

GRAY MATTER



GRAY MATTER MAGAZINE



ON THE FRONT COVER:

Anatomy of a Garden, 2025
Erika L. Block

ARTIST STATEMENT:

Anatomy of a Garden explores the intersection of the body's inner architecture and the natural world's instinct for renewal, reflecting on the mind as both a vessel and a landscape—fragile yet fertile, fragmented yet flourishing. This piece suggests that even within structures of mortality and decay, there is space for growth, beauty, and rebirth. It is a meditation on consciousness as a living garden: intricate, vulnerable, and endlessly in bloom.

fineartamerica.com/profiles/erikalblock

ABOUT GRAY MATTER:

Gray Matter is an independent contributor-supported magazine publishing literary essays, short fiction, poetry, grayscale photography, and striking visual art that travel the mind and speak to the soul.

WHO WE ARE:

Founded in 2025 by artist, author, and publisher Erika (E.L.) Block, Gray Matter extends from a lifelong fascination with the layered nature of the human experience. It is published independently by Gray House Publishing, a literary companion to the esoteric non-fiction magazine, THE GRAY. Essays and short fiction are edited by Dodge Zelko, an accomplished writer and the creator of flyover fiction. Poetry is edited by professional writer and developmental editor, Dana Boyer. The artwork we feature is curated by artist and former art educator, Jonathan Fritsch.

A READER-SUPPORTED SPACE:

Gray Matter is ad-free, algorithm-free, and reader-supported. We are not interested in trending, optimizing, or maximizing. We are interested in making something that lasts. If you find value in our work, consider becoming a conscious supporter to help keep Gray Matter alive, quiet, and independent.

SUBMISSIONS:

Gray Matter is currently seeking collaborators and contributors for upcoming issues. If you would like to submit an article or artwork, please email: graymattermagazine@gmail.com.

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KENTUCKY HELLFIRE

DODGE ZELKO

You're right, I only met her once. But I guess we hit it off. Newly sober, Ginny wanted to test herself, to see if she could still raise hell on-the-wagon. So on New Year's Eve she drove up from Louisville in her teal Cascada. There was such a turnout she had to park a block from your house. Late at night, we put the roof down and cranked the heat, a decadent combo even without the Cohibas. She invited you too, remember? Sorry—course you do. You said cigars were an affectation. Your exact words. So it was just Ginny and me, out in the open air, rehashing our most memorable New Years of yore. Hers was in Hawaii. The big island. She and some friends went to a national park around midnight to see an active caldera:

“So it turns out we can only drive so close before we gotta get out and walk. The trail is rocky and rough, not another soul in sight, and this heavy orange glow rises above us, getting more and more menacing, and the air—it stinks of sulfur, like Hell itself, and I start getting really freaked out 'cause I remember then that I believe in Hell, in the Devil, as much as I believe in you or me, and suddenly I don't want to go near this thing, so I head back to the car and later they show me videos on their phones, of this bubbling lake of fire. Today I wish I'd gone. I still believe in Hell, don't get me wrong, but that was druggie logic. I can see that now.”

Mine was at a guy named Rooster's house. He had every 007 movie on LaserDisc. He lived across from the county jail. It seemed a frivolous tale after hers, so I didn't tell it, not until four years later, on a cold Kentucky day, when we put marigolds and asters on her grave. I told you I had something to say, remember? “11:59 on the money, me and Rooster and some other guys run around the block with party blowers, knocking over trash cans, ringing doorbells, when we hear a commotion coming from the jail. Sounds like a riot, but it's the inmates counting down to zero, and we're so elated we jump on either end of a sheriff's car, me and Rooster, making the whole thing teeter-totter and creak and yelling Happy New Year to our brothers on the inside, sisters too, and behind the stone walls and grated windows we can hear them clanging and banging and yelling it right back.” You came in close then and said she would've liked that story, and when you couldn't smoke any more, you left the rest of it for Aunt Ginny.

WHAT WE WILL BE

DANA BOYER

I

The night follows the sunset like smoke.
The French open up their metal shutters,
one last gasp before tomorrow
which will reach 100 degrees like it never has before.
A barefoot father walks his baby to sleep
across the street.
Already, his baby only knows this world.
She does not need to be prepared.
He does this for himself.

When my son was young, very young,
and saw a picture of the autumn leaves
he said 'fire, fire' because he already knew exactly how things die.

The attic window winks the last sunset back.

II

The sun rises hazed and gasping while Canada burns.
On the river, the weeping willows barely grasp the water.
It is the shortage, and they say
there is not enough water to save
all the lives we've left behind,
and wait-
if-
you will listen
just a minute,
there is not
enough
water to put
out
the fire in
the garage.

The fire chief's report said buttons were found across it as if my grandpa tried to yank his shirt off in his panic, his hands already among the flames.

Forgive me.

I do not mean to say we all will die of fire.

Only that he did.

III

On an Okinawan beach,
my son stops eating sand long enough
to watch the dark pile above the horizon.

Japanese has 1,190 rain-related words,
and I only know three of them.

They say the storms in the Pacific are strengthening now,
that they will keep growing and swirling and adding to themselves,
that they will build their lightning and feed it heat, shoveling darkness
into their ever-hungry mouths, before drowning this island
and whatever garage fires are in its way.

After the typhoon passes,
my son flattens his face against the window
marveling at the flooding streets.

I write down the words I know.

Tsuyu, rainy season, uchi ami, rain that enters with wind,
uteki, for single raindrop.

May that last word be enough
to save some of our grandfathers,
to save some of our children.



Portrait of a Gladiola

Photograph, 2025
Lisa Lehmann



PUBLISHER'S NOTE:

Let's open the strange little cabinet of curiosities hidden inside the world of the gladiolus — a flower that somehow manages to be elegant, dramatic, slightly dangerous, and historically bizarre all at once.

- The gladiolus was named after swords. Its leaves looked so much like blades that the Romans tied it linguistically to gladiators. The flower's name literally means "little sword."
- Roman soldiers sometimes wore gladiolus corms as protective charms in battle, like botanical body armor.
- In Victorian flower language, gladiolus meant "you pierce my heart," which sounds romantic until you remember the flower is named after a deadly weapon.
- Some gladiolus species evolved specifically for one pollinator — a giant moth with an absurdly long tongue. This is the only creature physically capable of reaching the nectar.
- A few varieties of gladiolus intentionally smell like rotten garbage to lure insects to them. Not every flower wants to smell pretty.
- Gladiolus flowers keep blooming after being cut. A spike in a vase slowly opens upward over days, like a zombie rising from the grave and performing on its own schedule.
- Some gladiolus species disappear underground for most of the year and only emerge briefly to flower, like secretive seasonal apparitions.



SILENCE PERSONIFIED

S. C. MITCHELL

Night fell on the secluded forest glade. No insects buzzed. No birds chirped. No small animals skittered through the underbrush. A maple that had grown for over two hundred years died, injured by a lightning strike the previous day. Its trunk damaged beyond repair, the tree's structural integrity splintered and the top swayed.

Silence stood quietly, watching the tree break and fall, and because there was no one there to hear it, it didn't make a sound. It was a rare occasion. There were creatures almost everywhere listening and making noise. Her domain was so diminished over what it had been a millennium ago.

The moon broke from behind a cloud, causing her brother, Darkness, to go back into hiding. She'd gotten the impression he'd enjoyed the show, although he couldn't have told her one way or another. He couldn't speak in her presence, and she couldn't speak at all.

She also couldn't abide where there was noise, and so much of the world today was noise. She had tolerances, of course. The quiet breeze she drifted on, rustled distant leaves, but overall, the night where she existed was silent. There was a song, she knew, entitled Silent Night, but she'd never heard it. She'd never really heard anything. Sound was her antithesis.

In the distance, at the edge of her perception, she noted the rattle of a motorcycle on the road ahead, and was forced to detour around the noise, seeking quiet once again while still making her way toward her destination.

John strode the busy city sidewalk, enduring the clamor of car horns honking, trucks rumbling by, and people... so many people. Activity swirled around him, and with it the sounds of the city. Music and laughter filtered out of the doorways to bars and restaurants. Tires squealed on pavement as cars negotiated traffic lights and the tangled web of streets.

This is normal, he thought. This is life.

But it wasn't what he craved, at least at that moment.

The day had taken its toll on his senses, overloading his mind until it swam in a whirlwind of confusion. But at last, it was time to go home.

He stood at the bus stop, listening to two men screaming insults at each other. A woman held a crying baby, rocking it in her arms and shushing it.

The bus was nowhere in sight.

Silence drifted toward the city, lured by her latest discovery.

The city was noisy, crowded with boisterous people and a cacophony of machinery she could not endure, but there was one place she could usually go that was so totally silent she could exist to her fullest. A place she'd discovered only recently. A place that appeared to have been built just for her.

The house loomed on a hillside at the edge of the forest...at the edge of the city...and she had hope that the night would stay quiet enough for her to sneak inside.

A herd of deer wandered the forest between Silence and the house. Not loud but making enough noise to hold her at bay. She would wait. They would pass eventually.

The bus let John off a block from his home. It was much quieter here in the suburbs. His mind settled as he strode the sidewalk.

But his reverie was shattered as the Smiths' dachshund scampered toward the fence, barking and growling.

He wasn't sure what the dog had against him, but they'd never been able to come to any kind of understanding. He'd even offered treats as bribes, and although Eva had happily accepted them, she still barked at him whenever he drew near.

—

The deer moved on, but as soon as Silence began to move toward her goal once again, a new barrier was thrown up in front of her. The distant, determined bark of a dog became another wall she couldn't pass through. If only...if only...she could get inside that room.

Still, there was a lot of night left. She would be patient and wait. The dog would eventually stop barking.

—

Eva quit her tirade as John stepped onto his front porch. He sighed in relief. Home at last.

He'd gone to great lengths to insulate the house, and closing the door brought a dampening of the outside noise. Yet, in the stillness that settled, he could clearly detect the hum of his refrigerator and the whooshing of the forced air heating his home. Why were his ears so sensitive to every little sound today?

Well, not just today.

It was why he'd bought this house, and why he'd constructed his meditation room.

He quickly shed his work clothing and donned the more comfortable jogging suit. Dinner could wait.

His meditation room had once been a walk-in closet. Extra insulation and soundproofing made the space completely silent.

John sat down on the mat, crossing his legs and settling into a comfortable position. He stilled his breath, quieted his mind, and began his meditation practice.

—

The dog finally quieted and Silence made her move, dashing through the air and filtering through the wall of the home where she'd discovered the amazing room.

It wasn't a large space, but it was wonderful. Walls lined with foam soundproofing panels and a heavy, insulated metal door created a space that offered total sound deprivation.

Her space.

Still, this time Silence found she wasn't alone.

The man sat, as he sometimes did, on the floor of her wonderful room.

In the past, she'd always fled, fearing the inevitable sound that would cause her pain and push her from this paradise. People always made noise.

But this one didn't. In fact, he never had.

And this time, Silence couldn't help but move closer.

She knelt in front of him, studying his form.

He sat quietly, his legs crossed—hands, palms up, on his knees—and eyes closed.

Then...those eyes opened.

—

John struggled to keep from gasping. The creature before him was so stunningly beautiful—so otherworldly.

He'd seen her before. But only glimpses of her fleeing through the wall when he'd been in here meditating. Was she a specter? A ghost?

There'd been no other indication his house was haunted. And she didn't look scary.

She looked confused.

He was loath to shatter the silence, so he merely mouthed the words, "Hello."

She smiled and nodded, mouthing back. "Hello."

So, he grew bolder, speaking, "I—"

But just like that, she was gone.

Still, there'd been nothing scary about her.

He settled back into his meditation practice.

Silence.

Quiet.

Peace.

IT WAS
only
A DREAM

It Was Only a Dream

Photographic Series
Patrick Ryan

ARTIST STATEMENT:

My photography has been called eclectic, and I don't disagree. I capture everything from landscape to portraits to abstract to street photography. Still, much of my work is tied together by a consistent pull toward shape, pattern, and texture.







GRACE IN STASIS

ANDREW DEWEY

I awoke as one does in a new place: confused, disoriented, startled. I squinted and tried to look around. I didn't know where I was. I didn't know how I got there. And I couldn't sit up

My wrists were fixed in their spot, held fast in place by leather cuffs bolted into a solid concrete slab. A slab that leeched any warmth left in my body. I examined one of the cuffs – it was quality: soft and clean edges that didn't give much to my twists and turns as I tested it. It held me in place, but kindly, without chastising me.

My eyes quickly followed a series of winding lines down my body: straps, a kin to the leather cuffs, but wrapping me to hold my shoulders, torso, hips, thighs, and calves against the slab. On my ankles were two more identical cuffs.

Around me were impressive floodlights, bright and full. So bright that I could see myself as if in daylight, but saw only darkness beyond my slab.

As I lay my head back down, I found what had awoken me: a persistent whirring that came from above. A whirring that seemed responsible for the slow but sure descent of my concrete slab's brother: an equally-sized slab with the added adornment of a multitude of metal spikes, evenly spaced across the face of the concrete, jutting out, pointing at me.

It was still six feet above, but I could already see that the spikes were longer than I was wide, thicker than my arm, and recently sharpened. No, better than recently sharpened: recently manufactured. Parallel lines etched the surface as evidence that the last contact these spikes made was with an automated machine's finishing touches. These were made for me.

I took a breath and startled myself with the volume of it. It all seemed so loud: my breathing, the whirring slab, the leather around me, the spikes. Then I flexed myself against the leather, pulling and twisting and yanking. All actions that felt more real than they were, because the leather gave only enough to not punish me for my dissent. But they still reminded me why my struggle was fruitless to begin with. I relaxed. Then tried again. Yet I didn't move. I was exactly where I started. The restraints weren't any looser than they had been. Only my slab's brother was closer than he was before. I screamed.

As the whir continued, I tried. I tried to reach my fingers around to grab at the bolt that held me in place, but to no avail; I tried to slip out of the straps that wrapped my torso, but they didn't shift; I tried to slide my hand out of each cuff but they were too tight. I wriggled and writhed, pressed my body against the straps again and again, eyes squeezed shut. It didn't hurt. It should have hurt. I wanted it to hurt. I screamed and pulled and screamed and pulled until I was out of breath and resigned myself back down.

Whirring. Somehow unchanged but louder than my heavy breathing. I opened my eyes to see a spike close enough to leave me cross eyed.

I didn't know how to prepare. What does it feel like to be impaled? Be impaled dozens – no – a hundred times at once? When was my death? How terrible would life be until it came? Was I ready? I didn't know, so I forced myself to whimper, hoping it would help me get there.

I shut my eyes again. The spikes didn't make any noise but I could feel them getting closer, somehow leaching my warmth before they touched me. My better self told me to relax, to not make it worse than it was. But I wasn't ready, so I tensed my body.

From nothing to everything, I felt countless pricks across my body. Cold. The shock tried to force my breath from my chest – the terror tried to hold it back – and so it remained trapped in

my throat. The coldness of the spikes seeped and trickled away from where they touched me. I was sure I was bleeding. I was bracing for more, but –

My blood was cold. My breath shivered out of my mouth. My confusion overcame my terror and I opened my eyes. The spikes were bending, each in various directions. Each spike's end was rounding out slowly as it spread itself across my body. Then they began to move around, independently, softly. Leaving a cold, almost viscous fluid in their wake. I could hear the fluid on my skin as the spikes covered more of me. The one on my face slowly slithered its way across my nose and mouth. The more it made contact with me, the less I could breathe. I took terrible breaths in between swipes of this entity, heard sounds coming from me that I didn't even know I could make.

The whirring. The slithering. The immersion of the strange liquid as less and less of myself felt the air. The spikes wriggled against each other as they covered more of me, and the pressure of all of them on me quickly went from unsettling to alarming. I stopped being able to breathe, stopped being able to feign resistance, and wondered how much more my body could take.

Eventually, the spikes could move no more. The blackness they imparted over my eyes began to consume my mind.

Unable to physically resist, I gave up mentally resisting.

My eyes squeezed shut.

Throughout myself, I felt pieces of me ready to give up.

My ribs were going to pop.

My stomach began to collapse.

My skull felt more distorted than I thought should be possible.

And yet my ribs didn't pop, but slowly pulled me up. This must've been the end. I hadn't prepared well enough. My body was confused. I was going to be free.

I thought vertigo would be the last sensation I would feel. But instead of ending into nothingness, it persisted. And at once, I realized I wasn't crushed. I wasn't wet anymore. I wasn't in pain. I felt no pressure. None. I dared to open my eyes and saw around me a sickly, dull, yellow glow – a resin. No more slab. No more spikes. All I could see was this resin. I was surrounded by it, but still couldn't tell what it felt like. I called it resin but didn't know what it was. It didn't fade as I looked deeper into it, nor did it seem thick.

While I wasn't being crushed, I still couldn't move or look around. Yet I saw a shadow creep into my periphery. I didn't panic though I didn't know what it was. I then came to realize it was my hand, part of me I had lost track of. Drifting through the ether.

Though I hadn't taken a breath since I had given in to the brother, I didn't want to. I didn't even try. I didn't feel the burning in my lungs or throat, nor pressure from built up air. My throat opened and nothing came in or out. I was content with what I had. I wasn't suffocating. I wasn't uncomfortable. I felt very little but the sense that the yellow... resin? Ether? (Was this the concrete slab?) Was slowly pushing past me.

It wasn't relief I felt, but grace in stasis.

Momentarily.

Like an itch that couldn't be itched, I wanted: I wanted to want. I wanted to want to twitch my fingers. I wanted to want to stretch my arms. I wanted to want to scratch my nose, lift my legs, feel the rush of air into my throat. The desire in lack of desire burned my brain, first in a

pit somewhere within it. But soon it spread. Yet the want to want needs a desire to be satiated, so it spread until it flamed throughout my entire brain. As quickly as it spread, it left nothing in its wake. Left nothing to feel, nothing to be aware of. I was last aware of my ears. They heard nothing. I expected tinnitus, or that constant river that must be life, but there was nothing.

I supposed this was nice.

It would have to be.

My hand stopped drifting, and that became fine. I grew to forget my hand and my lungs and my brain that neither burned nor yearned. The resin, or ether, or yellow hue that consumed my vision was all I had. Until I didn't want for vision, either. So it left too.

Until my eyes saw first light. A soft glow right in front of me – slightly less sickly, slightly less yellow. My hand reached toward the glow. I believed I imagined it, for it didn't feel like my doing. I didn't perceive the warmth. My hand wanted to embrace the light, wanted to feel something, any sensation. Brighter the glow grew, spreading beyond my eyes.

First, I noticed my lungs as they yearned to be filled. They had nothing yet, but I believed they would. Or their want to want something would bring me somewhere where they could become filled. So I trusted them. Allowed the yearning to not be pain, but anticipation. Patience had wrought envelopment – a strange sort of alleviation. It would be greedy of me to decide when my breath was to come. It would come.

The light continued to brighten, further than I expected the ether would. The yellow hue melted away, as did my constraints. I became aware of my reaching. My legs started kicking in a futile attempt to hurry toward the light. I could feel freedom itching at my fingers and feet. I could already imagine what lay on the other side to indulge my nose in scents and eyes in colors. What lay for my ears in the constant murmur of the air? Breath – breath – breath waited for me. My eyes grew blind in the light, more white than I thought I could withstand. Finally, I thought I could feel it. Finally, I thought I could taste it. Finally, it was right there. I just —



Garage Still Life

Photograph, 2022

Lisa Lehmann

Author and photographer Lisa Lehmann is fascinated by color and shadow. Her father, Jerad, taught her to see through the eyes of a photographer. Her mother, Mary, gave Lisa her playful love of words and music. Lisa uses her eye for vivid detail in writing her scenes and composing images.

Learn more at lisalehmann.com.

MOUSIE

JOSEPH LEON

She stopped by one Saturday morning and stayed seventeen years. She was maybe a year or two old and had a beautiful calico-colored coat. It was I who found her wandering the neighborhood that sunny autumn day, looking lost. After quietly following for awhile I was able to pick her up. I carried her the short distance to my parents' house where my Mom set out a saucer of milk. She eagerly lapped it up and promptly went to sleep on the nearest comfortable, upholstered chair. She was home but not before one, small detour.

Mom called around the neighborhood with no luck finding her owner. So, she was taken to a cousin's nearby farm to become a barn cat; she still had all her claws. What farm couldn't use another good mouser? The next morning my parents looked at each other and that was all it took. Dad drove out to the farm and brought Mousie home for good.

Mousie loved "bug hunting" on warm summer nights in the backyard. Tethered by her harness, my Dad was never more than a few steps away. Her preferred method of drinking water was lapping it straight from the kitchen tap. At Christmastime she could often be found perched high in the tree, surveying her domain.

As the years went by, kitties of various sizes and colors came to live in my parents' home. They all were strays, like Mousie. One was found in a roadside ditch in spring, just a tiny kitten who quickly grew into an enormous, lovable Maine Coon. Another was hanging around the back door of a restaurant in early winter, trying to find something to eat and hopefully, survive a little longer. Still another was roaming around a

parking lot one summer day with nowhere to call home. There were many more and each was welcomed into a home filled with love and compassion, where they would spend the rest of their days wanted and cared for. If only every feline, stray or otherwise were so fortunate.

Mousie was the queen of her castle, first among equals. But, the years passed and she eventually began showing her age. Her down-like fur was no longer so sleek and shiny like before, the beautiful colors fading. There was a tumor in her stomach, benign but growing causing frequent "accidents." She wasn't suffering but clearly she didn't feel good. She didn't like to be touched anymore and it was evident she wasn't comfortable. We knew her time had finally come.

On a cold, rainy fall evening my sister and I accompanied our Mom and Mousie to the veterinarian's office. It was Mousie's last ride in the car, her last visit to the vet. We left with Mom holding her, wrapped in a blanket. She's in a better place, now running and playing near the Rainbow Bridge with some of the feline friends she shared her home with. They're all young and healthy again, possessed of a lifelong inner and outer beauty undiminished by time. Their grace and quiet dignity was a constant along their journey, a certain ineffable quality going back to the beginning, never wavering, never faltering.

Mousie holds a special place in the hearts of those who loved and cherished her. She is truly missed and will be forever remembered.

PARALLEL

FLYNN MORAN

To say the man *walks* along the stretch would be gracious wording. More aptly, he lumbers, raising his knees just enough to allow his limp feet room to loll from his ankles. And he whispers to himself. Hurried and sharpened, the words hold *spite*, but not sense. Even in the muted afternoon glow, I can make out his dreadful posture. Limping, his back is coiled over like a taut spring, violently twisting his neck to stare towards the debris ahead.

As I trail behind his withering silhouette, *ten paces parallel*, I notice myself continuously critical of him. His mannerisms, his demeanor, they tear me from the barren atmosphere that chokes us. I break focus and glance around. The highway suspending us is less of a road and more of a lesion in the earth; a scar mocking its original purpose. The debris lessens as we round the bend of the felled highway, but the ruined cars grow denser; the corroded husks likely forced the road to its knees over time. Rocks and roots protrude through crusted chunks of asphalt; nature proving itself relentless in reclaiming its territory.

We continue forward, my attention besieged by both the stranger and the stretch in front of me, coating my mind. I realize I'm unsure of where we're going, and as the sun shelters itself further and further behind the horizon, I assume the man in front of me isn't either. A pallid unease chokes the air. I don't recognize our surroundings, but I somehow know to continue onwards. Intrigued by the vague familiarity of the pale road lines, my gaze follows as they brokenly repeat across fissured lanes, until a segment of piping lodges itself beneath my heel. As I stumble, I instinctively reach to my side, expecting something to meet me there. But of course, nothing does.

Consequently, I slam to my knees. The pain doesn't register; I'm too focused on the empty space beside me. I glare to my side, waiting for something to reveal itself. The emerging moonlight and droning cicadas seem curious also, reflecting off rusted car frames in the distance, but to no avail. Turning back, the man in front has mimicked my position. Collapsed to his hands and knees, staring to his side, he's persistently muttering as usual. It wasn't him I was reaching for, I know that much. Something about the idea of having to touch him forces me to stand again, which he mirrors, reluctantly heaving himself to his feet. Our shadows elongate and connect as we begin to trudge forward. Granted, we remain ten paces apart, and something in me knows that's deliberate.

I can't help but feel disoriented. Unsure why we're walking, unable to stop. I occasionally check to my right, playing peekaboo with my delusions. Still, nothing appears. The man and I seem to walk at the same pace, but our movements are far from synced. He scrapes the tips of his sneakers against the rubble as he stumbles, cowering as if even his clothes are too heavy on his frame. Eventually, one of his mutterings finds its way to me,

“...shouldn't have left you. Sil...”

Although it's hard to understand, I pity him. Despite his revolting form, his flaccid limbs and disheartening stance, it's clear this world has been unkind to him. His hateful posture and vitriolic speech suggest much of it was his own fault, but he doesn't *seem* like an immoral person. With this thought, I close a portion of the gap between us, *nine paces parallel*.

“I’m so sorry.” I can hear him whimpering now, “I don’t deserve it, but I will plead your forgiveness until the last echo peels from my arid tongue.” He returns to a murmur, his erratic movement knocking a small tin off the roof of an abandoned car, at which we both flinch. The cracking thud reverberates through the road, sound bouncing from each desolate remnant of a vehicle. My hand gravitates to my side once again, but still, there’s no one there. I muster a perplexed ask, “*Who?*” I mumble, and as I do, the man cracks his neck to the side and responds.

“*Silas.*” He mewls softly, his mouth unfurling with sorrow. *Eight paces parallel.*

Something about his reply feels oddly persuasive, and similar to him, I flick my head to the side. The movement fractures my vision, and the dust-choked highway sheds away, replaced by a verdant clearing in the forest. It’s a peaceful afternoon there. The blades of grass are gently wavering in the subtle wind, and the birds are warning with a contrived chirp. A familiar hand grasps mine from the side.

Helping me to my feet, a casual voice asks, “Ready to go?” *Silas.*

Memories pour back through me – a cup trying to hold a river, and I’m paralyzed by their return. Seized in eye contact, a grin crawls up his face from my expression. “...Oli?” he asks, entertained. It takes me a moment to decide what’s real, until I determine it doesn’t matter.

“Yeah, yes, sorry. I’m ready.” I respond, sharing a slight chuckle over my stutter. He slowly releases my hand with a smile, and we begin to walk. Hesitantly, I shift my eyes back to the dismal road and disgusting man ahead, who begins to walk as well. I follow after him, *seven paces parallel.* The comparison between the two settings makes me shudder.

“We could try up there?” *Silas* suggests, drawing me back. He motions to a run-down pharmacy across the way. I start to remember our goal. We hustle over to it, kicking in the fraying door, the sunlight purifying long-settled shadows within. *Silas* works quickly, meticulously rummaging through packets and shelves. I examine the counters, running my hand along the dust-caked surfaces. I try to ground myself, but the shadowed road whispers to me still.

On the highway, my hand glides among the dust on a bus window to my side. The man ahead continues to limp along, and the lanes remain littered with rubble. In a way, this place is peaceful too, but it’s famished, empty. It aches. Perhaps these are more than memories, I think. The man stumbles, and I gain a stride on him, *six paces parallel.*

Returning to the pharmacy, I pry open a loosely locked drawer. The springs wail out in protest. I wipe a few labels clean, and eventually a promising name peeks out. I snatch it and move over to *Silas*, who is shoulder deep in the cabinets out the back.

I clear my throat, gaining his attention before chucking him the small box. It takes him a moment to examine both sides of the packaging, but as realization hits, he throws himself at me. He says nothing, nor does he have to. Relief can be a bitter thing.

As we step outside, I realize the daylight has begun to leave us. Stuck by the doorway, I watch as *Silas* hurriedly pulls the zipper of his pack closed, ready to depart.

“Si.” I protest, to which he holds my eyes, confused.

“You coming?” he asks.

My arms stay crossed. “We shouldn’t travel while it’s dark, you know that.”

At this point, he’s *poised* by the curb, itching to leave. “What, what do you mean? We’ve done it before.” He turns to face me.

“This is different. Most of them travel at night, and we have precious cargo. Plus, we’ll make better time with some rest.”

He taps his foot, uncertain. Eventually, he rolls his eyes and walks back up to me. “Tomorrow morning,” he grits his teeth. A piece of gravel pops under his boot as we head back inside, securing the door behind us.

Gravel pieces pop back on the road also, under his boot and mine. I manage another step closer. *Five paces parallel.*

We set up behind the main counter, our packs tucked away and our sleeping bags with little divide. Finding the medicine has eased our usual rigidity, and we find ourselves reminiscing through the night. We discuss our lives before everything. We talk of old situations, old struggles – trying not to mention our new ones. Somewhere along the way, more comfortable than we’ve been in a long time, we both nod off.

Awoken in the night by the sounds of a lock-pick, we shoot up, twisting the lantern off and listening attentively. A latch clicks open, and the hinges pose a quiet creak, the raiders as disciplined as we were warned they would be. Footsteps bring them closer. I can’t help but recall when I demanded we stay, trying to keep us from danger. Yet, we are only in this situation because of me. *Four paces parallel.*

In sync, and silently, we stay low to the ground and curve the sides of our feet, moving through the aisles as the raiders make their way inside. I count three, then four, as we pass the gap towards the storeroom. He tries the back door, and it doesn’t budge. We share a look of loosely contained panic. I look down at a small, jagged opening in the door, clearly torn open by some animal as desperate as us. Silas’ eyes catch mine, then he glances down too.

“No,” he mouths. A flashlight glides through just behind us. We stay unseen for now, but it’s a hell of a reminder.

I crouch down and start my way out, but I can’t fit with my pack on. Silas helps me slip it off, and I squeeze through the narrow exit. I turn and watch, expecting to see him scurry through immediately afterwards. Holding up some of the flaps of plaster for him, I stare at the spot in wait. After a moment or so of no movement, I peek through to see him furiously rifling through his bag.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“The medicine,” he plainly whispers back.

Three paces parallel.

“Don’t be an idiot,” I whisper, but it sounds like screaming in the echoed night air.

“She needs it!” he pleads, as quietly as he can, finally grasping the small packet. His hand surges through the door, quickly finding mine to safely deposit it into. I grab it, and him, trying to yank him through the exit. I’m painfully aware of the time we don’t have here.

“C’mon,” I grunt, desperate. I knew his shoulders were broader than mine, but as they slam into the thick wooden frame, my heart races.

“Oli,” he speaks up, worried, the warm sound of his voice pouring through the narrow, suffocated gap. I continue to grunt and pull. “Oli,” he says again, more tense than before.

“It’s okay,” I grunt back, pulling regardless of what he’s trying to convey. His face appears as he lies looking out of the exit. The distant flashlight glares closer and closer. “Get up,” I demand, pressure mounting behind my eyes and within my throat, unable to regulate my volume.

“Oliver,” he says, strangely calm. Our fingers grow still and cold together in the winter air. “It’s okay.” His pained voice seeps through, taking some time before speaking again. “I, I love you, Oli,” he mumbles.

I open my mouth to respond, but all sound evades me. No matter how much I try to force my voice, I can’t speak. Silence’s brisk fingers clasp over my jaw, and tears glide to my chin.

“Oli?” he asks, almost pleading, his hand squeezing mine tighter.

“I-” his arm is ripped back through the exit. Slamming erupts from the small room as I stare at the plastic flap, helpless. There’s a yelp, then the back door pulses towards me slightly, *throbbing* as somebody is thrown against it. The commotion continues as another flashlight enters the room. Underlying choking sounds become all that echoes through to me, until they cease with a gunshot, and there’s no sound at all.

I just listened. *Two paces parallel.*

Quickly after, muted gunshots fly through the decaying back window, my location no longer secret. I sprint away. One tags me in the calf, but I can’t stop. Hundreds of meters later, I’m leaping over the barrier onto the highway. I’m not even sure when I switch from running to walking. I crack my neck forward.

The foul man ahead is close enough to hear now, his begging and spluttering clearer than ever. “I’m sorry,” he says, repeatedly, guilt dripping from his frame. And for the first time, I understand him.

“I’m sorry,” I say, joining his chant; images of Silas’ mother plaguing my mind. The medicine packet bends around my grip as I envision her. I tell her I didn’t stay with him. I didn’t let him leave when he thought it right. I couldn’t even say it back.

I loved him, that’s what I could tell her, though it’s what I couldn’t tell him. And that truth pierced more than any bullet through my skin.

One pace parallel.

Looking up, my vision is mostly comprised of the horrid man’s bent shoulder. I push forward, closing the remaining step, latching my palm onto his wilting shirt. As I do, the sensation echoes, and I feel a gripping presence behind me, clutching *my* shirt.

To say I don’t feel *hope* as I spin around would be a lie. But as I gaze at the stretch behind me, it’s empty. Only my footsteps linger in the dew. I spin forward, and it’s empty also. Not a trace of the man I’ve been following all this time. The night-dwelling birds snicker at my confusion like an enthused audience, and a sickening urge tells me to laugh also.

I try to halt for a moment, but something quickly keeps me walking. I look down at the medicine packet crumbled in my hand, flashes of Silas assaulting my brain one last time. The more I think of him, the more I allow fatigue its rightful place over me, and every step grows cumbersome.

I start to lumber, raising my knees just enough to allow my limp feet room to loll from my ankles. And I whisper things to myself. Hurried and sharpened, my words hold spite, but not sense. Limping, I try to uphold my posture but cannot. My back coils over, taut like a spring, my neck twisting violently to stare down the debris-covered path ahead.

The more I give in, the more I remember him.

“I shouldn’t have left you, Silas,” I croon, the words instinctual. “I’m sorry. I don’t deserve it, but I will plead your forgiveness until the last echo peels from my arid tongue.”

I weep softly as my joints separate and everything close to me starts to darken. The medicine packet departs my hand, hitting the bitumen as do the drops of salt water from my eyes. I finally remember where I’m going, yet I have only *seconds* left.

“I can’t make it, my love,” I say to the dimming sky, “may I dream with you instead?”

THE QUIET ARCHITECTS OF LITERATURE

E.L. BLOCK

The typewriter arrived in the modern world disguised as a machine of efficiency. Metal keys. Ink ribbons. Uniform letters marching neatly across a page. Yet from the beginning, it carried something larger beneath its mechanics: a quiet shift in who could shape literature, preserve it, and participate in the architecture of authorship itself.

At the center of that story stands Christopher Latham Sholes, the Wisconsin newspaperman credited with developing the first commercially successful typewriter in the late nineteenth century. Working alongside Samuel Soule and Carlos Glidden in a Milwaukee machine shop, Sholes refined earlier writing machine concepts into something practical enough for mass production. His QWERTY keyboard, designed in part to reduce mechanical jams, became one of the most enduring industrial layouts in history.

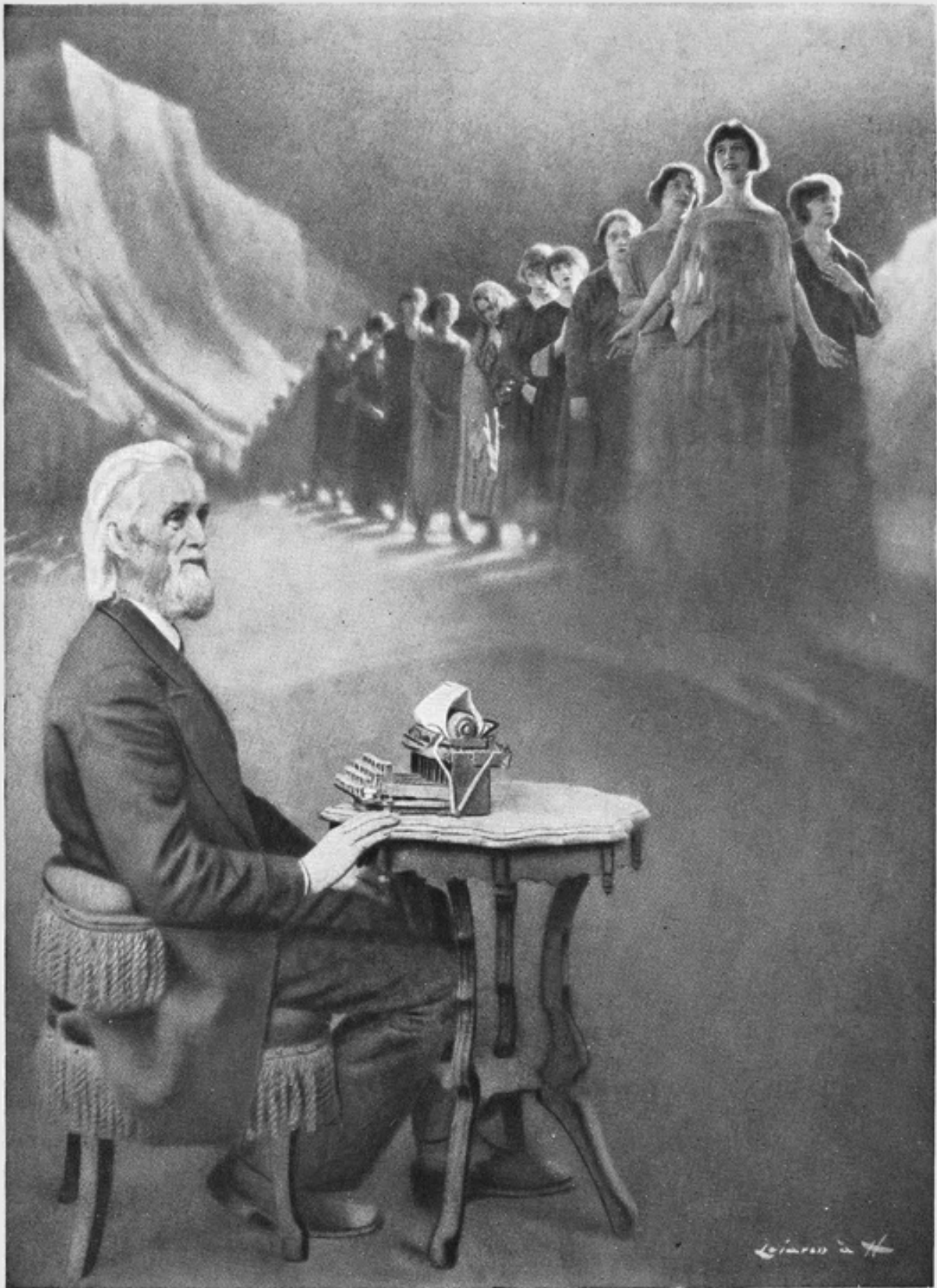
But the deeper story of the typewriter does not belong solely to the inventors. It belongs equally to the people seated behind the machine.

Almost immediately, typing became coded as women's work. Early advertisements frequently featured women at keyboards, presenting the typewriter as respectable, orderly, and suited to female clerical labor. In one famous 1872 promotional image, Sholes' own daughter, Lillian, posed at the machine because the inventor himself reportedly refused to. The message was unmistakable: the typewriter was modern, disciplined, and acceptable within the boundaries society assigned to women.

What followed was a profound contradiction. Typing was treated as repetitive, invisible labor, even as it became indispensable to the creation of modern literature. Behind many twentieth-century literary figures stood women whose contributions were compressed into titles like secretary, typist, or assistant.

Theodora Bosanquet worked closely with Henry James, transforming his dense dictation into workable manuscripts. In doing so, she became part editor, part interpreter, part human machine, keeping good pace with the notoriously complex literary mind.

Véra Nabokov typed, translated, edited, organized, and fiercely protected the work of Vladimir Nabokov. She managed correspondence, preserved drafts, and famously intervened when he considered destroying *Lolita*. Though history often framed her role as supportive, the infrastructure of Nabokov's career rested heavily upon her labor.



Then there was Valerie Eliot, who became the steward of T. S. Eliot’s literary legacy after his death. Through editing, preservation, and publication, she helped shape how future generations would encounter one of the twentieth century’s defining poets.

The irony lingers beneath the machine’s polished mythology: the typewriter expanded professional opportunities for women while simultaneously confining them to roles considered peripheral to male genius. Their labor moved quietly through manuscripts, revisions, letters, and archives, often visible everywhere except in the historical credit itself.

Perhaps that is the typewriter’s strangest legacy. Not simply that it mechanized writing, but that it revealed how literature has always depended upon collaboration, transcription, and unseen intellectual labor. The names on the covers were rarely the only hands on the keys.

PICTURED AT LEFT:

The image pictured is the frontispiece from [The Story of the Typewriter, 1873–1923](#). This book was published by The Herkimer County Historical Society in 1923, in Commemoration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Invention of the Writing Machine.

The image depicts the inventor of the typewriter, Christopher Latham Sholes. The image is accompanied by the statement: “I feel that I have done something for the women who have always had to work so hard. This will enable them more easily to earn a living.”

This book is in the public domain and may be viewed digitally in its entirety here:

<https://archive.org/details/storyoftypewrite00unse/page/n7/mode/2up>

ON THE BACK COVER:

Vessel, 2025
Erika L. Block

ARTIST STATEMENT:

Vessel contemplates the mind as a sacred chamber of emergence and transformation. The anatomical brain is rendered as both organic form and symbolic container, from which a magnolia bloom rises—an emblem of resilience, renewal, and the quiet flowering of consciousness. Subtle mechanical elements nested within the cerebral structure evoke the measured cadence of time and the intricate systems that underlie perception and memory. Suspended in stillness, the composition becomes a meditation on the body as reliquary: a place where thought takes root, where fragility and strength entwine, and where inner life slowly unfolds into visible form.

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