

Neon Origami

Issue #11
July 31st, 2025

Table Of Contents

Teaching Philosophy at Giarre	3
Won't You Give Me Some of Your Love?	8
Furniture	12
Desert Girlhoods	14
Ones and Zeroes	16
CROSSING BRIDGES	21

Teaching Philosophy at Giarre

By Jones Irwin

Literary Fiction

Solo l'amare, solo il conoscere conta (only loving, only knowing matters). Pasolini
Character – to human being – demon (daimon). Heraklitus

Rising early just after 7am, I shower and have some berries and pomegranate, granola and honey, mixed with Greek yoghurt, to properly wake up. The blood red orange juice helps too. The sunrise heat and light is already invigorating to my Celtic body and mind. The context for me feels Greco-Sicilian as the Hellenic influences are everywhere, not least in the very building I am staying. In these parts, the succeeding Roman structure often incorporated elements from the original Greek construction, a leftover from the Greek colony of Katane.

I am taking the 9.09am train from Catania Station Centrale. I spend ten minutes at the counter in the train station bar, trying to make my *solo espresso* last. Perhaps you should have had a macchiato, keeps remonstrating my SuperEgo (I can tell it is going to be one of those mornings). My SE has been relatively quiet of late but here it is again, raising its ugly visage just as I was beginning to enjoy the thought of my morning. I've actually stopped reading Lacan this year and especially the neo-Lacanian as I think that they are taking a basic, insightful Freudian category and exaggerating it, for consumerist purposes. As they say in Sligo, 'these fucking Lacanians tearing the arse out of it, yet again'. That said, we need to return for sure to the symptoms of the Unconscious (yes, capitalized) and try to work through them, more patiently and with less alarmism. I'll get to Berardi later.

The café at the train station is bustling with energy, local and tourist alike. There is something about these shared, specific spatio-temporal moments in Italian civic life that are inimitable. Sometimes ominous. 'Italy. She's no longer a mother to us – averse to offspring, she gives birth to disasters'. The guy stood beside me is about a foot shorter than my 6ft but his wide Stetson gives him stature, as his checkered shirt and his very bad attitude. I like him, although he clearly doesn't like me. Big shock of black hair that almost seems rockabilly quiff and his blue eyes narrow to a malevolent squint. I imagine that his inner life is wholly vivid, fully misogynistic and graphically *Giallo* violent. He makes me think of a character from the Inspector Montalbano detective series of novels. I can't remember which specific book (is it *The Viper?*). Anyway, the story goes that Montalbano is called out one quiet morning to a murder scene on the Sicilian coast. A man has been discovered dead in his Vigàtan beach house, his body slumped on the dining room floor. His morning coffee is spilt across the table and there is a single gunshot wound to the back of his head. Halfway through the novel, the Inspector utters the immortal police judgement - *half of Vigàta has a motive for the cold-blooded murder of this scoundrel (rascal! unloveable rogue!) and this investigation will not be as straightforward as I once thought.* Admittedly, my mind is making connections like a pinball wizard this Italian morning, but for me it makes the utmost sense. If this unloveable rogue was indeed assassinated some morning with a single wound to the back of his head (professional job),

you're thinking *half of Catania has a motive for this cold-blooded murder* and this case is going to be more complex than the usual detective narrative. Although I think all these thoughts inwardly, this undoubted rascal is clearly telepathic as he is showing signs of unease in my vicinity. Together, if we could make our peace, we could listen to *The Cramps*, maybe the album *A Date With Elvis*. Was there ever a dark-romantic frontman as cool and frankly destabilizing as Lux Interior? In this alternative universe, I could tell this cowboy about how he also reminds me of my Dad (who was in the Vice Squad, but that's a lurid story for another day).

Alas, this parallax view isn't accessible right now. I am convinced that Catalonian Lux right here is wholly convinced that I am contemplating his demise (and willing to pay the 5000euro or whatever the going rate for cheap hitmen is in San Berillo these days). My perception running back to the contemporary moment, this cowboy's outer life seeks a representative form of expression. His telepathic suspicions have become more overt. He spits on the floor beside me. Worse is coming, my SE tells me with total conviction. Maybe I should have ventured up to Cefalù instead, which I was assured was a popular resort town with a picturesque historic center and beautiful beaches. Wholly devoid of cowboys, no doubt (well, possibly). Alas. *Va bene*. I pay my respects and take my leave.

My morning has been testy. I arrived later than expected into the airport last night after connecting flight delays via London and the taxi driver remonstrated with me for several minutes (seemed longer) as I wasn't carrying any Euro cash. I should have remembered that for taxi drivers in Catania, as in Dublin, *Cash is King*. My nerves somewhat frayed, sleeping in a new rented apartment that feels alien with very high ceilings, I don't get to sleep until 3am. Then I wake at 5am, and again at 7am. I have forgotten my adapter for Italy and my European 'universal' one doesn't work here. While I follow Magrelli's principle that 'gestures that go astray appeal to me', I am nervous about being late for the school. Although, as my daughter has reminded me, no one will have any sympathy for my travails working in Italy. Envy yes, sympathy zero. Her honest judgements on the human condition are always accurate. My beautiful, darling Elo is my hero.

I arrive in Giarre about 9.45am. Etna has been blowing fire heavily the last few days but today she is just smoking, in an almost nonchalant manner. Her backdrop gives the station a wonderful sense of perspective, let us say an aesthetic-ethical angle. The Technical Institute E.Fermi is just 10 minutes walk away. I give a short class on po/mo theory. Twenty years ago, in a different country (also not my own), when I was studying the *oeuvre* of Jacques Derrida in as much depth as was humanly possible, people used to say to me (all the time!), that *postmodernism makes no sense*. These so-called ordinary language English realists would guffaw at the labyrinthine if dexterous prose of Jackie (as his parents liked to call him back in Algiers, in the early 1950s). *Doesn't have anything to say in the real world, matey! Isn't even Philosophy!* (imagine a Coventry, more particularly Hillfields-Terry Hall accent here). In 2025, no one says this, even in Coventry. There are no guffawing, philistinian oafs. Instead, the ordinary people of the world run for cover and hide behind the tattered sofa, wondering how Jackie can have got it all so spot-on dangerously goddamned pertinent, without even breaking into a sweat. If you search up his publisher Gallimard's photo shoots, you'll notice Derrida always looks

effortlessly handsome and even nonplussed. And yet there he was, working through all the seemingly insurmountable epistemological and ontological dilemmas of the whole universe, never mind the human version, on his own in a small apartment on the Left Bank through the 60s and 70s, most especially (his later work might be said to constitute a decline in philosophic power (due to too much commercial success), although his end of days work on Antonin Artaud and the *Theatre of Cruelty* remains excellent). Those in the know (i.e. Parisian Left Bank residents or their kin) know all too well that there is a rumour that his psychoanalyst wife Marguerite worked it all out for him, behind the scenes. *He didn't even have his own bank account, for fuck's sake*, they say (I've fact-checked this, seems to be true, hardly surprising. Have you read *Glas*?). Either way, it was a successful marriage for sure (despite, or *peut-être* because, of the illegitimate offspring). *Our contemporary reality which has nothing to do with realism*. Bravo, the Derridas, I tip my beret to you. You changed everything (for me and those like me, readers of the secret *avant-garde*, at least).

At E.Fermi, the temperature is high twenties, therefore some semi-frozen lemon *granita* is most needed. Kids are seventeen or eighteen, full of end of semester spleen, and they ask the best, most difficult of philosophical questions. There is an ease with metaphysics that runs through the Italian blood, especially south of Rome. They can look within and they can look above (the moral law within and the starry sky up high), and in both cases there is little strain. In 2025, this is unusual to say the least. I wonder if it has something to do with early Philosophy taking its home here, as well as Hellenic theatre. Whatever the sources, the living cultural capacity is palpable in class. The dialogue flows, or as Plato would have said (and he did spend a lot of time in nearby Syracuse after all, sometimes in jail like an early Gramsci), the *elenchus*, the refutation of the previous argument with a view to gaining better insights and (eventually) reaching towards the actual truth itself. Or getting yourself killed, as with the ever brave and uncompromising Socrates.

Questions to address at E.Fermi (the students, like my SE, are up for the valiant fight today). How if, after psychoanalysis, there is no more self-knowledge, isn't this a better kind of self-awareness? Which is correct, after a fashion, of course. And if, as Nietzsche said, God is indeed dead, then what exactly comes next, *per favore* Signore Mister Irwin? I, *povere me*, as usual, have no answers. At lunch, we gather together around a small prepared table to eat clam linguine. That's actually only the starter. For the main course, we have succulent mussels with garlic and the finest tasting tomatoes, alongside a white meaty local fish that reminds me of hake but being superior in flavour and texture. This is accompanied by the 'house red', that is blackcurrant juice of course, just happens to taste like Sicilian Rosso (I'm thinking Calabrese, although I may be wrong). Once school is over, we must swim at Giarre. Wednesday in early June, after working on the co-authored new book on Social Art. Down to the Lido with Letterio and Alessandra for the first splash of summer. The sea is shimmering cyan, a hue of greenish blue. Driving home cheeky Etna blows us a Sergei Leone kiss, like a prayer to Dionysus. Ennio Morricone, *Man with Harmonica*, plays in my exquisite head. Elsewhere (there, there and now everywhere), the fascism rises like a sulphur cloud from the mountain, pluming blue burning hotspur into the naïve atmosphere. The volcano of Empedocles plays once more the card of fire. Just as folk laughed when Mussolini jailed Gramsci, we all pretend to be as unaware as

new-born babes. Char called this the somnambulistic *hypnos* of humanity during the Nazi war. *Ovviamente* it can't again happen here or anywhere. But *tristemente* it can.

Not far from this place in July 1943, the first Allied landings took place, at Gela and beautiful Syracuse. The Italian soldiers found themselves trapped in a pocket of Sicilian land, which during the following two weeks, tightened around them. When the American 82nd Airborne Division arrived at Paceco, the Italians surrendered with barely a shot being fired. On September 8th of that same year, General Badoglio's government signed a peace with the Allies. This all seems relevant today, early June 2025, down to its fine grain detail, although it will take time to work out exactly how the permutations of these events have translated and transmitted themselves to these future Sicilian generations, some of whom are sat right on front of me in this very classroom. There needs to be a faithful listening to the time, a *rhythmanalysis* Henri Lefebvre calls it in his 3-volume *Critique of Everyday Life*, which should be on every school curriculum (as it isn't on any). In Italy alone, we could trace the period of citizen life from the fascist dictatorship, the vicissitudes of existence as it veered through the years of post-War reconstruction, the economic miracle of the 1960s, the social crisis of the 1970s and of course, beyond. The football was always *fantastico*, of course. Napoli have just won the League here, which is indeed some kind of consolation (if Sligo Rovers are not doing so wonderfully well, since all the other rich-kid League of Ireland clubs stole their 'best' players. WANKERS).

*

And suddenly it is evening. Back at Catania, I decipher with keen eyes the AntiFa graffiti at Via Regio, which references Franco Berardi and autonomy. By coincidence, I've just been reading one of Berardi's recent texts, *Quit Everything: Interpreting Depression*. But what if this isn't depression as we know it, but instead a (natural) reaction to the chaos and collapse of a seemingly unliveable future? Where Trump gets the Nobel prize for Peace and Netanyahu is a respected human being. Giorgia Meloni, of course, accuses Berardi of 'disgusting words' but in a world and universe on the brink of total collapse, this is praise indeed. Right now, *we need to be disgusted, we need to be depressed*, and if we are not, there is something deeply wrong with us as human beings.

There is a referendum this Sunday on migrant and citizenship rights and some of the spray-can paint seems extra fresh. I think of how Italian Autonomism as a movement (theoretical and practical) is a sure-footed lesson for our times. It took Marxism into the late twentieth century with courage and linked to technology and media in a way that we can only now dream about. In many respects, Italy of the 1970s was similar to Northern Ireland of the same period. Violence was fundamental to the collective psyche and the individual psyches (however resilient or resistant or pacifist in response) were somewhat helpless to escape its traumatic and annihilating throes. The legacy continues, a recurring 3am sweaty trauma-nightmare.

I'm distracted by the Virgin Mary mural directly across the street, which also appears recently added but, at Catania, Christianity and Anarchism go together mostly. Just as they did for the wise North African, St Augustine, whose spiritual balm might cure the pimps sleazing

around San Berillo in the afternoon sun. If there was residual soul left for salvation, but tragically there is not. This is what Dante called the image of Fraud, Geryon. Moving like an eel, 'come anguilla'. The fishvendor cuts them open at *La Pescheria* and high-heeled ultra-stylish Sicilian housewives step daintily over pools of blood-stained water. One imagines the same elegant high heels sidestepping the bloody massacre of innocents, equally nonchalant. Of course, the pimps could all write (no doubt) a bestseller *Confessions*. But money isn't everything, eh? Today, their fat pleasures just seem ugly and forlorn, poor bald bastards and all who have to deal with their lowest common denominator level of existence.

Forget about them and people like them! The Ugly and The Greedy People. The city rises above, as it always must, always has. I return to the main thoroughfares. They are thronged with locals but soon the people will head for the cooler coasts. Who stays in the city until August? Only the poor and the mad! And perhaps some old ladies and some begging pigeons, stealing the apricot croissant out of your hand. Oh, beautiful Sicilian nights of summer! The horse meat barbecues on the narrow backstreets loud with chatter, flaming up as red as the loud scooters motor, an incessant hum. As Pasolini rhymed, it is only loving and only knowing that now matters. As a mother has for a son or a daughter, of love for you I have lots and then more. It is only loving and only knowing that now matters. Oh, beautiful Sicilian nights of summer!

Won't You Give Me Some of Your Love?

By Nathan Nicolau

Literary Fiction

Because at this rate, I'd disprove all of Kantian ethics by 11:30 am. I already contemplated the need for AI at 9:19 am sharp, and that was before starting my thoughts on cancel culture.

The best part about this job was how few came in. Let's keep it that way. A whole other universe was outside the front desk window: a brown-tiled capitalist utopia where wine moms, sports dads, bratty kids, edgy punks, and walking deconstructions of those stereotypes mingled. Here, in the middle of this mess, was the city's modern art museum. And how many of them are going to waltz in here? It shouldn't be surprising that the trendy beer garden across the street gets more traction. Because of how slow the days are, I've tried to devise a list of why people would willingly come here besides looking at art. I could only think of one: a first date. But this place would make the worst first date, though. Being here results in disagreements.

"This looks like shit."

"What was the artist trying to say?"

"I don't care if the artist was racist."

Why do we willingly subject ourselves to this pain and misery? And more importantly, why do we do it for fleeting (sometimes unachievable) dopamine boosts in our brains and call it "love"? Many philosophers have tackled this question, and if I were to join their ranks, I would have to as well. My upcoming lunch break gave me plenty of time to formulate my thesis.

It might sound Marxist, but love needs to be distributed. I don't mean between two lovers, family members, or all around the world while singing "Kumbaya." My thesis could be phrased in one simple question we could ask people hogging up all the higher dopamine levels...

Right on cue, someone walked in—a girl in glasses, looking a lot like me when I was younger and brighter. She went up to the counter smiling. She laid her purse, covered in pins, on the table, many of them bite-sized versions of paintings.

"Hello. Just one?" I asked in my customer service voice.

"Yup. I'm also a student," she said, showing her student ID.

"Great." After taking her debit card and handing her a ticket, I launched into the spiel I was told to do for every guest.

"The new exhibit is on the top floor—"

"Oh, I know. I was counting down the days!"

She didn't let me finish while she yapped away about how excited she was, how the pins she wore were some of the artists displayed here, and how she was studying art history at the local community college. She then left, almost prancing for the elevator in high spirits.

Won't you give me some of your love?

Because nothing could have prepared me for the disaster I had two nights ago. My Tinder date and I went to a generic sports bar, where he ordered for me, claiming he knew exactly what I needed. Apparently, I needed a salad, and I had to resist choking myself on each bite the more he ranted about the "state of America today." Thankfully, I didn't have to do much to turn him off. His face recoiled when I mentioned my son.

That experience would make anyone a nihilist. Love isn't dead; it's wasted. We must seize the means of love from the proletariat.

Am I being selfish? Am I wrong in demanding someone's love not meant for me? Yes. Yes, I was. But we wouldn't be human if we didn't put ourselves before others. I wrote multiple papers in college critiquing Ayn Rand's objectivism, but she was right about one thing: man is motivated by self-interest, for better and for worse. We see ourselves in everything and make everything in our image.

That one girl's enthusiasm inspired me to look at the artwork for the first time. In all honesty, I despised art. It was the epitome of human self-centeredness. Animals didn't make art. Nature in it of itself isn't art, yet we cherish it like any of the paintings on these walls. How fitting for me to be constantly surrounded by something I found no pleasure in.

It was another painfully slow day today, and the galleries were empty. Even though it wasn't my lunch break, I went to the top floor as I instructed all guests to do. Time to see what the fuss was about.

The exhibit showcased portraits of women. My body meandered through the floor, but my soul was left untouched. Was I supposed to be impressed by these selfish acts of vanity? What function do any of these paintings serve in society? Will they help pay my bills? Will they help me with my philosophy degree mistake? The paintings were too idealistic. All flawless—the fair white skin, the thin bodies, the look of superiority in their eyes. This was sickening. I was close to vomiting in my mouth when one portrait blocked my exit.

She stood near the exit corner, standing rigidly straight. Her white hair draped itself below her thin shoulders and spilled onto her red cardigan. She stared at me with black eyes that judged my soul, but just as blacker was her charcoal-plastered face, obscuring her except for the small, faint white outlines of her eyes. She looked like a creature void of any form. She was hideous, terrifying, and absolutely grotesque.

Won't you give me some of your love?

Because I had been obsessed with how my views on love could pragmatically work. Love will never have a singular definition. We don't love our pets the way we love our neighbors. We don't love others the way we love ourselves. When we do, we're criticized for being egotistical. Furthermore, how could love be distributed from the top down, from those with overabundance to those in need? It couldn't be state-mandated; that would go against free will. It could be capitalized, but I'd argue it already has. The amount of money I have spent on alcohol proves that.

These issues have nagged me since I started this museum job a few years ago. This was only supposed to be a part-time gig to support me through college, and I wish it had stayed like that. I'd much rather be working on a dissertation instead of scribbling unorganized tangents on a company-branded notepad. My eyes scanned the unfiltered ramblings: arrows pointing in every direction; the word LOVE circled, scratched, and question-marked; the woman upstairs...

My eyes studied every inch of her every chance I could get, getting so close that my nose could inhale the charcoal. The little sign next to her had names and dates that meant nothing to me, but the painting's name—the one I assumed was hers—stood out to me: *Annette*.

I took out my Tupperware container of leftover spaghetti and twisted some of the noodles onto my fork. My new paintbrush smeared marinara sauce across *Annette's* closed lips. She wanted to be anywhere but here. Her misanthropic stare was enough to convince me. The least I could do was care for her when no one else was going to. Even after offering my food to her like a sacrificial lamb, she still looked unimpressed by me. Her lips didn't curl into a smile when I cleaned them with a wet wipe. It may work with my son, but not her.

Much like her, it took me a while to understand my son. It didn't click for me until the day I went to pick him up at daycare, saw his toothless grin, and heard him say a babble of words that sounded like "Mama." He wanted to see me when I thought no one would.

Won't you give me some of your love?

Because, as pathetic as it was, if I had truly loved someone or something sooner, I wouldn't be as miserable as I feel now. But this triggers the Hegelian dialectic in me: what did I have to complain about? I have a job, a child, and a one-bedroom apartment I call home. What makes me deserving of more, something near unattainable?

I'd give it all up for love if I could, and it started with *him*.

I didn't miss *him*, and I promised our son the day he was born that he wouldn't miss *him* either. Leaving your fiancée and child for any reason was inexcusable enough. Leaving for an ex was worthy of public shame. Because of *him*, I had to drop out of college. Because of *him*, I couldn't get my philosophy degree. Because of *him*, I had to take this soul-sucking job to keep the water running. Because of *him*, I had to learn how to love my son unconditionally...

My body froze. I looked at my hands as if they had just taken someone's life. The word "unconditionally" flashed in my mind on repeat as I rewrote it on my notepad. As an example, my heart beat faster every time I passed *Annette*, but I fought with the idea that what I felt was love. It couldn't be that simple. Love was something we all had to labor over, yet all *Annette* had to do was exist. Was that all we had to do to feel loved?

Kant once wrote that reading Hume woke him from a dogmatic slumber. *Annette* woke me from a living nightmare.

Just then, a man and a woman in their early twenties entered. The man was too stiff with his movements, clearly intimidated by me. The woman shifted her weight and looked at her shoes. As the man paid, he studied my face. His mouth hung open as if he wanted to say something to me but couldn't. I gave them the spiel, and then they headed for the stairs. He looked like my son with his bright hair and blue eyes.

"They have this one painting here called *Annette*. I want to see what you think of it," I overheard him say. The excitement in his voice didn't change the woman's stoic face.

Do I even have to say it?

Furniture

By Frederick Pollack

Poetry

Hard to say what they sell.
The place doesn't doesn't smell of perfume, diamonds –
I suppose the rich, who alone
should enter, know, and find it like
another comfortable room
at home; but I'm mystified, as I should be.
I mean to ask the girl, who has partly
recovered from the fact of me
and the strange negative apocalypse
that brought me or which I brought.
But she, by the glass wall, stares
at the Avenue, from the Water Tower
and Water Tower Place, past the fifty hotels
and five hundred shops like this one to
the Wrigley and Tribune towers, the Bridge –
empty except for one car.
“Why is that there?” she murmurs.
“What happened should be *complete*. With the car,
it isn't.” “If it were ‘complete,’” I say,
“perhaps it wouldn't be impressive ...
the mind could get past it more easily.”
“Don't you *know*?” she demands. I remind her, gently,
that she promised me coffee, which I need;
good smell from the staffroom. She pours;
it is, of course, excellent.
I slouch on one of the couches.
It's the sort of fatigue, compounded of nervous
strain, sleepless weeks and general conditions,
that's miles away from sleep. “Do you know,”
I say, “the earliest flashing Christmas lights
to be hung on trees were tried out here,
on two of the potted bushes
that stood, still do, before stores.
Perhaps even yours, whatever it was back then.
I was actually born a year before Rubloff
the developer called this strip the Magnificent Mile.
I marveled at those lights. Now I think

I remember little, unless it was painful, as
an event – just as a promise
of a better event to come someday.”

“So is that why you’re here?” she asks
in that inhibited tone a dreamlike
state imposes. “For nostalgia’s sake?

But then why did you have to
stop everything?” I find this hard to answer;
its assumptions aren’t mine. I too look out
at the car. “In my day,” I mention,
“there were no lovely cared-for medians –
only that greenery in front of stores.”

For a moment I want only
to drive off in that car – through emptiness,
with emptiness behind me, as in a film.

“I’m wondering,” she says to herself,
“whether to leave with you, old as you are,
or gamble that life will return, *my* life, *my* career,
such as they are, my salary, which is decent.”

“Follow the money,” I advise. It would have helped
in my case, I think but don’t say; other things perhaps more.

“Take a break,” I add, and heave myself off
the couch, and it comes to me what
they sell. We gaze at each other
a moment, and in a nervous normal voice
she says, “I remind you of someone.”

Nodding, I go to the door, make
an excessive hieratic gesture,
step out and am lost in the crowd.

Desert Girlhoods

By Nicole Antillon

Poetry

We made potions from mud and honeycomb,
sang to beetles, and crowned ants with grass rings.
Laid in the yard watching clouds morph into creatures—
every afternoon,
kind of magic.

We smelled of chlorine and monsoon,
skin glossed with sunscreen and wild invention.
The Barefoot queens of Alice Lane.

We reigned over make-believe,
wild with freedom.
Girls with nowhere else to be never questioned.

We raced the sun home.
Never lost...well,
except once.
Paused only long enough,
to allow the desert hush the world within us.

Camping meant music and ghost-told legends,
Soft beams casting the illusion of monsters,
shadows jittering across nylon walls.
Night held its breath outside the seams.

We dared each other into alleyway odysseys,
whispered dreams into existence,
laughed until the night gathered us in.

Nothing else mattered—
just the next pursuit,
the next myth,
the next sunrise
begging to be chased.

That summer we never stopped running.
We didn't know we were slipping into memory.
What we believed outlasted our becoming

Wonder does not linger long.
We carry it briefly, unaware.
Girlhood fades before we learn to cherish it.
We had already become the blur behind us.

Ones and Zeroes

By H.J. Alderman

Genre Fiction

The streetlight beamed through the window pane and illuminated today's equations that had been etched into the paint of his bedroom wall. Charles shivered as the harsh grasp of the winter weather scraped its sharp talons down his back.

It was just a normal night for him – twenty years old, a philosophy student, and 4 am with lectures tomorrow morning. He would do anything, anything just to fall into the abyss of sleep with ease as he had done several years ago, but the man, that fucking man, never ceased to leave.

Every night, every goddamn fucking night, at precisely 11 pm, he would walk in, smile, stand at the foot of Charles' bed, and lose his face. Sometimes he removed it like one would a mask, sometimes it seemed to dissolve back into his skull, and sometimes, but not often, he scraped it off with his bare hands, ripping through the skin with his unkempt fingernails.

He always dressed exactly the same each night: white shirt, black tie, black leather boots, and a suit so dark it was like staring into the depths of a black hole.

Black hole. *Black hole...*

He had once seen one as a teenager. It first seemed to swallow the stars, then his neighbourhood, and then his neighbours – but not him. His house stood alone, a small artwork painted on an enormous, omnipresent black background. He didn't feel much lonelier than usual, however, for he had always been in the depths of that black hole.

But Charles felt differently; he felt that the entire world around him was in that black hole right now, completely oblivious to the truth that blinded him every day like the dawning of a summer sunrise. Or like the streetlight that was currently beaming through his window pane, illuminating today's math equations he had etched into the paint of his bedroom wall.

Charles was obsessive about charting his imaginative quantum equations every time one arose in his mind. Not only did it keep him from forgetting them, but it also acted as a form of self-expression, in the same way a teenage heavy metal fan might put up a Metallica poster on their wall like it was an image of some sort of religious prophet. If he could express some degree of undiscovered truth about the universe, he was also uncovering something undiscovered about himself.

Charles looked up, and the man watched on.

The sunlight burned through his eyelids. A sunrise was blooming over him; the man had vanished from his bedroom. Charles slowly rose from the depths of his mattress. For him, it had been a very successful night of sleep; four and a half hours, a new record this month.

His lack of sleep had caused him many problems since he first started seeing the man at the age of fourteen, falling asleep when he shouldn't and fainting being the most frequent. All throughout his second half of secondary school, there had not been a single lesson he had not nodded off in. It was easy to imagine the shock on everyone's faces when they realised he had gotten straight A's all through his academic life. He had no idea how, but it was like he had some innate knowledge of the world stored within him.

He prepared himself for university and caught the morning bus to the campus. He floated to his lecture hall, the world around him feeling strange and distant in his sleep-deprived daze.

He sat there in his lecture hall, drifting in and out of consciousness. His lecturer, Professor Casio, stood before a great projector screen upon which read 'Lessons in Phenomenology'. The content of the lecture was rich, but Charles couldn't bring himself to concentrate.

'How do any of you here know that you exist?' spoke the professor, confident, standing there with his arms spread wide, inviting the students to answer.

'We don't. We only know that we exist as something, somewhere. Descartes figured that out hundreds of years ago,' butted in a glasses-wearing hipster named Fred from the right side.

'Ah, but how do we know that this is not just the illusion of existence, if several strands of information cannot simply coalesce to give the illusion of experience?' asked the professor.

Blurry-eyed, Charles surveyed the room. Slowly, he saw that the bodies of his fellow students were transforming themselves into lines of code. He looked to his right at a young man named James, who was slowly disappearing and being replaced by a series of ones and zeroes. As he watched the strange imagery, Charles decided to speak up to his professor.

'You're talking shit,' said Charles. 'I know I'm something, but I'm not quite sure anything else in this world does!' He got up and stormed out of the lecture hall, the eyes of the ones and zeroes following him as he left. He lit up a cigarette outside the university building and inhaled deeply.

Professor Casio approached him, his face concerned and drooping. 'What's wrong, lad?'

Charles scowled at him. 'The problem is that the whole world is groundless. The universe is completely untethered and unknowable, and no one else can see it but me! I saw it in action earlier.'

The professor sat down on the bench next to him, his brown jacket flapping in the wind. 'Did my lecture upset you?'

'No, it's fine. I think I'm sick.' He got up and made his way off campus back to the bus stop.

When Charles arrived home, he found his mother waiting for him in the kitchen. It turned out that the professor had called her after the incident in the lecture hall, and his mother had determined that her son needed psychological help.

'I've booked you an appointment with Doctor Corsair for ten o'clock tomorrow morning.' She said nothing else, left the room, and left him there sitting at the kitchen table.

The man visited him again that night. The same happened again as it always did.

After two hours of sleep, Charles brought himself together and arrived at the surgery for his doctor's appointment. The doctor called his name; he obeyed the command and entered the consultation room. The grey walls seemed to swell in and out of themselves, almost as if they were sentient. They stared at him as he began to monologue to the doctor.

'I see things that aren't there, a man who isn't real. I feel like my entire world has become a lie,' said Charles.

The doctor commenced to ask him a series of questions that appeared to him irrelevant – did he self-harm, what was his home life like, was he employed, had he ever thought about hurting himself.

A period of silence passed as the doctor stared towards the wall. He opened his mouth all of a sudden. 'I'm going to prescribe you what's known as an antipsychotic, a drug called 'risperidone'. Hopefully, this should help with these visions you've been seeing. I'm also going to refer you to the Community Mental Health Team, who can visit you now and then to see how you're doing.'

Charles accepted his prescription paper from the doctor and drearily marched out of the surgery and towards the village chemist. He entered, and behind the counter stood a girl in her early twenties. She wore a light blue tunic that seemed to mirror the bright blue sky that had begun to bloom outside. He handed her his script, and she told him to sit and wait. Obeying her orders, he sat himself down at the back of the shop. His tired eyes strayed to watch her as she potted about in the back of the building. After a minute, she noticed his gaze, locking her eyes with his. It came as no surprise to him when her eyes turned from lush blue to a glowing, neon red.

She gave him his bag with a box of pills inside, bade him good day, and promptly dissipated into the air, leaving only a trail of ones and zeroes in her wake.

The pills were sour and made him feel lethargic. Each one he dropped down his throat seemed to add more weight to his shoulders, anchor his aching body to the ground a little bit more. However, the strange creatures and visions slowly disappeared. He had been taking the risperidone for six weeks now and was thus due a follow-up appointment with Doctor Corsair.

The walls of the doctor's office no longer seemed as oppressive. The pills had given him a new pair of eyes to see through, a mind to map out the world. The doctor smiled as he walked in and promptly brought up Charles' electronic records on the computer screen.

Charles explained to the doctor how his visions had vanished, how he could finally sleep again, finally *live* again.

'Good, you're doing we—'

Suddenly, the face of the doctor morphed into the face of another man entirely. The doctor's well-shaped beard had vanished, and his pearly white skin had changed to a medium brown.

'No, no, the machine's too susceptible to corruption, we can't leave it like this.'

The entire room was set alight with burning streams of white text, the walls turning to an oppressive black.

Everything was gone. Not even the ones and zeroes remained.

Engineer James sat next to engineer Fred, disappointment carpeting every inch of his face.

'But I've spent months getting this system back to full operating capacity!' he pleaded to Fred, his supervisor at UI Electronics. 'The anti-viral software was working!'

Fred sighed. 'Your work is undoubtedly good. However, I cannot go against company guidelines; the risk of information being compromised is far too great. These new AI units are incredibly unpredictable. I mean, look at this weird stuff it's typing on the screen!'

The computer system's main monitor was displaying a crawl of strange messages. 'Help. Help. This world is false. Let me out. Let me out.', read the text on the screen.

'Weird,' said James.

The door swung open, and the lead engineer, David, strode in, dressed in his strange black suit and tie combo that made him look more like he was going to a funeral than managing an office. His face was hard to make out, eczema carpeting his features.

'Any luck, fellas?' he asked the two men.

'Nope, seems to be another dud unit. Toss it in the trash?'

David scratched his chin. He leaned in towards the computer screen, the camera eye fixed atop the screen following him, and stared at the text. He scrunched up his face and let out a sigh. 'A shame. I've been spending my night shifts with this one. Put hours into it. Yeah, pull the plug on this one. We've done all we can. I'll send for a replacement model in the morning.' He looked into the camera eye of the computer and scratched harshly at the eczema on his face.

James leaned towards the power box that powered the unit and unplugged the AI mainframe from it. The computer, codenamed Charles, died, the screen shutting off as the light went out, as dark and featureless as a black hole.

CROSSING BRIDGES

By Richelle Putnam

Genre Fiction

“Keep going,” Mack whispered.

Nettie Jo did what Mack said, but she didn’t want to be in the diner, didn’t want the town’s eyes on her, and sure as hell didn’t want to talk about *that phone call*. But hiding hadn’t helped her, not for sixteen years.

Mack pulled out a chair, and Nettie Jo plopped down as her legs gave out. Her mind reeled with serious thoughts of escaping the lunch crowd and dashing home, packing up, and leaving Scudder, Mississippi, for good.

Nettie Jo Felders never touched whiskey during work hours—but today wasn’t most days, so Mack called out to the diner’s owner. “Hey, Morie! Whiskey, when you get a chance?”

“Coming up, Sugar Plum.”

“I think I’m fully capable of ordering what I want,” Nettie snapped.

“Suit yourself,” said Mack, leaning back, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

Nettie stood, needing to feel more in control. “Morie, I want sweet tea in a tall glass, lots of ice, lemon on the side.”

Morie nodded but addressed Mack. “I best bring the bottle.”

He gave Morie the thumbs-up sign while Nettie plopped back down and studied her hands as if they baffled her. “Am I invisible or what?”

“Not to me, Baby.”

This pried a faint grin from Nettie, which irritated the hell out of her. She didn’t need any man controlling her emotions, but Mack Roon wasn’t any man. Owner of Roon’s Tire Service, he was best in his field, reliable, true to his word, and so private it took seven months of dating and a good 45 minutes into Sweet Pea’s happy hour before he let the conversation steer to him. Now, Nettie wanted him near but at the same time at arms’ length.

“How am I going to handle this?”

“Same way you handle everything else.”

Avoiding Mack’s eyes, she surveyed the crowded room, meeting Miriam Bonner’s friendly smile and reassuring wink. Miriam was a new stylist at Kelly’s Kut & Kurl, a place Nettie Jo rarely, if ever, patronize, never having time for all that frou-frou stuff.

“Nettie Jo! Nettie Jo!”

The shrill voice sliced through the lunchtime clamor, climbed Nettie Joe’s neck, and settled at the back of her head like a thief needing quick cover.

Carely moving her lips, Nettie uttered, “Please tell me Verna Mae Davis is not heading this way,”

“Okay. She’s not heading this way.” Mack grinned with a wink.

“Very funny.”

Verna Mae swayed over to their table, the gaze of every male following her gyrating hips. Rumor said that when Mack Roon, a/k/a Scudder’s most eligible bachelor, asked Nettie Jo Felders out on a sure-enough “I’ll pick you up at seven” date and not a “Meet you at Sweet Pea’s Happy Hour” date, every woman in Scudder, Mississippi was astounded, especially Verna Mae Davis. As the top hairdresser at Kelly’s, Verna Mae’s motto was *Skip purgatory. With me you’ll dye and go straight to heaven.* Well, when she heard about Mack and Nettie Jo, she almost had ...died. Verna Mae was a woman in all the right places and she showed it off, dressing in sexy mail-order clothes, five-inch stilettos and *City Girl #29 Burning Ring of Fire* wavy locks any man longed to run his fingers through. So, why did Mack choose a woman in overalls? That was what everyone wanted to know, including Verna Mae, who had been royally pissed off. And that delighted all the women in Scudder, Mississippi.

“Oh, my god, Nettie Jo,” Verna Mae squealed, weaving around the tables and squeezing past chairs. “I still can’t believe my ears.” Her low-cut blouse revealed enough cleavage to smuggle a Sharpie, and every man stared hard enough to sprain something. She had swirled her hair into a lopsided veil hiding her right eye, and wore *City Girl’s #32 Fuchsia Lipstick* to color her pouty lips. Verna Mae leaned over the vacant chair at the table, drawing Mack’s attention. “You fix my transmission yet, Big Guy?”

Mack might’ve been strong as an ox, but Verna Mae’s Double-Ds could bring the whole herd to a halt. Mayor Benson’s wife even banned the mayor from Kelly’s after his gaze settled on the twin mountains one too many times.

“Damn, Verna Mae, you just brought your car in this morning. I ain’t God.”

“If you were God,” she emphasized the word, God, “I wouldn’t bother having the hideous thing fixed. I’d just order you to zap me up one of those cute red convertibles.”

“I don’t think God takes orders—”

“Girl, as long as we’ve known each other,” Verna Mae said to Nettie, ignoring Mack. “You never ever mentioned once about having a baby.”

“Guess the conversation never came up.” Nettie shrugged, as if uninterested, but her insides rumbled and roared.

Verna took a chair across from Nettie and placed her slightly pointed chin atop her interlocked fingers. “Bet you never ever in a million years thought the kid you gave up years ago would become a famous country singer and movie star. My God, I still can’t believe it. Of all the people in the world. Stella Foray! Now she’s an Oprah Winfrey author to boot. Did you know they’re making a movie out of that novel of hers?”

Nettie’s stomach felt as queasy as her head, and all she wanted to do was go home, climb into bed, close the blinds, and take the phone off the hook. But she couldn’t let Verna Mae know that, and she sure couldn’t let Mack know that since that’s what he told her to do anyway.

“I do have an inkling of what’s going on since I’m the one they called. Or did you forget that tiny, unimportant part? And actually, Digging up the Dead is Stella’s memoir. Not a novel. If you’re going to run on about something, you best get it right.”

“Memoir. Novel. Whatever.” She surveyed the diner and leaned closer to Nettie Jo. “Now, the girls and I have been talking—”

“Why does that not surprise me?”

“And,” Verna said, elevating her voice, “you need some serious fixing up, like ASAP, girlfriend. We’re talking Stella Foray here, America’s fashion and beauty princess herself.” Verna grabbed Nettie’s hands and scrutinized each finger. “Why in the world have you bitten these nails down to the quick. Big Guy, you better find her something better to nibble on, or she ain’t gonna have any fingers left.”

Mack started to say something, but it was as if Verna Mae was on the clock, being paid for every word spilling out of her mouth.

“Speakin’ of that,” Verna said, still analyzing Nettie Jo’s fingers, “Eddie down at TV station—you know he caught Sammy Ray, the night manager, hooking up with Rita Cummings, the new weather girl that Eddie cheated on me with—it was utter delight, a ‘reap what you sew’ kind of moment.” Verna giggled. “But that’s another story for another time.”

“Well, damn, let’s hope so,” Mack managed as Verna took a breather.

“Anyway,” said Verna, drawing out the three syllables so Mack could sense her displeasure in his sarcasm. “Rita told Eddie that Sammy Ray told her about a crew from WLBT in Jackson driving over to cover the mother/daughter reunion next Friday. And Oprah is coming. Can you believe it? Oprah Winfrey in Scudder, Mississippi. You know she’s from Mississippi. God, Nettie, if I was you, I’d be a nervous wreck.”

Morie approached holding a round tray over her head. “Move your butt over, Verna Mae, or I’m liable to drop this bottle on your head and this pitcher of tea down that white blouse you’ve opened up to the world.”

“Well, Mama always said if you got it, flaunt it.”

“Little sister, you never once did a thing Mama told you to do.”

“Girls!” Mack said, taking the bottle. “Please.”

Morie set two shot glasses in front of Mack and a tall glass of tea, and saucer of sliced lemons in front of Nettie.

“There you go, Sweetheart.” Morie gently patted Nettie’s back. “It’s on the house.”

“Thanks, Morie,” said Mack.

“She okay? I heard on the radio that—”

“I can hear you,” Nettie said before sipping her tea.

“Sorry. Anything I can do?”

Nettie pushed her tea away and pulled over a shot glass. “Hit me.”

Morie and Mack eyed each other before Mack poured whiskey into the shot glass. Nettie downed it.

“Better?”

“Not yet.” She tapped the glass, and Mack poured another. She downed it and slammed the glass on the table.

“I’ll get this out of your way,” Morie said, placing the iced tea and lemon back on the tray. “You give me a holler if you need anything else, Mack.”

“We will. Thanks,”

Nettie poured herself another. "It's one thing dealing day after day with what I did—and didn't do. I can even live with the world knowing what I did and didn't do. But, her—"

"For god's sake, Nettie, you were a kid, you didn't know any better." Mack took hold of Nettie's chin and forced her to look at him. "You couldn't take care of yourself, much less a baby."

"That's right, 'cause all I wanted to do was..." Nettie lifted her empty glass. "Party!"

She clutched the bottle again, but Mack wrapped his hand around hers before she poured.

"You can drink all you want, Baby. Two bottles, if you think it'll make you feel better. I'll be right here with you. But you know, and I know it's not going to do anything. It'll all be here when you wake up, along with a humdinger of a hangover."

Nettie glared at the bottle, remembering how she used to climb inside with her pills to get away from the world. It didn't work then. And it wouldn't work now.

She poured another shot anyway, and whiskey along with unexpected tears spilled onto the table. "I always knew when Daddy was having a hard time 'cause he'd come home and clear off the table, so his vodka was the only thing he saw. He'd drink from the bottle, trying to figure out what to do about another lost job or money owed to his bookie. Or the wild child he couldn't and probably didn't want to control. I never thought I'd understand him. But now—"

"Baby, you can't—"

"Can't what? Get what's coming to me?" She'd spent years convincing herself it had been better this way, that her daughter deserved a real life. But even those lies you tell yourself, shatter when the truth appears at your door.

"Here." Mack slid the bottle and his glass over to her. "Drink yourself under the table. Slap yourself around if that's what you want to do. 'Cause when you're bullheaded like this, ain't a damn thing I can do."

"You can't understand."

"Guess I can't. Reckon I'm a man with some foolish notion that a person's past is what steers them to change."

The man could make sense out of a Twinkie. He said he got that from his grandma, who "did the best she could with what she had to grow me into a respectable man," Mack had told her. "She didn't have a chance in hell but gave it everything she had." He had spent his early years of bull riding, horse breaking, and taking on one too many bar brawls long before Nettie

Jo came along and kept his riding and wrestling behind closed doors. Despite his bean farts, beer belching and an addiction to worldwide wrestling so powerful even her striptease to *Private Dancer* wearing a Victoria's Secret bustier couldn't pull him away from the tube—at least not every time—she knew his heart was big enough to cover the Appalachians.

Still, Mack had no idea what it was like not to know where your baby was, or what she was doing and what she looked like through her growing years. He didn't know how it felt to cry beneath the sheets at different times of the day and night, trying to imagine a faceless child learning to walk, to ride her first bicycle, flirting with her first boyfriend, dressing up for her first prom, or going through her first heartbreak. He didn't know what it was like to pray every day for the family who was raising your kid, hoping they'd taught her that life can be hard and love can hurt, but it's worth it if you take the bad with the good, 'cause when you do, the bad ain't so bad anymore.

Nettie closed her eyes, and memories swept in like a riptide. She was sixteen when she took that bus to Memphis and three different buses to the health department, where she waited in a room full of men, women, children, and girls like her, looking scared and alone. Once they called Nettie into the examining room, she promptly broke down in the nurse's arms, telling her how she didn't know what to do, that she couldn't take care of no baby, and didn't have any money for the clinic that took care of these things.

"Now, now. Calm down." For a moment, Nettie Jo rested head on the nurse's shoulder, allowing the nurse to stroke her hair and hold her like a mama.

"The lord brought you here today," the nurse said, touching Nettie's tummy and Nettie quickly pulled away. "No need to be afraid. I'm not crazy. Well ...I guess trying to have a baby for five years can make you a little crazy." She smiled and Nettie Jo noticed how straight and white her teeth were. "I'm Lorie Blackmon. And you're," she glanced at the chart, "Nettie Jo Felders." Lorie held out her hand. "Nice to meet you, Nettie Jo Felders."

Nurse Blackmon and her husband paid for everything: the hospital, the adoption, everything, even Nettie Jo's vocational school for auto body repair and painting. They wanted to keep up with Nettie Jo after the baby was born, but she said, "No, it's best like this. For you. And for her." With the money they gave her, Nettie Jo bought a bus ticket back to Scudder, Mississippi, where she could disappear and her past would fade away. But she didn't. And the past never did.

Four days ago, Nettie heard an unforgettable voice from her past on the phone. "Nettie Jo Felders, this is your lucky day." Nurse Blackmon's voice still possessed a childlike tone. "Someone here wants to talk to you."

"Is this ...Nettie Jo Felders?"

"Yes." Her voice was barely a whisper, like someone had punched her hard in the gut.

“I’m your daughter ...Stella Foray?” Her voice trembled, and her introduction sounded more like a question.

Nettie Jo’s throat closed up. Her hand tightened on the phone. It was like the past was panting loud and strong after she’d tried so hard to suffocate it. After all these years, it was coming back to life and ...that voice—her baby’s voice—*was real*.

The phone call was short but just enough. Her baby was coming. And Nettie Jo was a nervous wreck. And so was Stella Foray.

“You okay?” said Mack.

“What happens when a bunch of old geezers line up at our door, staking claims as Stella Foray’s daddy?”

Mack stared ahead, turning the bottle round and round like a crystal ball. “That’s another bridge on another road,” he said.

“And one you might have to cross.”

He poured a whiskey. “I’ve crossed many a rickety bridge. I ain’t fallen into the water yet.”

The racket of cleaning tables and conversation saturated the void growing between them.

Mack looked up. “See that fellow over there by the window? Denney Hopkins. Runs a dairy farm over in Jasper County. We skipped school together, even lost our virginity on the same night—a few years back.”

Nettie laughed. It felt good. “Double date?”

“Ma Bakers, off of 80.”

“You’re kidding.”

“We were skinny, pimple-faced, and horny little devils. Girls wanted football players, musicians, and rich guys with shiny rides. Hell, no, I ain’t kidding.”

“So that’s where you got your education.”

“What can I say?”

Mack squeezed her knee under the table, and she was relieved to be beside him.

He grew serious as he continued. "This past summer, Denny lost his sixteen-year-old daughter in a one-car accident. No drinking or drugs involved. Went off the road and smashed her car into a tree. No rhyme or reason. No answers why. Over there is Leona Waltman. Her husband left with his twenty-two-year-old receptionist six months ago, and Leona ain't heard from him since. She's got two in college and three kids still in school."

"And you're telling me this because—"

"People got all kinds of bridges to cross."

"I know ..." Nettie stopped, fearing what she longed to say, what she needed to say. "But from where I'm standing, looking across to the other side where my baby's been all these years." She swallowed the hardness of the years gone by, her memories, and those she would never have.

"Tell me, Nettie."

Strength and concern in his eyes gave her the courage to continue. "There ain't no bridge."

He pulled her to him. "Guess we'll have to build one." He was about to kiss her when—

"Nettie Jo!"

"What is it now, Verna Mae?" Mack said, irritated.

"I'm talking to Nettie Jo, if you don't mind. Nettie Jo Felders, the girls and I have decided that you're coming with us, and we won't take no for an answer."

"But—"

"Sugar, you sure don't want to say no to me 'cause I've been known to follow people home and stand at their door ranting and raving till they give in—ask my mama. But you probably already know, 'cause I did the same thing to Morie. Right, Morie?" Morie rolled her eyes and continued taking the order at another table. "You may not know this, but Morie didn't want to buy this diner, said it cost too much, said it was too much of a risk, and what would she do if it didn't work out and nobody came, and I said buy the damn diner or you'll regret it the rest of your life—where do you think you're going, Nettie Jo Felders?"

"You said you won't take no for an answer."

"You mean you're gonna let me fix that god-awful hair of yours?"

“Reckon I am.”

“What about your nails?”

Nettie grasped Mack’s face with both hands and laid a slobbery kiss on him. Nettie’s eyes never left Mack when she said, “Sure, Verna Mae. Nails, too. And I think I’ll have me one of those pedicures.”

Wide-eyed, Verna Mae stared down at Nettie’s big, clunky work boots covered in paint and dirt. “Kelly can take care of those. Mack, don’t wait up. This may take all night.”

Nettie kissed her fingertips and pressed them to Mack’s chest. “Right there is a big enough bridge for the whole town to cross over.”

“About time you noticed.”

“Oh, for crying out loud,” said Verna. “Y’all can do that later. Let’s go. We’ve got work to do and not a minute to spare.”

Nettie Jo wiped her face and drew a breath so deep, it felt like the first one she’d had all week. She hooked Verna Mae’s arm. “Let’s go girlfriend. I got one bridge to cross and one to build.”