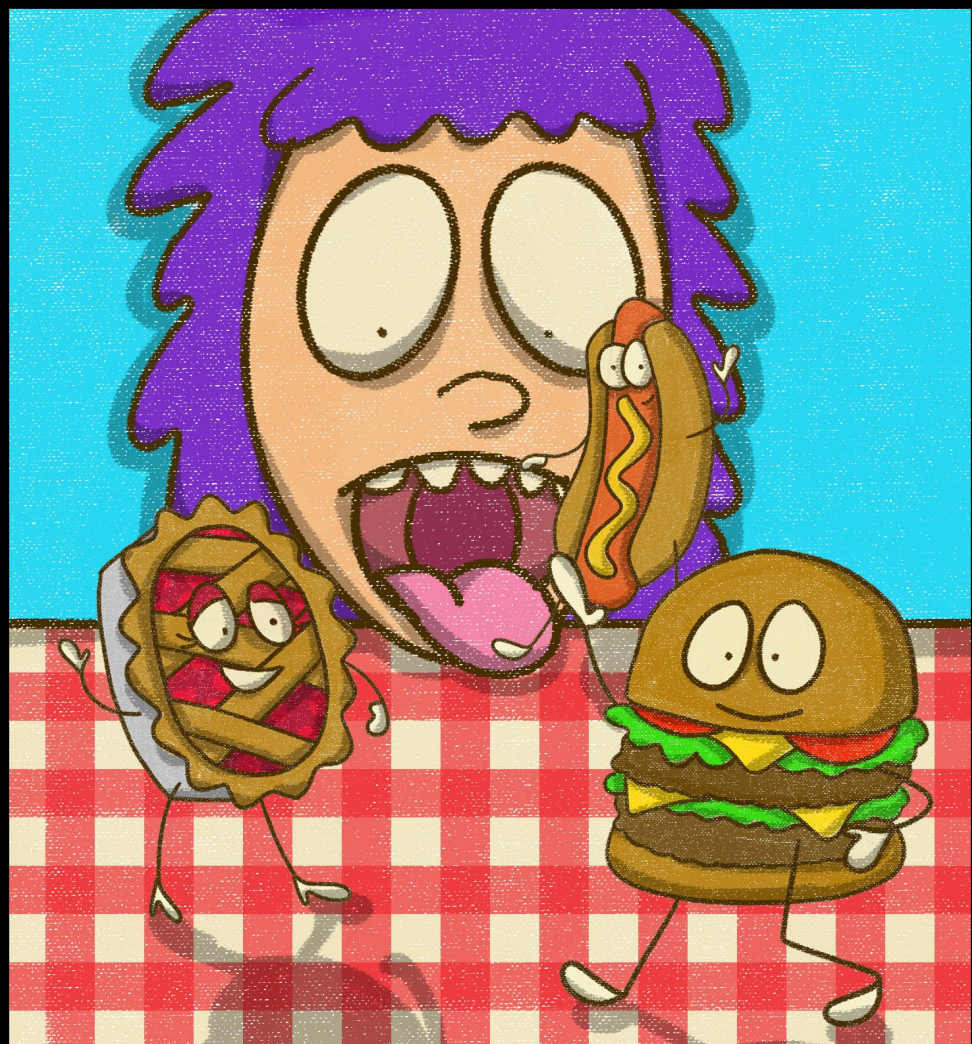


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free. take one.

the dirtbag times



*inside: alligator alcatraz - gettin fixed - narratives -
thoughts about film words - creepy horse makes a lifestyle
change - the journey - columnated ruins domino - i wrote
a book - micromusing*



**the dirtbag times is a
magazine for dirtbags
by dirtbags.**

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ALLIGATOR ALCATRAZ & THE SHRINKING QENPOP

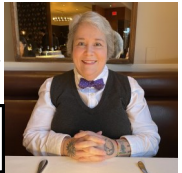
Last month I read an interesting article in *The Atlantic* regarding the size of the United States prison population. Reporter Keith Humphreys stated that in the next ten years America's prison population will have fallen by half from a record high of 1.6 million incarcerations in 2009. Humphreys explained this is due to a generational decrease in crime. "A prison is a portrait of what happened five, 10, and 20 years ago" and that crime is essentially committed by the young. Violent crime rates peaked in 1991 causing the 2009 peak in incarcerations. We have had a generational slowdown in crime for the past 15 years and those waves have been slow to come to shore.

Many of you will be familiar with the term "the prison-industrial complex" and the overlapping relationships between government and private industry for jailing America's prisoners. It is profitable to this industry for America to continue to put bodies in these prisons. Mandated sentencing, three strikes laws, and the war on drugs helped to fill these prisons to capacity 15 years ago. Overall, crime rates have dropped (except for a small trend in reverse five years ago during the Pandemic) so the need for prison space has slowly deteriorated. These companies' bottom line is tied to the amount of bodies in their prisons. If citizens aren't committing crimes like they used to, and the judges are already handing out heavy sentences, how does one find a new source for prisoners? One need only look as far as the "illegal immigrant" and the right wing's rabid desire to oust them from America to find a new well to fill these empty jail cells. This has become such a popular idea that Donald Trump has endorsed the use of a makeshift prison in the Florida Everglades near Miami known colloquially as "Alligator Alcatraz."

It is not an actual facility. It is a bunch of FEMA tents and shelters on an abandoned airport runway. Up to 5000 people will be detained there. It is meant to be a temporary facility but looks eerily like photos from World War II internment camps. Other southern states what a piece of this action and have expressed interest in creating their own quasi-internment camps. Who will ultimately run these camps for FEMA? The prison-industrial complex, of course! But this creates a bit of a conundrum. These states already have empty prison beds waiting for prisoners to fill them. I find it very interesting that these corporate prison companies would rather build new temp facilities rather than fully use their existing facilities. It turns out that Florida Governor Rick Desantis has promised enormous tax breaks for these companies. There is also talk of selling internee slave labor. And the Big Beautiful Bill, passed earlier this month, will bathe the prison corporations in federal lucre. All of a sudden this becomes much less about citizenship but instead about Jim Crow for brown people. — **KELLY MENACE**

ALLIGATOR ALCATRAZ IS A MIRROR AND WE SHOULDN'T LIKE WHAT WE SEE

*How many times can a man turn his head, pretending he just doesn't see? –
"Blowin' In the Wind" by Bob Dylan*



It was hard for me to celebrate July 4th ... you know our yearly festival in the "land of the free" ... while watching us build cages in a swamp ... really hard.

This so-called "Alligator Alcatraz" is the latest, most grotesque example of how far we've strayed from anything resembling decency. It's not a catchy nickname. It's not some gritty marketing ploy. It's a threat. A taunt. "Try to escape," they sneer, "the gators will get you."

You want to talk about who we are as a country? Because this is who we are *choosing* to be right now: people who build a prison camp in the Everglades, ring it with barbed wire, and call the lethal wildlife a convenient security feature.

I can't stop thinking about the people inside. They are people, period. People who thought that America was a place where they could be safe, where there was hope, where they might be free. They didn't come here for a vacation. They didn't come to "invade." They came here because the world they left behind was even more dangerous than the snakes and gators waiting outside their tent city.

And our response? "Here. Sleep on the concrete. Sweat in the sun. Fear the wildlife. And know we did this on purpose."

If you're not enraged, I'm not sure you're paying attention.

They built this horror in eight days, on sovereign indigenous land no less, just so they could say, "Look how tough we are." As if cruelty is a virtue. As if deliberately making people miserable is proof of some moral spine.

It's not strength. It's cowardice. It's the moral equivalent of kicking someone who's already on the ground.

What kind of country are we when we measure our greatness by how effectively we can make others suffer? When we put razor wire in rivers so children can't cross, when we turn the swamp itself into a prison guard?

I'll tell you what kind. A country in deep, dangerous denial about the promises it claims to hold dear.

I grew up pledging allegiance to "liberty and justice for all." Not "liberty and justice for those lucky enough to be born on a certain side of an imaginary line." All.

We love to paint ourselves as the good guys in the story. The shining city on a hill. The beacon of hope. The melting pot. But when the moment comes to prove it — to actually live it — suddenly we're building concentration camps in the Everglades and joking about the alligators doing our dirty work.

It's not just shameful. It's un-American.

And don't tell me this is about "deterrence" or "security." We can process people with dignity. We can invest in immigration courts, legal aid, humane shelters. We can treat asylum seekers as human beings. But that would require courage, empathy, and imagination — and the willingness to see ourselves in the faces of people who don't look like us.

Instead, we've chosen cruelty.

We can't let this stand.

We can't call ourselves good people if we don't speak up. We can't say we care about freedom while locking people in cages in the middle of a swamp and daring them to escape. We can't claim the moral high ground while deliberately stripping other human beings of basic human dignity.

I'm angry. I hope you are too.

But more than that, I hope you're willing to *do* something with that anger.

Call your elected officials. Demand this camp be shut down. Support the organizations fighting for immigrant rights and humane policy. Have the hard conversations with people who think this is acceptable. Refuse to look away.

Because if America means anything at all, it has to mean this: that no one's humanity is negotiable. That dignity isn't a luxury you earn with the right paperwork. That cruelty in our name is cruelty we're all responsible for ending.

We can be better than how we are behaving right now ... We have to be.

Because the day we stop even trying? That's the day we lose whatever soul this country has left.

Let's choose to be the America we keep saying we are. The one that truly stands for freedom and justice... for all. — *PAMALYN ROSE-BEELER*



GETTIN' FIXED

This summer, I did something I've been wanting to do for a very VERY long time, I got sterilized! I've known since I was about 10 that making a human in my body and taking care of one were things I was not interested in or suited for. I thought, who would want to hear about this? You just decide, go to the doctor, and get it done! But there were some real adult ladies who were asking me about it, so I thought it actually might be helpful for others out there who may not have or might not know they have friends who have gone through the process! Heads up, this is for those of you with female parts.

Let's start with the biggest barrier — money. Luckily, the Supreme Court ruled just a couple of weeks ago to uphold the preventive care mandate that's part of the Affordable Care Act. That's a big deal! That means if your insurance is ACA compliant (like insurance through your employer, from the exchanges, or non-scummy private insurance), preventive care like your well woman exam, getting an IUD, and, yes, sterilization, are covered! You don't need to meet a deductible, and you shouldn't have to pay anything out of pocket besides what's not covered for your pain and recovery meds. I paid \$20 out of pocket for my pain meds and \$35 for an urgent care visit after I broke out in an itchy rash from boobs to tubes from the surgical wash they use (if you have sensitive skin, ask if they can use the dye-free soap!) Insurance covered all \$14,000 of the procedure and pre-and -post op visits.

Maybe you're lucky and your current doctor is also a surgeon and you can just stay with them, but I had to ask my doctor for a recommendation to a doctor who would perform the surgery. If you're not comfortable asking your doctor, there's an entire subreddit called /childfree, and they have a list of verified doctors on their Friendly Doctor List in each state that are safe, don't ask intrusive questions about your lifestyle, and will sterilize you. Peruse that list and see who's in your insurance network and reach out to their office.

Along the way, you'll go through three different

appointments. The first will be a pre-op consultation with the doctor who will be performing your surgery. This is more of a chat where they tell you about the procedure, make sure you know it's permanent, and open it up to any questions from you. This is a clothes-on appointment.

The second will be your actual surgery. The procedure now is a bilateral salpingectomy, where they completely remove your fallopian tubes. It's permanent and darn near 100% effective, much more effective than tubal ligation. It's

laparoscopic, and you will probably have two tiny incisions above your hip bones, and one in your belly button. When they remove your tubes, they send them off to test for cancer, and removing them also reduces your risk of certain types of cancer that may start in your tubes. Bonus!

Before surgery, you'll want to be sure you've done all your prep at home to be able to come home and recover without worry. Clean your house! It'll be much calmer and easier to relax. Get snacks! Bland stuff — Ritz crackers, Ritz Bitz, uhhh, more Ritz. And prep some food! I made chili, soup, and beans, and it's good to pick something high in fiber without dairy, because the pain meds will be working against you, if you know what I mean. Make sure you have something comfy to wear — a loose nightgown or t-shirt dress and underwear with a low rise or super high granny rise so the waistband doesn't bother your incisions. Loosy goosy pajama pants. Slip-on shoes. Ice pack and/or heating pad. You might need pads in case there's some bleeding. Cough drops for the sore throat from your breathing tube. And if you live alone, maybe have a friend stay over the first couple of days to look after you and help you.

On the day of, you'll throw on a hospital gown, sign some consent forms, get an IV with fluids and some meds to relax you, tell about a million different people the procedure you're having, and when you're all set, the person who brought you can come in and wait with you until they take you to the operating room. The very BEST thing about surgery is that they give you HOT, FRESH BLANKIES at every step of the way. I had no

fewer than three hot blankies given to me before surgery! Once they're ready to go, they'll wheel you into the OR, scooch you onto a buttless bed (yes, of course this is the detail I remember), and put an oxygen mask over your face. They'll let you know they're giving you the night time knock out stuff, and all of a sudden you're finished and awake! The procedure itself is about 15-20 minutes. I dreamt about laying on the bed and petting my cat, Toonces, while I was out. You'll get your choice of snacks and drinks, another dose of pain meds, and you can rest until you're comfy enough to get dressed and leave with your person. On the way home, you'll pick up your pain meds, and then your off to your cozy home for recovery!

Recovery is different for everyone, but definitely take some time off work. The first few days, you'll be on the heavy pain meds and probably feeling pretty zonked. If you have a job where you do a lot of standing, walking, or other physical movement, see if you can get a whole week off. I work from home and went back on day 3, but felt pretty miserable, and wasn't able to do a full work day until the fifth day. You'll be tired for a good two weeks post-op while the big healing is happening, and you should give yourself some grace and allow yourself to really rest. They really emphasize walking post-op, even just little baby short 3-5 minute walks if that's all you can manage, to help with healing and pooooops, and really, you'll start feeling pretty cooped up. I ambled around the neighborhood with my partner in my giant t-shirt dress, pajama pants, and my easiest to put on shoes morning and evening for a week. Definitely have someone help you walk your dog and don't bother with jeans.

After two weeks or so, you'll have a post-op appointment to see how recovery is going and to ask any remaining questions. By this point, your incisions should be well healed on the outside, but there will probably be some dissolving stitches remaining on the inside. Your doctor will talk you through how your procedure went and give you photos of your insides, including a pre- and -post tube view. Mat it, frame it! Congratulations, you've exercised your autonomy! — KATIE KILLER

THE JOURNEY

Joseph Campbell was an American mythologist and scholar who immersed himself in the world's religions, sacred texts, and literature. Through his research, he discovered something extraordinary: that beneath the surface differences, the same fundamental storytelling pattern echoed across cultures and time. Every epic tale, every mythic narrative — from the Bhagavad Gita to Star Wars — seems to follow this shared arc.

I used to wonder how that could be. How is it possible that, for thousands of years and civilizations, we've been telling the same story again and again? Or as Campbell put it, how can there be one hero with a thousand faces?

Well, what I've come to realize is this: the Hero's Journey isn't just a storytelling device. It's a blueprint. Because let's be honest — this whole "being alive" thing? It's confusing and wild and hard. If you've got a bottom dollar to bet, honey, wager it on the fact that the struggle is real.

Each of us, will sooner or later, get our call for our road of trials — a mega quest of challenges and heartbreaks that test us, break us, and then forge us. It places us in a dark depth of despair and forces us to ask "What if I'm capable of more?" And on the other side of that is transformation. That transformation is an important gift we earned.

I've also realized that the real magic of the Hero's Journey isn't just our own transformation, it's transmission. You see, to overcome the darkness, we need light. A light that, no matter what, has always been in us. Sometimes bright, sometimes flickering, that light is passed from hand to hand, from generations before and the ones after, lighting the way.

After we've crossed our own thresholds and have emerged victorious and forever changed, we're no longer just seekers, we're guides. What we've learned in the dark becomes a map, a story, a light held aloft so the next generation doesn't have to walk blind. And THAT is magic. — TISHIA JACKSON



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THOUGHTS ABOUT FILM WORDS

Odds are you won't recognize the names of Stephen McFeely, Christopher Markus and Ernest Lehman, but I bet you know their work.

They are all movie screenwriters. McFeely and Markus are responsible for a number of movies you may have heard of that grossed over \$9 billion. Lehman wrote a number of movies so classic in the Fifties through the Seventies that it's likely even teenagers today have heard of most of them.

McFeely and Markus are best known for writing Marvel movies, notably *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*, but they also did pretty good with three *The Chronicles of Narnia* films. A personal note — one of my favorites of theirs is a little dark comedy called *You Kill Me* about an alcoholic hired killer who has to join Alcoholics Anonymous.

Okay, let's see how many of Lehman's films you've heard of. *The King and I*, *West Side Story*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Hello Dolly* — slamdunks, right? Two more are Alfred Hitchcock films: *North by Northwest* and *Family Plot* (okay, the last one is forgettable). A couple others may only be notable to film fans: the original *Sabrina* with Audrey Hepburn and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton.

At least, you probably know the actors.

McFeely and Markus put all those great lines in the mouths of those actors in not only those Avengers movies, but also all three of the Captain America films. They provided not only the dialogue, but the action as well as the storylines that held together throughout the Marvel universe of films. Yes, I know it's hip now to slag the Marvel movies (and the Star Wars efforts), but those are still some memorable flicks, comic-book or not.

Back to Lehman. You may be asking yourself why should he get so much credit for writing a movie about a Broadway play? Do you ask the same question of someone who writes a movie based on a novel? A short story? (the films *Brokeback Mountain* and *Total Recall* were both short stories first). Just one question — how many people

have seen the theatre plays of those four productions *compared* to the number of people who have seen the movies?

Lehman's biographer Jon Krampner discovered a guy in Wales who has seen *The Sound of Music* 810 times ... in the theatre. The movie was in theatres in the U.S. for four and a half years. *West Side Story* — an American film about Americans — was the longest-running movie in French film history when released. It was nominated for 11 Academy Awards and won 10, losing only for — you know this is coming — Best Screenplay.

Krampner discovered Lehman's talent for adapting plays into movies was unappreciated in his time. Lehman had new songs written, changed their order in the movies, created new characters, wrote considerable dialogue, and devised original dramatic (and comedic) moments in all those productions. However, most critics dismissed his efforts as "Nice typing."

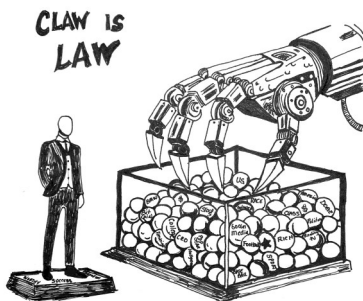
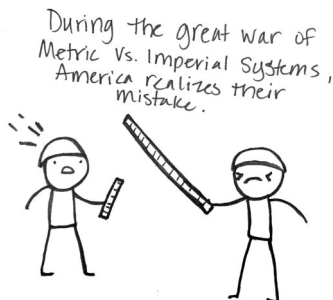
Why did Lehman write so many movies about theatre plays with only the one original screenplay (*North by Northwest*)? Simple. Money and the demands of the market. People had heard of the plays even if only a handful had seen them.

Look at McFeely and Markus. Six Marvel movies, three Narnia movies, and two Marvel movies upcoming. The money goes easier to the familiar and the comfortable. Some things never change. So much for art.

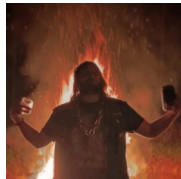
The King and I was the number two movie of 1956, earning the equivalent of \$81 million (in today's dollars). Lehman was nominated for his *Hello Dolly* screenplay, but he lost (of course) to *Midnight Cowboy* (one of the few times an actual good flick beat him).

One last tidbit — one of the working titles for *North by Northwest* was *The Man on Lincoln's Nose*. Now I would have paid to see that.

Next time you see a movie in the theater, pay attention to the part of the credits for the writer. The story is the heart of any movie. He or she deserves more than just that credit. — MIKE L. DOWNEY



NARRATIVES



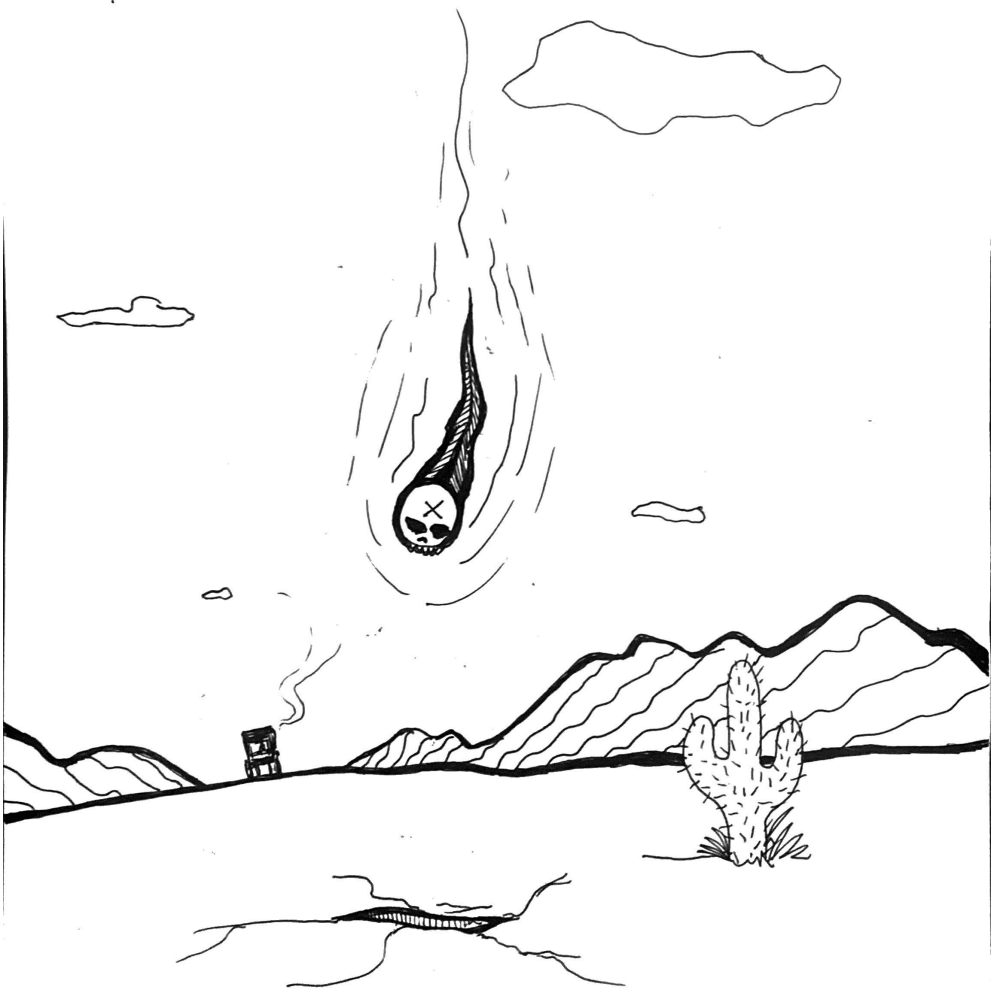
We made it here. Wherever here is, we made it. The world as we've known it is only further in disarray. Our "elected" representatives have felt the need to ostracize us only more as retribution for more their greed and for not believing their lies sooner. The humanities are under attack from our digital companions, and greed. ICE is breaking down doors as though they are some rogue militant force. Clickbait has replaced the news, most videos and articles are bogus. Unopinionated reporting has gone the wayside in favor of over sensationalized news-blotter. We have witnessed the chainsaw of democracy with a live TV ad for Tesla on the White House lawn with the President leading the pitch. Oligarchs arguing in public like school children while trying to appear hip and cool. The game of pass the blame is being played harder than it has in a long, long time. Floods have ravaged and taken many innocent lives in North Carolina and Texas. Southern California was on fire in the most horrific of ways. Immigrants are now being rounded up and sent to internment camps. Freedom of speech is getting thrown to the wayside for inner party newspeak. Senseless Tariff wars. Extravagant "gifts" from foreign powers looking to flex their influence. While the US bullies its once and just till recent loyal allies over semantics, just because. There's seldom been a time in recent history in the US where being an informed independent thinker and voter would be any worse, with the exception of the years to come of course, though hopefully not if we can collectively acknowledge and curb the trend through awareness and our own actions. Let's not forget the wonderful work of DOGE gutting our vital agencies with the care of a 5 year old with scissors. So many vital resources gone, because of the mega rich's greed. The military being deployed against the citizens they are sworn to protect, which is wild. Then there's the ongoing Palestinian cause and now the Iran conflict not to mention, the Big Beautiful Bill, new strands of ick threatening another pandemic, and generally just so much hot air it can seem like a lot for anyone to even think straight and the truth be told is that there is sooo, sooo, soooo much more to list that it would only serve to depress and curb the whole point of this piece.

With all this going on, it's pretty easy to feel overwhelmed and generally depressed. It can be pretty easy to let the headlines and clickbait seep in alter our world view. The day to day can seem redundant and on loop of worries that go beyond our own needs for happiness and survival. By getting lost in the frenzied media hype we can easily forget what's right in front of us. The wildest part is that while yes all of these things are happening, there are still plenty of wonderful things happening right in front of us all on the day to day. The little things matter, especially when the world as we know it seems to be falling apart around us. It's important to remember the simple

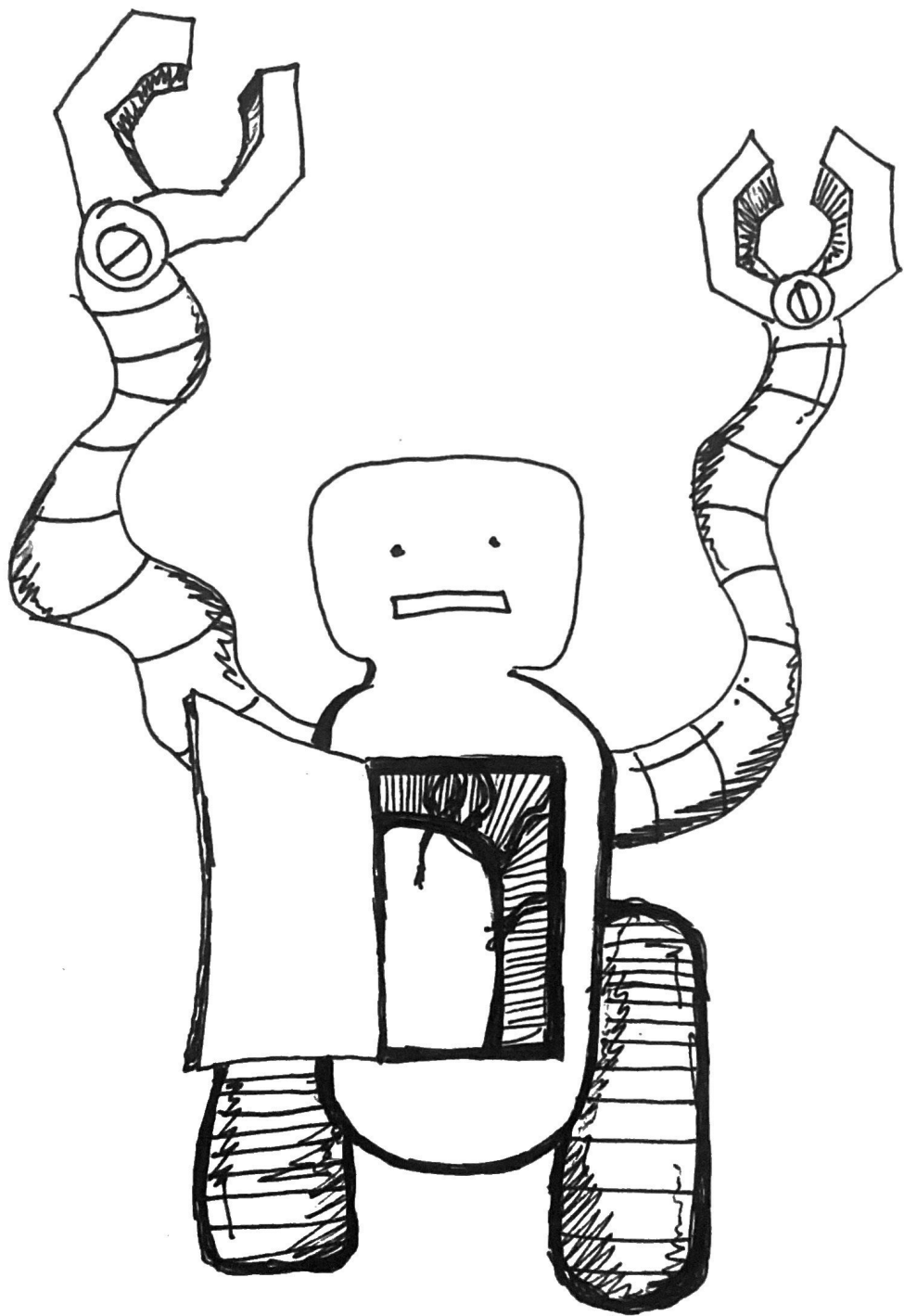
niceties that go so far on rough days. To be present for one another, but also to hold space for others when "it all seems like too much." If we want to feel safer or at least more at peace in our day to day it's important to do what we can mindfully to help others feel the same. It's up to us to find our zen and replicate it in the world so that it comes back to us. Think on the positives and the structure that true trial and error ultimately brings with time and patience. All will be as it should in the end and manifest the end that should be. If we each do our part to make another person feel safe, seen, loved, or present we can make the ripples echo past our respected pay grades and clearance levels. After all we are beings of solid water and sound, and contrary to what some may say our vibrations matter. Worry begets worry, hope inspires hope, and so on.

For the sake of your peace of mind and those around you at least try to remember the good in the world and the approaching awesomeness to come whether geopolitical, entertainment, community-based, or personal there's always something good on the sidelines waiting for the right time to bounce on all the convoluted madness. Some of the things I am excited for are the upcoming Superman movie finally helmed by someone who cares about the comics and gets the pacing. Super stoked for the new Fantastic Four movie FINALLY hopefully getting it right where so many others have failed. I'm stoked that so many bands I love and have loved are making comebacks and touring once more. I'm grateful for my loved ones and friends no matter how close or far. I'm grateful that while imperfect, the systems we have in place are doing their best to counteract and stop the spread of the muck we seem to be stuck in, though they need our hand to guide them back to where they should be.

I'm excited to know where our hearts lie as a country despite the rhetoric on TV and online – I am proud of the people for the spirit and turn out to the NO KINGS parades over a self absorbed wannabe dictator. I am grateful that while certainly still under attack, that we still have our freedoms of speech and that we still have time to fight for them and privacy. Despite all the negative news 24/7 the people seem to be generally in good spirits and a lot less divided then things are being made out to be. Holding a little air for people goes a long way, and I see it. There is good, there is hope, and despite the hiccups and growing pains we will get through this stronger and together. Remember who is ultimately in control of our narratives – US. Let's take back the narratives and spread uplifting messages of hope, love, growth, and more and not just the bad things that happened at work or on the news. We got this friends and fellow countrymen, keep up the good fight! – *WILLIAM DANIEL THOMPSON*



WILLIAM DANIEL THOMPSON



WILLIAM DANIEL THOMPSON



CREEPY HORSE HAS A LIFESTYLE CHANGE

Bahhhhhhhh. Anyone that has possibly been following the ever harrowing chronicles of Creepy Horse these years would know some core things about me:

- 1) My mental health was untreated for many years, bitch be crazy;
- 2) I struggled with addiction and alcoholism;
- 3) Despite my best efforts with extreme yo-yo diets and not having any self control, my health sucked.

Well, in the last decade I struggled to get clean and sober, but more in the last five years, I did. I fucking did it. Me. Some shithead. Fuck yeah.

Then I had a few mental breaks and lost everything. I dealt with agoraphobia, psychosis and suicidality. I believed I was other people. I lost my god damned mind on multiple occasions and the embarrassment and shame had me wanting to make life's biggest exit. I got help. I thought I'd be in a mental institution for a couple days while they figured out meds for me. Nope. They had a panel of doctors that were like you ain't going anywhere.

While I hated every day of it, it saved my fucking life. I was made to undergo Electric Shock Therapy. Despite my protests, it was the best thing that ever happened to me. For the first time in my life, I wasn't disappointed to wake up in the morning and I'm flourishing now.

Well ... my physical health will always be an issue and that's why it has finally moved forward on my plate of bullshit totem pole.

I learned over Christmas that my whole family knew I had Dyspraxia, a developmental disorder also referred to as "Clumsy Child Syndrome" and I struggle with balance and spatial coordination. I was never told. My brother cried as he confessed my mother was not going to let people know she had an r-word daughter. Yep.

But like she's a junkie and no one loves her so what's the point of being mad even if it did give me a slight eye twitch to hear. Yeah how much easier my life would've been. Not gaslighting myself about why I can't climb stairs or even stand on an escalator.

My mother also made a choice raising me as a child and that was to pass on her eating disorders to me. At the age of 6 years old, my mother would put me on my first diet. I was allowed two slim fast milkshakes made with skim milk a day. Nothing else. Food was kept from me and she rarely grocery shopped. I became sneaky and would steal food. I'd lie. I'd cheat if I had to. I remember her giving me a keychain in middle school with a dial on it so I could keep my fat grams under 20 grams a day. She wanted me to shoot for 12 if possible. That scar stays with me

to this day.

I have never had a healthy relationship with food.

Then life said, wow, you made all this progress! Let's dump the thing that's the hardest. And I said, aight.

Actually I ended up in the hospital. My upper right abdomen was searing. I felt like a branding iron was going through it. My back pain was intense and I had started throwing up every time I ate. I'm kind of stupid, so this went on for awhile until it got really bad. I had to wait a week for an ultrasound to be done and by that time, I was on my way to the emergency room.

My dad was an EMS chief so I feel like a cock-sucker anytime I'm in the ER and my arms haven't fallen off and are spraying blood everywhere. I also found out that if I'm even remotely nauseous, I am a flat-out cunt. I was so rude to people that were rude too but I was like super rude like when God got mad and drowned everyone and then was like oops. To be fair, I sat in an ER for seven hours unseen and patiently waiting and a tech mouthed off to me and I fucking erupted like Mt St. Helens. Then I screamed at two police officers for making me walk a different way to exit. I walked doubled over and crying to another hospital and when the security asked to see my backpack I threw it down on the ground and said, "Fucks sake there you go! I hope you feel real fucking important! So glad security can protect us all from fucking backpacks!" and stormed in.

Literally within seconds of receiving an IV push of Zofran, I felt physically better and mentally like the asshole I just was to someone doing their job. I tried to find the person to apologize but they were gone. I told the nurses what I did and asked them to tell the person I was sorry. I have daily reminders that I can be a dick. I really try hard not to be and see things from other perspectives but at the end of the day a snake's a snake, bitch.

My friends won't let that last sentence slide and that's why they're my homies. I see you fuckers.

Anyhow, they run every test ever created on me. I have fatty liver disease and an enlarged liver. Most women have a liver of 14cm. Mine is 18.3 cm. Initially I was on a bus riding back from the ER when I was emailed these results and it scared me so I felt the best course of action was to sob violently in public. Luckily it was also the day of the No Kings protest so no one actually noticed my red ugly face crying. My aunt died horribly from this disease and I thought that's what was happening.

Then I remembered I might have a slight penchant for being dramatic in situations so I read

up and educated myself.

The number one thing to reverse fatty liver disease is to lose weight. I have struggled my entire life to "lose weight." Well, now my life depends on it. My aunt unfortunately did not take care of herself. Her health was like this for decades before she developed non-alcoholic cirrhosis of the liver.

At first, not eating anything was actually pretty easy and enjoyable. It was the only time my belly didn't hurt. The liver doesn't like you not eating. The liver prefers small meals every couple of hours. I would eat small portions of food that was as healthy as possible because my bloodwork was a shitshow and I really wanted to heal my liver.

I would envision my liver like a baby I was left to care for. I had to learn to love my liver. Do what's best for it. Put my liver's needs before mine.

I learned that the liver fucking loves it some god damned coffee. Not a little either. 3-4 cups of dark roast coffee black, because apparently the liver is a dad from the '70s. It helps it release fat from the liver, lower enzymes and it also helps with cell turnover for regeneration. I look like when someone that doesn't drink takes a swig of whiskey trying to drink coffee like this. Green tea is also aight.

One of my go-to's has been açai smoothie bowls. I'm able to get my fruit servings (my only allotted

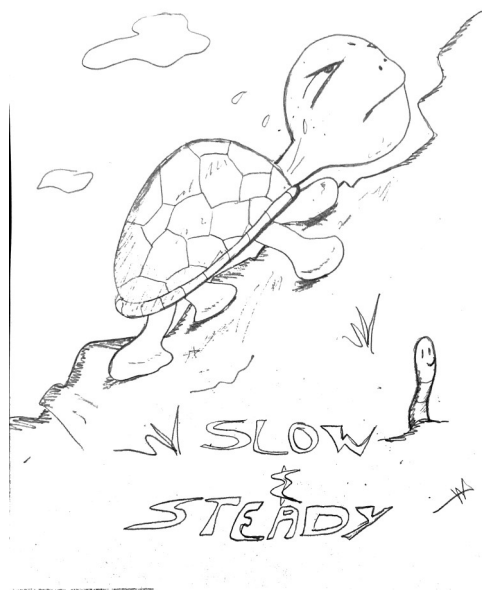
sweetness in my diet) and omegas in and it doesn't piss off my belly. I eat some fish as a lot of plant-based proteins are still kind of rough on my tender belly rn. I plan on being fully vegan once the belly is right. My body has chosen veganism. It's what's best for me personally.

It's hard sticking to this but I have to. Progress has been slow and I need to be patient. I didn't get this sick overnight and it won't be fixed overnight. Am I not jealous of people that can eat whatever they want? Of course. But that also kind of got me at this crossroads. I'm having to relearn how I look at food.

Food is no longer a joy. It's not celebratory and it's not emotional comfort. My addiction to food is waning. Food is becoming sustenance. Giving my body what it needs for proper nutrition not what I want to eat because I'm upset or bored. I can no longer eat fried foods, drink carbonated soda, or eat ice cream. I don't grieve them either. All of that is a thing of the past. I have to think about every single thing I put into my body. I have to carefully consider if it is nutritious enough.

At the end of the day, after everything I put this poor body through, if being healthy and getting into shape is my only life sentence, I'm not doing too bad. I always share everything with you. I do that because we are all connected. In some ways you too are struggling. I'm not the only one.

I just hope that if you see I can get through this shit, you sure as hell can do it. — *CREEPY HORSE*



COLUMNATED RUINS DOMINO

It is weird that my parents really didn't listen to music much in our house growing up. I think it was because although my dad was a musician he was also quite a bit older than our mom. Well into the 1970s he still thought rock & roll was a fad. My mother graduated high school in 1965 so she was the perfect age for rock & roll. The two albums she owned summed up that experience for her: a 2LP compilation of "oldies" rock curated by Dick Clark; and *Endless Summer*, a 2LP compilation of The Beach Boys' pre-drugs greatest hits. These were the records I remember hearing in the house at large as a really little kid. But it never truly connected to me, as it was my mom's music. My music was saturated in *all* the drugs. But I enjoyed those 1962-1965 Beach Boys tunes as they were just good clean fun. So imagine my surprise when I learned that there was *way* more to The Beach Boys music than just surfboards, hot rods, and girls.

I had not heard much of The Beach Boys beyond mom's copy of *Endless Summer*, though I was pretty well-versed in The Beatles' catalog. I did recall having seen a documentary in the mid-'80s during one of the times we had cheater cable (my brother was great at splicing into our neighbors' lines) on HBO and I remembered a part of that movie vaguely where The Beach Boys were running around in fireman's helmets while the scariest racket was being made. Years later I now know that I was hearing part of "Mrs. O'Leary's Cow," an unreleased song that was intended to be a part of the mythically unreleased *SMiLE*. I found a copy of *Pet Sounds* and *Surf's Up* at the local used record store. I fell in love with the former, and was baffled by the latter. *Pet Sounds* was an instant connection. How could it not be? By then its reputation had preceded it. I began to see lots of fawning references from some of my favorite indie rock artists about this album, and as I read more of the literature about The Beatles I discovered that there had been a friendly rivalry between Beach Boys principal Brian Wilson and Paul McCartney. I could hear that connection. "Penny Lane" is a direct result of that competition. But I didn't really hear The Beatles so much in The Beach Boys, not from those two albums. What I did hear was a connection from *Surf's Up* to a band that I had just fell in love, a little band of old dudes from Dayton, OH called Guided By Voices. The piecemeal vignette approach of the album's closer and title track, "Surf's Up," intrigued me. But I felt like that album was haphazard and at times outright embarrassing. I loved the last two songs but couldn't handle the rest of it.

By the '00s I had read more about the myth of *SMiLE* and was excited to hear the 2004 live recording of the album by Brian Wilson and the fellas from The Wondermints. I liked it, but it didn't really hit me at the time. In 2011 *The*

Smile Sessions was released and I was able to hear a completed version of the album. But it still didn't really connect to me. It wasn't until earlier this year, after I read Steven Gaines' *Heroes and Villains*, a decades-old Beach Boys biography, and Dominic Priore's *Smile: The Story of Brian Wilson's Lost Masterpiece*, that I began to be more curious about it.

I learned a lot of things I didn't know about this group of recordings: it was never finished (I thought it was just shelved); Brian second-guessed it as much because of his own mental issues as because of the shit his bandmates (particularly Mike Love) had to say about it; that because it wasn't finished that there were dozens of unique versions of the album out there via bootleg release (some with master recordings that fans stitched together from multiple takes). I spent months listening to as many versions of the album as I could find. It is an odd piece of music to spend that much time immersed in, especially once I understood that I was not listening to a completed piece of work. In a way it was like I was rummaging around in the bones of the deceased.

My son and I talk about the concept of context all the time, that it is hard to evaluate an historic piece of art without evaluating its place in the context of the times. It is generally accepted that *SMiLE* was a masterpiece. But what we hear is incomplete, assembled many years later from what parts were finished outside of its initial context. Much of *SMiLE* is instrumental. Is that on purpose or because it was unfinished? Some of it is pieced together from demo recordings added onto and sometimes mixed into the studio recordings. "Surf's Up," that one song that I knew so well, seemed to come alive for me. The *Surf's Up* version added a new coda and overdubs from the other five Beach Boys (the original was all Brian and The Wrecking Crew session musicians group). When bootleggers assembled their versions of *SMiLE* they often flew in that coda from the *Surf's Up* version, although that part was written and recorded *six years* after Brian originally tracked parts for it. I learned that



the first half of the song was recorded with the Wrecking Crew but that the vocals came from a solo piano and voice recording Brian made as a demo in 1966. I can think of no other album that was created in such a way, that the fans finished for the artist because the artist had moved on from it. How much of this album is actual genius, how much was acci-

dental, how much was incidental, and how much of it was purely willed into being by a group of dedicated fans? That is part of what makes *SMiLE* so fascinating.

The results incite the strangest emotions in me. Once I start listening to "Surf's Up" I can't stop. I have to listen to it over and over again. I have no idea what the lyrics to this song mean. The title of this column is culled from a line in the song. But the way Brian played those chords, the way he sang it, the way it was arranged and recorded, and the way it was assembled does something to me. The unfinished nature of the rest of the album lends an orchestral flavor to it. It sounds like an extension of the pastoral 20th century American symphony as popularized by Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein. Wilson referred to the process as making a "teenage symphony to God" and at first I focused on the teenage part of that quote. I have come to feel that the symphony part is the bigger clue. It gets right what so many of the progressive rock bands that I love like Yes and Genesis did not get right when merging rock music with classical music. It is not the masterpiece that *Pet Sounds* is. But there is something about *SMiLE* that is compelling in a way to me that *Pet Sounds* is not.

It is also interesting to compare notes with what was going on at the time Brian and the Wrecking Crew were cutting *SMiLE* in earnest. It seems that lots of artists discovered serious 20th century music at the same time on opposite coasts of opposite countries. It is hard not to compare/contrast The Beach Boys and The Beatles, but it is fascinating that both artists used tape editing, found sound, loops, jump cuts, random dialogue, and the idea of nonmusical expressions by musical instruments. In The Beatles' case it has been

noted that Paul McCartney lived in Swingin' London in the middle of things during this period and attended lots of exhibitions and performances of avant garde art, film, and music. He was familiar with the work of Edgar Varèse, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Pierre Boulez. You can hear this influence especially on *Revolver* through *The White Album*. Brian Wilson seems to have arrived there from a technical perspective. Biographers have suggested that Wilson was influenced by spending time with tape operators and learning about splicing tape. His snippets approach is a direct result of understanding that performances could be juxtaposed in a way that live performance could not allow. It is reported that Paul McCartney shared an acetate of an early mix of "She's Leaving Home" and that coupled with the early radio airings of "Strawberry Fields Forever" that Brian Wilson thought that *SMiLE* had become obsolete because "The Beatles got there before I could." I think it is also likely that had either one of them listened to Frank Zappa & The Mother of Invention's *Freak Out!* that they both would have learned that Frank got there before either one of them did. All of the 20th century elements abound on *Freak Out!* and Frank was definitely inspired by Varèse and Boulez. *Freak Out!* was released a year before *Sgt. Pepper* and recording for it coincided with recording of *SMiLE*, sharing many of the same studio musicians on both sets of sessions. Frank used satire, Brian used wide-eyed wonder, and the Fab Four used lots of drugs. Not to say that Brian Wilson wasn't also a head because he is perhaps the most famous acid casualty this side of Syd Barrett. And also not to say that *SMiLE* is not druggy because I think in its unfinished state that it sounds more like my memories of my lysergic experiences than much of The Beatles music (excepting "Revolution #9"). The Beatles sound like the drugs are working them. Brian Wilson sounds like he's working the drugs. And Frank is quite famous for being a tee-totaler and his work is likely the most self-conscious of the three. These are all thoughts that I've had in my month of listening to the panoply of *SMiLE* mixes, outtakes, and alternate arrangements.

It is in this context that I heard the news last month that at 82 years of age Brian Wilson had passed on. His life was complicated, to say the least. He lost control of his life's narrative for nearly 40 years and it is good karma that Brian was able to earn the respect due him as one of rock music's greatest composers on the same level as Dylan, Lennon, and McCartney. The interest in *SMiLE* baffled him and in some ways ruined his life. How do you live life renowned as a genius best known for a piece of work no one has heard and that you never truly finished? But he was happy to oblige his fans. And we are all the better for it. — KELLY MENACE

I WROTE A BOOK: THE THREAD THAT TIES THE KNOT

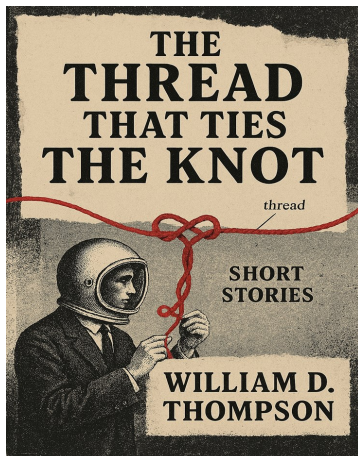
So a few things I set in motion long ago have finally started to come to fruition. This is both overwhelmingly awesome and intimidating to the max. One of these things is a collection of short stories that has somehow survived the wild and turbulent life I inadvertently live, for better or worse. A lot of these have been published in various zines over the years in rawer draft forms, while others sat collecting dust in a draft folder in my email, or are new entirely. I always wondered what it would feel like once I completed this undertaking some 15 years unknowingly in the making.

The book is a collection of fictional short stories that range from the awe inspiring to science fiction, surrealism, the dark places and the spaces in between. The journey spans seventeen collected short stories and is the prelude of sorts to a string of novels to follow should fate be so kind as to see me make it that far. There's matters of the heart, tales of the cerebellum, the unknown, the what-ifs, and the could be's. And something for the lovers of the macabre and the otherworldly too.

Sounds fun huh? Did I reel ya in? I hope so, because jeez I am really winging it on this one. I've decided to go at as I have most everything else and self releasing it through my newly formed Potent Pufferfish Publishing. This part has been fun, but it also nerve racking as I know I will most certainly overlook something initially. No matter how much hard I try it will be human – it will be flawed. That said I know I can make amendments through the years with various print runs and so on, so I am not too worried. I do worry about getting the attention I feel it deserves by a much wider audience than I could hope or do in person.

This is the fun part, I hear some of you in the background saying to yourselves – social media, reviews, ad's, press releases, and interviews, photo-ops, signings, and the likes. Yes it is, and it is a LOT for someone who can take ten minutes or ten years to do the same task depending on my head space, so let me say woaaa. I'm not complaining, merely relishing in this moment of in between completion and birthing. Currently, I am for all sakes and purposes pulling the loose threads together at this point to tie the proverbial knot from concept to physical book. I've taken the time to re-re-re-edit and retype the whole thing from scratch to ensure an authentic flow and tone. There were honestly times in the back of my head where this was one of those "well, I'll probably never make it around to finishing the thing properly..." type things. I would always come back to it along with a few novels I've been

working on simultaneously that will see light of day some time down the road once I troubleshoot this whole process, but the point is I knew and now know once doing all that for so long that it has a place somewhere in the world and deserves to be birthed.



The irony isn't lost on me either that I would finally get around to finish these years long literary works just in time for machines to come along that could theoretically do the same damn thing, and probably better in less time than it takes to clean up a wet fart. We are definitely in a shifting age of all the key staples of life and in the midst of some really life-changing cultural events without even grasping the scope of the things we have already lost in the name of convenience. That said I have painfully boiled and brooded over each of these tales myself and despite all my best efforts there will probably still be some typos or misplaced words. But I'll get them the second go round, right?

For all of you wondering if you should follow through with that thing you've been mulling over for some time now, my advice would be yes. Do it. Why not? If anything and all else fails you will have had the experience and can say you do it, and that's more than most get to do. Fear is pretty powerful stuff, and I've seen it along with angst, hurt, and general depression and doubt take down many a worthy creative force. People no doubt better than me if they had only followed through. So that's where I am. This turned into a pep talk to myself as well as you the reader about why I should and you all should pull the proverbial trigger on your projects. Dream the things you want to see and hear and try just try to one up yourselves each time. I've just recently turned 40 and started this in my late 20's. I've come up against things I would have thought would of killed me and things that damn well should have. But like I said somehow I've kept coming back to this project and I hope when it does come out in the next month or so that some of you will humor me and give it a go. Thanks for letting talk in your brains ears for a moment, and I hope you follow that thing that makes your souls sing.

Allow me to send you off with a little more 411 about said upcoming book. It will be available in print and digitally through Amazon and Amazon affiliates. The book features 17 short stories by yours truly along with accompanying companion art for each piece. There's blank page to write notes and a really clever cover to tie it all together. It will be out later this month/early next month. I hope you enjoy it! – **WILLIAM DANIEL THOMPSON**

MICROMUSING

Liars. Bullies. Cowards. "Medicaid will never be cut." "Rowe vs Wade is precedent." This sound familiar too?

"The Gestapo operated without civil restraints. It had the authority of 'preventive arrest, and its actions were not subject to judicial appeal." – *Britannica*.

According to the Deportation Data Project that collects immigration numbers, about half the people in detention don't have criminal convictions. Liars. Bullies. Cowards.

"The Republican Congress is dominated by sycophants, extremists, performance artists, and opportunists." – Zeteo. Liars. Bullies. Cowards.

"Give me your tired, your poor,/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Sorry. All we got to offer: Liars. Bullies. Cowards. – **MIKE L. DOWNEY**

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I'm sure we've all seen those videos — memes, reels, whatever — where a text asks, "What shaped your worldview?" and the person in the video plays some political or sensitive or even angry song. And honestly? I get it.

Because for me, music has been the largest shaping cauldron in my life. The lyrics, voices, sounds. Like a heartbeat that never quit. The noise that made sense of things when nothing else could. Music is where my identity was forged.

Bands like Descendents, Killing Joke, and Stiff Little Fingers, Ramones, Hall & Oates, and so on weren't just background noise — they were my teachers. I learned how to question, how to rage, how to hope, how to pull myself out of a dark place.

Music didn't hand me the answers. It gave me the code and some strong armor and feelings. It gave me a sense of togetherness and told me "you're not alone. You're not crazy."

Music gave me a vision of the world that important enough to hold onto. — **TISHIA JACKSON**

AMERICAN WET DREAMS

Gleaming with oozing cheddar delight
Grease con carne making me a bit horny
the aroma of the soon to be had fast food coma
Double, triple, quadruple threats of yum
A single order, better make it a double
of fresh and golden fries
to help comfort the meaty delights
Pour some soda in me as I wash it all down
The simple comforts beyond a cigarette
that bloom in the trash world sun.

— **WILLIAM DANIEL THOMPSON**



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Caverns of Gold Caverns of Gold

A Benefit for WNC Hurricane Relief

Caverns of Gold Caverns of Gold

a vibrant coalition of over 280 musicians from western north carolina and beyond has come together to release caverns of gold: a benefit for wnc hurricane relief. this impactful compilation album seeks to raise crucial funds for those affected by hurricane helene, with 100% of the proceeds benefiting beloved asheville, a local nonprofit dedicated to providing immediate assistance and long-term support for those affected by the disaster. artists include r.e.m., steep canyon rangers, kevin kinney, luscious jackson, consolidated, caitlin cary, moe., milk carton kids, north mississippi all-stars, richard buckner, the feelies, and many, many others.

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