of Prototypes, Utricoli, Brief Wilderness, and more journals.

After a long career as a professor of Classics (specialising in Latin literature) **Paul Murgatroyd** retired nine years ago and started writing novels and short stories. sixty-four of the latter have been published or accepted for publication, along with twenty poems in English and over one hundred of his Latin poems.

Martin Elster, who never misses a beat, was for many years a percussionist with the Hartford Symphony Orchestra. Martin's poems have appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies in the U.S. and abroad. His honors include the 2022 Helen Schaible International Sonnet Contest winner, Rhymezone's poetry contest, five Pushcart nominations, and a Best of the Net. A full-length collection, Celestial Euphony, was published by Plum White Press in 2019. Dogged: A Verse Novel is a collaboration between Martin and his writing partner, Joan Axelrod-Contrada.



William Blake, The Ghost of a Flea, 1820