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Letter From the Editor

Fellow Students,

As we embark upon the new academic year together, many of us face anxiety about the return to the campus setting. For others, it is a relief following over a year of strained work from home. For others yet, this pandemic has compounded existing turmoil that has prevented some of us from having a home at all. Many are arriving at Portland State University for the first time, others are anticipating their departure. Regardless of the circumstances under which we have gathered on campus, we at The Pacific Sentinel wish you welcome.

I invite each of you to regard this coming term as an experiment, one that will test our ability to solve complex collective action problems, the efficacy of our coronavirus vaccines, and the longevity of our ambitious return to in person learning. Throughout this experiment, we must not lose sight of what unites us in this place, a desire to better ourselves and, for the right minded, the world around us through the exchange, proliferation, and examination of ideas. Especially now, as this nation is challenged by bad faith discourse and our streets play stage to political clashes, we at The Pacific Sentinel encourage you to prize the values upon which universities of esteem are built: curiosity, knowledge, truth, empathy, equity.

The values we bring to our studies and the experiences that inform them should be treasured. For those readers new to the environment of university, our experiences are not to be assumed universal— the walk of life winds along many paths, and no two are exactly the same. Over the course of your time at Portland State University, I hope that you will find within the pages of The Pacific Sentinel not only a pathway to understand your peers with nuance, but an opportunity to share your own voice. This magazine pays for each article, illustration, and photograph published, providing the unique potential to line the pockets of students while contributing to a greater conversation between members of the student body.

For those of us with more experience in a university setting, be it a single year or even nine or ten, I have advice that is hard learned through adversity. Do not allow yourself to become jaded to those around you. Especially now, there is great temptation to close ourselves to others or allow our empathy to fade. This takes many forms, political, public, and private. There is wonder in difference, and though not every idea is to be entertained seriously, the ability to interact and discern is crucial to the functioning of society. For those who have already become jaded from their experience, I relate. As someone who has recovered from that state, I encourage you to find your joy, reflect on past joys, and cherish those memories and experiences. It is never too late to recover joie de vivre.

Welcome, all of you, to the great experiment of education in this pandemic. Together, we shall persevere. Though many of us have faced tremendous loss over the course of this still raging pandemic, it is through community that we can heal, through knowledge and wisdom that we can protect ourselves, and through time that we can breathe easily once more.

Kind Regards,

Vivian Veidt
Executive Editor
The Pacific Sentinel
In August of this year, Oregon’s Governor Brown announced that the state would mandate vaccinations for all executive branch employees including police and correctional officers, as well as state employed health care workers. This announcement was shortly followed by another stating that all healthcare workers, teachers, educators, support staff, and volunteers in K-12 schools will also be required to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.

Brown stated that “the Delta variant has put enormous pressure on our health systems, and health care workers are being stretched to their absolute limits providing life saving treatment for the patients in their care. I am devoting all available resources to help, and we must proactively implement solutions right now. We need every single frontline health care worker healthy and available to treat patients.”

With the Pfizer vaccine also gaining FDA approval in August of this year, many believe this to be a smart step in preventative public health care and combating widespread anti vaccine sentiment. Anti vaccine sentiment has been growing at an alarming rate and hindering overall public well being. With Oregon having recently breached 4,000 COVID related deaths so far, and new variants of the virus continuing to develop, Governor Brown’s intention of preventative action could help to halt the ongoing pandemic.

This mandate goes beyond Oregon with most states also requiring vaccines for all federally employed workers. While there was some speculation in September as to whether police forces would be included in the vaccination mandate (originally being exempt from such mandates under state law), this speculation has since been cut short.

Aimed to be in effect by October 18, these temporary mandates have been met with resistance. Photographs have been circulating the web that display police brandishing right-wing “don’t tread on me” flags from their state issued vehicles. Police strikes have occurred all over the country with many refusing to work or going on strike. Many of these individuals are being removed from their jobs for their aversion to the vaccine and unwillingness to comply with federal mandates as is required by their employment.

In Washington, 127 people employed by Washington State Patrol were let go for their refusal to be vaccinated, including 74 commissioned officers. Things are worse in Chicago where around 2,000 police officers have refused vaccination and a lawsuit has been filed by the city against the Chicago Police Union. In response to this resistance shown by police in Chicago, the Indiana police force has offered safe haven for cops unwilling to be vaccinated. With Indiana already at a bewildering 16,000 COVID deaths, anti vaccination safe havens will only create further public health crises.

According to the Officer Down Memorial Page, a website that tracks death statistics of on duty police officers, more police have died from COVID this year than any other factor. The number currently sits at 240 compared to 50 gunfire related deaths.

As widespread criticism has recently been amplified in regards to American policing, this public display of subversion from policing agencies could further public resolve that systemic change needs to occur. It could also result in defunding police institutions—a goal of abolitionists.
After a year and a half long closure, Portland State University reopened for students and faculty this Fall term, inviting students, faculty, and staff back to campus after a long and trying quarantine. Despite the collective sigh of relief from all of those who were finally seeing some light at the end of the tunnel, there's also been a good deal of anxiety and warranted concern for overall campus health. Considering the poor state of response displayed by the nation this last year that has resulted in the deaths of 716,000 Americans, students are right to be concerned about their well being upon leaving the safety of their quarantine homes after all this time. Further, it seems that as we slowly return to in person activity there's simultaneously been a divergence in general COVID related information.

So the question is, how are things going now? How concerned should we be about personal safety around campus?

In terms of state data, Oregon Health Authority (OHA) recently announced that Oregon's total number of COVID-19 related deaths has reached over 4,000 since March of 2020. With massive spikes through August (reaching a peak of 2,600 cases a day), it appears that we may be continuing on the downward slope of recovery. However, COVID continues to disproportionately affect older individuals (and even more for those with preexisting conditions) and is respectively increasingly dangerous with older age and poorer health. We're currently marked at high risk with an average of 1,343 tracked COVID cases per day.

In terms of vaccination rates and according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 78% of adults within the United States have received at least a single dose of one of the COVID-19 vaccination shots. That percentage drops to 65% when accounting for individuals below 18 years of age.

So despite the vaccine offering noticeably increased protection from contracting COVID, and even higher protection against COVID related hospitalization and death, we're certainly not out of the woods.

Here at PSU, the Center for Student Health and Counseling (SHAC) located on campus has also been tracking COVID related data since March of 2020. According to this data, there have been a total of 103 COVID cases on PSU campus since March of 2020 with a trend of about a dozen per month for the last three months. While these numbers aren't particularly devastating, a dozen confirmed cases a month also isn't a low enough number that it can simply be waved off.

There's also a consideration to be had about how SHAC has collected this data. Do most students who experience symptoms actually get tested? If they do, how many are going to SHAC rather than an outside resource? How many asymptotic students are on campus at any given time? That's not to say that on campus health resource facilities aren't doing a good enough job, but rather a consideration of other factors—factors that are harder to account for in basic data analysis.

It's hard to say whether or not those numbers will increase or decrease as we continue commuting to and from campus, especially considering we've only just returned en masse. If there were a dozen cases back in August before most of us had even stepped foot on PSU property, there's a logical argument to be had that numbers could be on the uptick in the next few months. Hopefully, with PSU's mandatory vaccinations and masks for all students and faculty, smaller classroom sizes, and other preemptive health actions, we'll continue to curb Oregon's numbers and enjoy life back on campus.
Death of the Damsel in Distress

Marion Ravenwood in “Raiders of the Lost Ark”

by Jennifer Williams
Illustrations by Alison White
The year 2021 marked the 40th anniversary of director Steven Spielberg’s “Raiders of the Lost Ark.” Along with an assortment of colorful characters and exciting action sequences, the film introduced movie goers and popular culture to the unassuming yet larger than life character of Dr. Henry “Indiana” Jones Jr. Despite the film’s obvious central focus being on “Indy,” actress Karen Allen’s supporting role as Marion Ravenwood introduced audiences to another memorable character in her own right, and one who likely influenced many cinematic action adventure heroines that followed after.

At the beginning of the 1980s there was a distinct shift in actresses playing the proverbial damsel in distress for yet another action adventure movie in which the male protagonist does all of the hard work while the female lead essentially waits to be rescued, most likely in a torn dress. Karen Allen’s work in 1981’s “Raiders of the Lost Ark” showed signs of the turning of the tides for this worn out cinematic trope.

The film’s introduction of Marion Ravenwood finds her in a cold and dingy tavern somewhere in the far reaches of Nepal. She is dressed in what appears to be comfortable pants with functioning pockets. The scene begins with Marion and her male challenger several shots into a one on one drinking contest as a crowd of rowdy locals looks on after having placed their bets on the two competitors. Marion appears completely capable and self assured despite the size and intimidating presence of her bursly opponent. Shortly after Marion wins the drinking contest, trouble soon turns up when a small cadre of Nazi cronies gangs up on and interrogates her in their desperate search for an elusive ancient artifact they believe she possesses. Initially, Marion appears to be fully capable of taking care of herself, at least when she is not unfairly outnumbered.

Although the film did give her moments of individual daring and bravery, it still saw the character of Marion devolve from a scrappy, independent, and resourceful woman to more of what could be considered a more socially accepted version of herself. In what was one of the most regrettable aspects of the film, despite the fact that she was essentially an independent business woman, she still was made to seem as if she needed saving from the direction she’d taken with her life.

Similar to Marion’s introductory scene at the beginning of the film, in a later scene Marion challenges her Nazi ally captor, Rene Belloq, to a drinking game for which the opening scene clearly established her as a formidable opponent. It was this scene in particular where Allen suggested a change.

In an August 2021 IndieWire article by author Kate Erbland, Karen Allen spoke about how Marion Ravenwood, was initially supposed to “seduce her way out of the Nazi camp but had the scene changed.” Allen suggested to Spielberg, who turned out to be open to the change of direction for the scene, that such a move would not be in keeping with who she felt the character was. With this divergence from the original scripted direction for her character, Allen completely altered the way in which audiences would perceive Marion.

What makes Marion so unique to the mainstream films of the time is that even though she is female, she relies more on her wits than on her tits. Additionally, Marion boasts no elaborately coiffed hair or excessive make-up. At least, not until the final moments of the film. After going through several adventures alongside Indy, as well as several costume changes in which she gradually shows more skin, the film ends with Marion in a sharp, polished skirt suit.

When it comes to the direction in which Allen’s influence altered what could have been a less original and memorable version of the character, one thing I will give the film credit for is our last glimpse of Marion’s singular authenticity. With her arm hooked around Indy’s, instead of walking off into the sunset with Indy having the last word, they stroll off in the direction of the nearest bar for “a drink,” at her suggestion. Girls will be girls.
Game Night at the Dysfunctional Family
A Writer’s Dive into the VRChat Phenomenon

by Zion Victoriano
Images by Steph Bianco
A dizzying array of neon blue lights assault my eyes as club music batters my eardrums. Luckily, I can at least turn down the music, as this isn’t the “real” world, which would explain the legion of odd figures hanging around the club. The majority are various anime characters; however, there is a legion of intentionally nonsensical models, such as bicycles, anthropomorphic frogs, and a chimpanzee. Though perhaps I shouldn’t be too quick to judge, as I was dressed as a T-Rex in a tweed suit. This scene is a mixture of the mundane and dreamlike madness, both of which are choices by the creators and users of the medium I am on, VRChat. The madness endows users with relative expressive freedom, and luckily for me plenty of stories to tell, while the mundane allows them to gain a sense of being somewhere comfortable.

While most of us still see computers as tools of work, entertainment, or communication, the residents here skirt the line between our reality and another. One of the figures I spoke to, a goth anime man with a bushy white tail who uses the handle “Spook,” told me that the madness was one of the best parts of the platform. “I come on expecting something random, which can lead to a lot of fun interactions.” Spook was a streamer, who first came to VRChat the day it launched, his birthday. “In six years I’ve seen a lot of changes, mostly waves of people turning into groups. Spammers, chatters, and streamers, which are my people.”

VRChat was something personal to Spook, partly because it was where he met his current girlfriend, “Kiwi,” a white haired anime girl who joined shortly after the interview started. Throughout our conversation, the two petted each other’s heads and cuddled in a way similar to what you may see in any young couple, with Spook referring to Kiwi as “Baby.”

The two of them met through their VRChat “family” in which they were brother and sister. “It wasn’t no Alabama type shit, nothing like that,” Spook explained, they just got used to playing games together and then started talking; eventually Spook asked Kiwi out. They plan to meet in person one day, but have no date in mind, as they live across the country from one another.

I asked Spook if he acted differently in VR than he does in the real world, seeing how one of the strongest relationships in his life was on here. His initial answer was: “I never had a life to begin with.”

He went on to explain that there was indeed a sort of cognitive dissonance. I then asked what role VRChat would have in their future. Spook planned to stay on here regularly, and Kiwi was planning on “expending [her] arsenal” so she could start streaming as well.

I left the two of them to their cuddling. An anthropomorphic frog and VR expert who I met on another world explained that this was fairly common behavior on the platform. “Immersiveness and body language REALLY helps,” he said.

Each pair of virtual reality goggles track the movement of players, as do the two hand held controllers, but you can buy sensor boxes, which will track your entire body and translate it into the game. I got to see this in action when a man used his $1000 equipment to dance “Gangnam style.” The controllers also allow players to interact with objects in the world, such as dice, markers, and even a functioning piano, on which the frog (AKA “Hyperbola”) played a rendition of a song from the game “Undertale,” an especially impressive task considering how he had never so much as touched a real piano. Hyperbola was a game developer for VR who initially had a hatred of the platform but was now a regular player. He explained that the key was to not “give up” and to keep “fighting through the motion sickness,” which was worth all the socializing that he did here, far more than in his regular life.

This was something I watched all night. It amazed me how groups of total strangers would form together and leave as friends, though there was of course a contingent who used their relative anonymity for sub-nefarious purposes, shouting slurs, whispering threats, or dressing up like Klan members to illicit purposes, shouting slurs, whispering threats, or dressing up like Klan members to illicit some public response; but here, too, there was a special tool that made all of their annoying antics obsolete, the block button.

“That’s what I love about it” explained “Brick”, yet another anime character, wearing a fishing hat with a pot leaf on it. She proved this when a Halo trooper appeared to inform us that he was pleasuring himself to our conversation. Brick’s response was “You can just block him.”

In real life Brick was a bartender who started here just when the quarantine was winding up. She explained that despite her job, she was a very insular person in the real world, but not here.

“I’m way more likely to hang out on here. Like, I would never do this [interview] in real life,” she said, explaining that she was deeply involved in the VR club scene and a staff member at a DJ club here. Brick talked about how freeing this space was, that she enjoyed being judged only on her personality. And in spite of her not being too social in real life, VR changed that when the group of friends she made here visited her on her birthday. “They all took a road trip, so this guy (she pointed to her friend ‘Foop’) drove from Cali to Arizona and New Mexico to pick up two other people, and then out to me.”

To Brick, VRChat meant freedom from shyness and worry, but for Brick’s friend Foop, VRChat meant another kind of freedom, a monetary one. “It’s just really convenient, I don’t have to spend gas money to drive to a club and buy 50 dollar shots. I can just get a cheap bottle of vodka and come on here whenever I want.”

There’s a surprising trend towards normalizing VRChat despite it’s seemingly endless possibility. Most people opt to be humans, and all the most popular spots aren’t fantastical worlds of adventure, but bars, clubs, and apartments. VRChat exploded in popularity in 2020 during the pandemic lockdowns, and there’s an incredible sense of humanity wherever you go. People flock around mirrors like campfires, tell jokes, hug, and even fall in love.
Literature has historically presented many representations of the same cautionary tale. As the tale goes, when mishandled, the struggle between ambition and self restraint inevitably leads to a fall from grace preceded by a reckless practicing of one's free will. In eighteenth century playwright Christopher Marlowe's "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus," the character of Faustus represents humanity's capacity to embody any of Pope Gregory I's seven deadly sins at any given moment in life. Such a depiction begs the question, why did Marlowe choose to write about a subject that Elizabethan audiences were certain to find so suggestive, perhaps even taboo? One might also consider whether Marlowe was working out his own demons on the page, as many fiction writers are known to do. Undeniably, Marlowe's contribution to the eternal cautionary tale not only marks the existence of humanity's tendency towards self destruction, but implies through a relatable protagonist that it's a struggle that humanity is doomed to perpetuate.

Under the assumption that we are indestructible, Marlowe's cautionary tale speaks to the fact that humankind continuously fails to learn from the grave mistakes of others as if impervious to the misfortunes of someone else. Marlowe's protagonist, Dr. John Faustus, a highly educated man of multiple disciplines, decides that his vast knowledge of medicine, law, and religion have yet to bring him the sense of satisfaction and fulfillment that he craves. As the tenth edition of The Norton Anthology of English Literature's introduction to "Doctor Faustus" asserts, "Faustus seeks the mastery and voluptuous pleasure that come from forbidden knowledge." Deciding that he has no more to learn from academia, Faustus shifts his focus toward practicing the dark arts. When Faustus becomes torn between his feelings toward divinity and devilry, he ultimately declares to himself, "The god thou servest is thine own appetite." Faustus decides for himself, of his own free will, that the "god" he will serve is himself; despite his recent deal with Lucifer. By essentially throwing caution to the wind, Faustus reveals his susceptibility to ill fated decisions. Despite his extensive education and vast knowledge, Faustus proves that even someone with such an impressive multidisciplinary intelligence is still capable of succumbing to their baser instincts.

History is filled with tragic fiction and nonfiction stories of individuals whose poor choices in life go so awry that they practically seal their fate beyond recovery or divine redemption. Of further note in The Norton Anthology's introduction to Faustus, certain types of literature depict, "heroes who passionately seek power . . . striving to get beyond the conventional boundaries established to contain the human will." As Marlowe's tale shows, when hell bent on getting beyond such boundaries it's possible to unwittingly allow ourselves to be negatively influenced or altogether seduced by nefarious forces. However, in Faustus' case, he makes an impassioned choice, multiple times, to engage in abominable behavior. Perhaps one of Faustus' most blatantly self serving deeds occurs when he proclaims to Lucifer's demon familiar, Mephistophilis:
“I charge thee wait upon me whilst I live,  
To do whatever Faustus shall command,  
Be it to make the moon drop from her  
sphere,  
Or the ocean to overwhelm the world.”

While referring to himself in the third person, Faustus presumes to be endowed with god-like capabilities of controlling the elements and planets at the behest of one of Lucifer’s servants. As the story unfolds, Faustus’ insatiable lust for knowledge gradually escalates into a lust for power, which slowly erodes his sense of morality and discernment, spiralling him into an obliviousness to his own fallibility.

Marlowe reveals that wanton lust recklessly combined with free will can have dire consequences upon those who are convinced that their motives are admirable and beyond reproach. Certainly one of the most specific indications of the underlying motivation behind Faustus’ actions is when he admits to Mephastophilis that he intends “[t]o glut the longing of my heart’s desire.” Although in this scene he’s referring to seeking a female companion, at this point in the final pages of the narrative, with all that he’s been granted through his pact with Lucifer, it’s highly unlikely that he would truly be satisfied if this latest request were to be honored. Additionally, by including such an expression as to glut in his request, Faustus absent-mindedly demonstrates the human capacity to personify one of the seven deadly sins. Despite his best efforts, Faustus succumbs to the inevitable damnation that such a dangerous dalliance with the devil warrants. As Norton’s introduction to Faustus further contends, “Faustus’s fall is caused by the same pride and ambition that caused the fall of the angels in heaven and of humankind in the Garden of Eden.” Ultimately, Marlowe’s allegorical contribution to the cautionary tale genre of literature puts the universally familiar subject of reckless pride and ambition on full display, bringing the deadly consequences of corrupted free will into devastatingly vivid focus.

Marlowe’s compelling tale makes it clear that, despite Faustus’s espoused devotion to things both profane and sacred, he ultimately possesses no redeeming qualities. Intent on serving his own ignoble desires, the character of Faustus is exposed as being just as susceptible to eternal ruin as the lowliest of humanity. Although it’s unknown as to whether Christopher Marlowe was attempting to present a struggle with his own inner demons in “The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus,” his tale of a mortal’s road to perdition represents humanity’s inability to resist an all-consuming pursuit of power combined with a flagrant abuse of free will. Sadly, this timeless tale, as with so many other thematically similar incarnations, has yet to alter humanity’s nature of being easily seduced towards self-destruction.
Currently there are many literary retrospectives on what life was like for so many during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. As we all learned, there was no user manual or roadmap for any of us on how to navigate such a lack of social contact due to a pandemic. Now, with so many discussing the mental and emotional toll the pandemic had on them through whatever manner they’ve chosen to share their experiences, it seems that we have been given the opportunity to understand what each of us can surely relate to: Being forced into isolation is traumatic, and figuring out how to survive it requires some gentle self care and a healthy dose of internal fortitude.

After reverting to online education for several months, along with the lockdown restrictions that so many students have endured, it seems that the world of academia is doing its best to get back to some semblance of normality. The lockdowns not only kept most of us from our daily routines, it kept us from each other. If we didn’t personally experience it, it’s likely that most of us know someone who has struggled to get through the difficult times of the last year and a half.

Taking all of this into consideration I was curious to find out what some of the first things people wanted to do when they were finally able to go back out and engage in social activities. The responses I received from the individuals I spoke with were both interesting and inspiring.

Here is what the first two people I spoke to had to say:

Deb from Northeast Portland said, “I wanted to go out for drinks and food with friends. We ate outside, had no waitperson, and had to order food on our phones. Although it was a nice change of scenery, it was not quite the same, almost like another form of isolation.”

Jenny from Southeast Portland said that, in addition to attending live theater performances again, she couldn’t wait to “hug my grandmother.”

After sitting down to lunch at the Hawthorne Asylum food cart pod located in Southeast Portland, I spoke extensively with Drew Mahler who is starting Portland State University’s Masters program in Computer Science this Fall. Mahler received his Bachelor’s degree in Biomedical Engineering at Boston University in 2018. Before returning to college this year, Mahler had been working full time as a data scientist at a Portland based small end to end data science consulting firm. He told me that during the pandemic lockdown he took stock in where he was in life and decided to make some major changes.

When I asked Mahler about the first things he wanted to do after the lockdown, he said that he wanted to go hiking with friends since many of the hiking trails were closed due to the pandemic. The next thing he wanted to do was to meet up with friends he hadn’t seen in awhile for dinner and drinks. Once he finally was able to do the latter he said that it was amazing to be among friends again saying, “I’ve never felt so socially alive!”

Mahler also said he looked forward to being able to go to coffee shops again, where he felt that reading or working on his laptop is more productive as opposed to doing so in his own home. He added, “I’m really looking forward to, with school starting, being able to just go into a coffee shop, open my laptop, and people watch a little bit, but mostly stay focused and feel this kind of second hand high from people, theoretically, looking at my screen and seeing code and me then projecting this idea of what they’re thinking about. It’s so human and I love it. It feels so good, and I just love spending six dollars on a nice latte, even though I have an espresso machine.”

Ultimately, Mahler said that the main thing he wanted to do after the lockdown was to just be sociable. “I wanted to go and do and see. To be with friends again since it had been awhile since I’d seen them, especially living alone. Zoom and Facetime are all great, but there’s nothing like just being two feet from
someone.” He added that feeling the energy of others around him and being able to reach out and touch someone is an important aspect of social interactions, which he was eager to experience again. “It’s very much like I’m here in this moment and I exist,” he told me, “You feel that less strongly when you’re alone for a long period of time—that you exist.”

Regarding the decision he made during the lockdown to leave his data scientist job and return to academia full time, Mahler told me, “I realized I just needed a change of pace and that I would really appreciate being a student again.” When considering his decision to go back to school, he added, “To be back in that environment, you have external goals that are set for you, but ultimately whether or not you complete those goals only reflects upon yourself. It doesn’t impact a potential coworker, or a friend, or a family member. It’s really just about me and my own growth.” He went on to say that during the lockdown he decided that he needed to reprioritize his own growth, which was something he came to realize he hadn’t been doing. Of all of the colleges, both national and international, that Mahler considered prior to choosing Portland State University, he said that he chose PSU due to his desire to continue planting his roots in Portland and that PSU “aligns with all of my goals at this point.”

In her July 2021 essay in Harper’s Magazine entitled “A Complicating Energy: Notes on a Year Without Strangers,” author Elisa Gabbert contends that “the self cannot be too much with itself, it seems. We need to be seen or else we feel transparent, even nonexistent.” Gabbert also claims that “It’s as though we have a basic need to see other people, a recommended daily intake of humanity.” Whether it’s face to face contact with the waitstaff at a restaurant, seeing live performances, or sitting in a busy coffee shop, as social creatures we are not built to remain alone for very long.

This past year I was introduced to the term Zoom fatigue, which is a known issue that I was completely unaware of. Being a PSU student taking remote courses over the last 18 months, I have to admit that I definitely suffered from this as well. Despite the sedentary aspect of watching a screen, we may, in fact, be unaware that we’re experiencing a form of sensory overload. According to an April 2020 online article by The National Geographic, “virtual interactions can be extremely hard on the brain.” The article goes on to say that, “Gallery view—where all meeting participants appear Brady Bunch style—challenges the brain’s central vision, forcing it to decode so many people at once that no one comes through meaningfully, not even the speaker.” This implies that nothing really can compare to in person contact in any of our social interactions and that too much screen time essentially impedes our ability to form more meaningful social experiences.

If nothing else, I’ve learned from the last year and a half that not only is life full of unexpected challenges, but that I’m not the only one who’s attempting to adopt methods of self care and patience for dealing with them. Not only can we learn from our own experiences, but it’s worth recognizing that others are willing to share theirs, which has the potential to provide us with additional effective tools for enhancing our overall wellness. What we need for our own lives is not always what we provide for ourselves, but what others, whether directly or indirectly, provide for us as well. So, essentially, we’re really helping ourselves when we’re helping each other.
The 2021 Portland Book Festival
Highlights from this year’s hybrid book festival

by Jennifer Williams
Images by Tye Raymond
The Portland Book Festival, presented by Literary Arts, is a coveted annual celebration of great literature, of storytelling, and of those who bring it to us. This year’s weeklong schedule of events, running from November 8-13, was packed full of writing classes, author discussions and youth storytimes, all leading up to the festival’s first in person event on Saturday, November 13. The in person day’s events treated book lovers to a huge book fair, author meet and greets, and singing vegetables. The following is a random sampling of just a few of the featured events:

Monday, November 8 – TAP @ PBF: Change With John Freeman
John Freeman, in discussion along with French author and translator Jakuta Alikavazovic; Yugoslav-born writer Lana Bastašić; and novelists and memoirist Aleksandar Hemon, spoke about language and the ways in which it changes “through generations, through geography, and through translation,” as explained by Literary Arts’ Director of Public Programs, Amanda Bullock at the start of the podcast. “I think it’s worth talking about this today in a world where borders are evermore ridiculously enforced and language is ever much more a virus that travels faster than ever.”

Tuesday, November 9 – TAP @ PBF: Witches With A.K. Blakemore & Rivka Galchen
OPB’s Crystal Ligori, in conversation with A.K. Blakemore, author of the novel, “The Manningtree Witches” and Rivka Galchen, author of the novel, “Everyone Knows Your Mother Is A Witch.” “The focus of the discussion was on the two novels’ ‘Similarities, their differences, their intersections and also the entire vibe of witches then [in the time periods when the novels are set] and now,” as Ligori explains at the beginning of the podcast. When asked to define, What is a witch? Blakemore expounds on how the societal perceptions of witches during the 17th century were much different than those of today’s societal perceptions. At one point, Ligori asks the two novelists, “What do you think that we can learn today from these stories of women accused of witchcraft?” “I think something we’ve seen here [in the two novels], perhaps in a more subtle way . . . is a sort of disintegration of solidarity between communities and across communities. That was something that was reflected in these stories.”

Wednesday, November 10 – Home: Rita Dove, Lauren Groff, Qian Julie Wang
This virtual event was broadcast live from Annie Bloom’s Books located in Southwest Portland. True to the variety style show presentation advertised by Literary Arts, the three guest writers appeared remotely on a screen next to each host who spoke individually with them. While shoppers in the bookshop browsed the large selection of books, the three hosts engaged with each of the guest authors. Both the hosts and the authors were able to rise above the initial technical difficulties of the live broadcast to engage in vibrant and compelling conversations about the writing process of each of the authors’ books discussed. There was a Q&A held after each discussion where audience members attending virtually were able to pose questions via typed message for the authors. When writer and attorney Wang was asked where she found her voice as a writer, she responded, “I found my voice in the courtroom. It was through advocating for others that I learned to advocate for myself.” — Qian Julie Wang

Rita Dove’s latest book is “Playlist For The Apocalypse.” Dove, who is a former U.S. Poet Laureate discussed her new collection of poetry with National Book Award winner, Mary Szybist.

Qian Julie Wang, who is an author and litigator, discussed her latest novel, “Matrix” with Literary Arts Executive Director, Andrew Proctor.

Thursday, November 11 – Hidden Worlds: Julia Cooke, Ruth Ozeki, Asturo Riley
This literary event was broadcast live from Powell’s City of Books in downtown Portland. Each writer spoke candidly about the journey that led to each of their latest books as well as their writing and research process. They also spoke about what influences and inspires their work as writers. The well considered and thought provoking questions posed by Amy Wang, Dave Miller, David Biespiel, as well as their virtual audience members made for rich and insightful discussions with each of the authors.

Journalist, essayist, and noteworthy travel writer, Julia Cooke, in conversation with The Oregonian’s Amy Wang, spoke about her latest book, “Come Fly The World: The Jet-Age Story of The Women of Pan Am.” Cooke spoke about a striking discovery she made while speaking with the women behind these stories saying, “A lot of these women told me that I was the first person to ask about these experiences in detail. I just really wanted to do justice to the diversity of the voices I was talking to.”

Ruth Ozeki, who is an award winning novelist, spoke about her latest book, “The Book of Form and Emptiness,” with OPB’s Dave Miller, who is the host of “Think Out Loud.” While sharing her appreciation for books and the significant role they play in her writing process, Ozeki explained, “Books communicate . . . All books are in conversation with each other. I feel that way when I’m writing. All the books I’ve ever read are somehow informing what I’m writing.”

Asturo Riley, winner of several prestigious writing awards including the Witter Bynner Award from the Library of Congress, discussed his latest poetry collection, “Heard-Hoard,” with OPB’s Dave Miller, who is the host of “The Oregonian’s Amy Wang, spoke about her latest novel, “The Manningtree Witches” and Rivka Galchen, author of “Come Fly The World: The Jet-Age Story of The Women of Pan Am.” Cooke spoke about a striking discovery she made while speaking with the women behind these stories saying, “A lot of these women told me that I was the first person to ask about these experiences in detail. I just really wanted to do justice to the diversity of the voices I was talking to.”

Friday, November 12 – Love & Loss: Jasmine Guillory, Danielle Henderson, Devon Walker-Figueroa
In the Portland Book Festival’s final installment for the week of the virtual variety-show style author discussions presented by Literary Arts, the event took place live from the global headquarters of Literary Arts in downtown Portland.

Jasmine Guillory, discussed her latest novel, “While We Were Dating,” with Kisha Jarrett. Guillory is a bestselling author often touted as the undisputed queen of the romance novel, whose work includes a series of African American romance novels as well as a collection of poetry. While commenting on her writing style, Guillory said, “I tend
to write long, rambling first drafts. I change my mind a lot about things when I’m first writing.”

**Danielle Henderson** in conversation with “Live Wire Radio” hosts, Luke Burbank and Elena Passarello, discussed her memoir, “The Ugly Cry.” In addition to being a memoirist, Henderson is also a TV writer for such shows as “Manic,” “Dare Me,” and “Divorce.”

“Pop culture saved my life when I was a kid.” — Danielle Henderson

**Devon Walker-Figueroa** spoke with Jennifer Perrine about her poetry collection, “Philomath.” This poetry collection was a 2020 National Poetry Series selection and includes multiple themes as varied as naming, distance, and separation. Upon revealing that she is working toward her second Masters degree, and after being asked about the themes of learning and teaching in her poetry collection, Walker-Figueroa said, “If I’m ever too old to be learning, I’m probably too old to be living.”

**Saturday, November 13 – Portland Book Festival: In-Person Festival Day**

On Saturday, November 13, the 2021 Portland Book Festival kicked off its first in person event since COVID-19 forced the previous year’s festivities to revert to all virtual programming as coordinated by Literary Arts. This highly anticipated day was filled with tons of literary activities including pop up readings, author discussions followed by author signings, and the West Coast debut of the Gastro Obscura vending machine.

While proof of vaccination or a negative COVID test within 72 hours of attending the event were required, along with mask wearing, attendees flocked to the locations of both the Portland Art Museum and the Portland 5 Theatre. With the mild weather bringing a welcome reprieve from the previous day’s deluge of rain, attendees eager to sample the literary scene were met by authors, moderators, book fair vendors and publishers just as eager to engage in all things literary. The following are just a few of the Saturday activities that took place:

**Dispatches From Anarres: Tales in Tribute to Ursula K. Le Guin**

In attendance to discuss their contributions to the books' collection, sci-fi, fantasy, and realism short stories, which pay homage to Portland’s own Ursula K. Le Guin, were authors Rene Denfeld, Juhea Kim, Jason Arias, and Jessie Kwak. This event was moderated by Arwen Spicer, who also provided her own short story to the collection. Spicer led a lively discussion that focused on how Le Guin influenced and inspired these writers and how her work has left a lasting and memorable impression on the literary community in general. While engaging in conversation with each other and with the audience, each of the authors spoke of how a sense of humanity, identity, and of feeling worthwhile were central themes for their short stories.

Just a few noteworthy comments from the discussion were:

“Sci fi at its core still deals with what it means to be human [and] turns it around on its head.” — Jessie Kwak

“I’ve always sought it [sci fi] out for the human aspect. We can seek out ourselves.” — Jason Arias

[On fiction writing]: “We can create a reality that allows us to access the truth.” — Rene Denfeld

[On the writing process]: “If it makes you uncomfortable to write, maybe figure out why, and do it anyway.” — Juhea Kim

**Intersections: Chris Stuck and Theodore C. Van Alst Jr.**

In conversation with author Margaret Malone, Chris Stuck discussed his new book, “Give My Love to the Savages” and Theodore C. Van Alst Jr., who is the director of Indigenous Nations and Native American Studies at Portland State University, discussed his latest book, “Sacred City.” Malone pointed out the central elements of place finding, vulnerability, and absurdity evident in both books.

Some noteworthy comments from their discussion were:

“Never talk shit about writers cuz they’ll make you famous.” — Theodore C. Van Alst Jr.

[On his writing]: “I know I’m gonna jolt people and they’re either gonna run away or run toward it.” — Chris Stuck

**Gastro Obscura Presents: The World’s Most Unusual Vending Machine**

The 2021 Portland Book Festival marked the West Coast debut of the Gastro Obscura vending machine. The Portland Art Museum’s sculpture garden was where attendees were able to check out the one of a kind vending machine, which featured unique culinary curiosities from around the world. One selection in particular was Akabanga, a chili oil from Rwanda with a serving suggestion of 1-3 drops from its eyedropper dispenser because of how spicy it is. Another selection was copies of the book “Gastro Obscura: A Food Adventurer’s Guide,” which sells at a discounted price in the vending machine compared to copies sold elsewhere. Co-author Cecily Wong was on hand to sign copies of the book. While attendees stood in a queue that extended well outside of the museum’s sculpture garden, others waited in shorter queues nearby where local culinarians offered samples of their own unique delicacies and beverages. Some of these samplings included wagashi by Yume Confections, fermented bread soda from Reverend Nat’s Hard Cider, and fresh shucked oysters from Tournant.

While attendees noshed and imbibed they were serenaded by amplified fruit and vegetables whose ambient sounds were altered when guests were allowed to touch them. Emitting biofeedback while wired for sound, the plants’ sounds are altered when touched or when touched to each other.

Attendance at the 2021 Portland Book Festival turned out to be much lower than previous years when crowds reached upwards of 10,000. Although the in person event was significantly scaled down, each of the individual events were attended by a healthy number of book fans. The virtual events and Saturday’s in person speaking events, other than the pop up readings, writing classes and webinars, can be accessed at the Literary Arts Archive Project at literary-arts.org/archive and the 2021 PDX Book Fest video library at pdxbookfest.org/2021-video-library.
Nikki James is a student at Portland State University and an incredible artist. Their passions range from illustration to poetry to painting. They are also an entrepreneur, having started the clothing brand D3viants in the Summer of 2021. I was fortunate enough to sit down with Nikki and talk to them about their artistic inspirations and aspirations. During our conversation I was blown away by their varied artistic expertise, and especially the stories that they tell through their art.

Nikki James: When I graduated high school I was accepted into the Art University. I was going to originally be a graphic design major. I really like to draw and I've always had a thing for art. I ended up not going to art school. I looked into it a lot, and I did a lot of research, and I figured out that if you're gonna be a graphic designer in California you either have to have really good connections to get really good positions, or start your own company and hope that it launches out. Otherwise, you're generally doing a lot of freelance work, and they just, they just don't make a lot of money. It's something that I love, and I know that sometimes turning something that you love into a career kind of complicates things between those, and eventually you might not love what you're doing anymore.

So now I'm a psych major! I've been looking at going pre-PA or pre-med. I've always liked helping people and doing things for people. And so I ended up volunteering at this hospital. It's called CHOC, Children's Hospital of Orange County, and I worked in the neurology department. So I got to hang out with all the kids that have neurological disorders: from seizures to cerebral palsy, all of it. I hung out with all of them, and it was really fun. Then I got moved up to the CVICU, which is the Cardiovascular Intensive Care Unit. I went to another ward, I was in the cancer ward for a little while, and that was another hard one. But a lot of the kids there are really happy.

My mom is friends with one of the secretaries that works for a school district, and she said that she would help me get a job there. I was essentially running, like, a daycare at the elementary school. I had a lot of fun, but the administration that I had to deal with I didn't like, and I ended up finding another job that was for the same school district that I got hired at. They hired me to care for a little boy who had cerebral palsy, and he was also deaf. All the kids in the classroom were deaf or hard of hearing. I just kind of bonded with him, because we were just always together. The kids didn't even know my name. They just always said that I was him. Like we'd ask what my name was, and they're like "yeah that's Camden." And I was like, "Apparently we're one. You are me, I am you. There we go." That's where the clothing line came from actually.

CB: How did your experience inspire the clothing line?

NJ: So, in June they had this thing called "ESY" which is "Extended School Year" but for the special education students. My classroom, they like to theme each classroom, our room was the leopards. Jokingly, one of my coworkers was like "We should be the Deaf Leopards. Because get it, because all the kids in our classroom are deaf." So what happened is, I ended up drawing a leopard, side view of it, and I put a cochlear on it. I put it on the shirts, and I designed the whole logo with the same lettering as Def Leppard, and I put Def Leppard. I just gave them out first, and then people wanted to buy them from me that worked there, so then I started selling them and making them at home. So I was tie dyeing shirts, and ironing on logos, and cutting them out. It was just, it was a lot, because I started getting a lot of people to purchase everything. I was also having to spend money to buy products. But the problem was I didn't want people thinking that I was overcharging. So I was undercharging, severely undercharging, and it didn't line up with what I was spending. So I was actually losing money, not gaining money. The thing was, it wasn't for me. I was actually raising money for the DHH program at that school.

CB: DHH?

NJ: Deaf and Hard of Hearing. And eventually I told my mom, I said, "Do you know what, it's kind of stupid I'm spending all this money and people are waiting, like 2 weeks to get their shirt! What if I just found a website where I can just put it on there and people can go on there and they can purchase the shirts themselves? That way I know for a fact, 100% of the money that is being earned is gonna go right to them." In the end when I was finally done with all of it, I raised about $1,100. But the problem is I spent a good amount of money on products, so in the end really they made about $400. Another shirt that's on there is a dinosaur, it's called Mighty Dino. It's a mom dinosaur with the baby dinosaur in a wheelchair. I made it for the little boy that I worked with. He has cerebral palsy and the mom dino that's pushing him has a green ribbon around its neck, and cerebral palsy's ribbon color is green. So it was both cerebral palsy aware and like, a cute way to kind of bring my love for that little guy with me. And I was using it as another way to raise money for like, APA approved equipment for him. APA is, I don't know exactly how to define APA, but pretty much it's equipment that he can use on the playground that is properly built for the fact that he's in a wheelchair. Because the kid loves going on the slides, and he likes playing on the swings, but the school doesn't have equipment that's built specifically for that fact. I've requested it, I've requested that when they build their garden that they make it to where he can actually go inside of it with his wheelchair. But they said that it would cost too much money to make it
CB: Are you still working on funding those projects?

NJ: Yeah, I just have them on my site, but I have like, zero time, so I haven't been able to promote it. Things like that. So it's just kind of been sitting there.

CB: What kinds of art do you make?

NJ: I did like, pencil drawings when I was younger. When I was in high school I did a lot of pencil drawings, as like, my way to tell people I like them. So there was this guy and to ask him to the Sadie Hawkins dance I ended up drawing, because he was super into music, so I drew a guitar. I drew the top of a guitar and it had a couple roses around it and I put “Will you go to the Sadie Hawkins dance?” He said no because somebody else had already just asked him. There was a girl that I liked, and I drew Batman because she was super into Batman. I was super proud of it too.

I like painting. I kind of like random paintings. I don't really have specifics that I paint. Right before the shirt thing my Instagram page was actually for paintings. I kind of put my art, my painting and my drawings and stuff on there. And then I deleted all of that and I put the clothing brand onto it. That was mainly just for drawing and stuff. I would sell those too. Like, I have a bunch more at home. I haven't done it in a minute. Just because it's very time consuming. Painting and drawing.

CB: What materials do you use for your paintings?

NJ: Canvas, acrylics. I use paint markers, I use the Sharpie acrylic markers, and I'll use them in different sizes.

CB: Can you describe your creative process for painting?

NJ: In all honesty, I've always been jealous of people that can think of something and draw it because it's not how I can work. I can have an idea and it just, I can't bring it to fruition. But with digital art it's made it a lot easier. Especially like, because there's no pictures of a leopard with a cochlear implant on it. That's also, like, an issue in the DHH community is cochlear's, they don't like them very much. So I have been talked to, and I know a lot of things about it before I put it onto my stuff. But anyways, so, the digital art is where it's a lot easier for me to bring those ideas that I have and draw them up. When people ask for paintings I'll ask them, “Well, what do you like?” Then they'd kind of throw some things at me. One of them liked comic style paintings. Where they have those really big dark black lines around really vibrant reds and blues. So I made him one. It's the side view of a girl, and she's looking up, and she has this teardrop falling down. It's bright black around the tear, and white. Then the whole background is red. She's like, a tan color with bright red lipstick and a bright blue shirt. It looks freaking sick! I was so happy with it! I did another one where it was all black and I made a white line and I drew like, these weird teardrop looking things, and when I colored it in, it was a face!

CB: How would you describe your digital art style?

NJ: I like a lot of vibrant colors. Like, if you look at the shirts that I have, like, all of them are really bright colors. Generally that like, neon lime green that I really lean towards. But I always use really vibrant colors. I always put my signature onto it, which for the shirts is the D3viants signature. I do like cross hatching shading though. It mainly comes up in more like, pencil drawing, because I prefer it with pencil drawings. With digital art I mainly will do bright colors. With those things I don't like any openings for like the background to pop through. I like it to be completely solid and I'm a very big stickler for straight lines and curves. Like with the first drawing of the Deaf Leppard thing, the lines were kind of messy. None of my drawings have ever taken me more than, like, two days. When I start it, it has to be finished. If I stop, I'm not gonna' do it anymore. Because now my brain's like, “Well, we're done with that!” No, I have to finish it that day.

CB: Which of your art pieces are you most proud of?

NJ: I really love the Deaf Leppard one. Just because of the meaning with it, and the little dino one. Like I love all of my drawings that are on there, but like the Deaf Leppard one has the most meaning because it was the first one I made. That's what kind of started a lot of the things, because I had always wanted my own clothing brand.

Two of the designs on there, one of them is a skull. It says "D3viants" on the top part of its head. That was my first idea when I was in middle school and I drew it up. But the clothing brand that I thought of was called Blissful Roses. I was like, “I don't know about that title. That's a long title!” I really like shopping at Zumiez and a lot of the brand names on there are shorter. They're creative, there's something that's kind of mentally catchy for people. But you have 40s and Shorties, you have Empire, Obey, I like Salem 7. I just like their colors. Anyone that has crazy vibrant colors probably more than likely are the brands I like to purchase from. The other one that I have on there is a mermaid with a wave crashing up behind her. She's not facing you, she's facing away, and the wave is on the side. Her hand is actually holding like, a cigarette. When I first did it, it was a bluntness. It's called High Tide. That was the other idea that I came up with for a name brand. Because I wanted to appeal tostoners. I ended up with D3viants.

CB: How did you end up with the name D3viants?

NJ: I was trying to think of, like, names that like, older people would yell at kids that were running around skateboarding and smoking weed, and like staying out late. Just like doing your typical teenagery young adult thing. And then I was like, What would the adult women, like, gossiping, What would they call them? Deviants. "Goddamn deviants!"

CB: What themes show up in your art?

NJ: With my paintings and my drawings it's more of, I go out and I ask friends and family for ideas and I do them. When it comes to the poetry thing that's completely different.

CB: How so?

NJ: I kind of messed around with poetry a little bit when I was in high school but it never really went anywhere. Then I started using it as a way to express my feelings. That's where it kind of started. All of it is about loving somebody, breaking up with somebody, liking someone. I have a thing for rhyming the
words. It’ll be like, This word rhymes with the third word, and then the second one rhymes with the fourth line.

**CB: What do you write poetry about?**

**NJ:** So, in one of them I wrote for an ex, it was when we started to become friends again, and I was talking about how they’re aging like fine wine. The words that rhyme with that was “eau de vie.” Eau de vie is a French word for the youthful waters, and so it rhymed! But the thing was it connected. Well, it was that word, and then it was “aging like fine wine.” But I know that with certain words people are gonna have zero clue what that means. So I try to give context in other parts of the poem, or prior to that portion, and so I’ll try to try and make it to where you wouldn’t have to Google what that word means. You could figure it out while you’re reading it.

**CB: Can you tell me about your photography? What do you take photos of?**

**NJ:** I’ve taken photography a couple of times, and I’ve used it as a way to kind of showcase different things. So, for one of them my teacher wanted us to use the photography to kind of create a story, or a perception of something. What I did was I made it like a progression, so the first photos, they were stacked on top of another photo. So it was just pictures of people. I labeled it and I was like, “What are your perceptions of each of these people?” Because when you look at somebody that you don’t know you make an automatic judgment. So I let people do that with these different photos. Then, at the next part when we came back around to it I took all the top photos off, and I had the next set. The next set was kind of showing you who they are. It was my uncle, my grandma, one of my guy friends, and one of my girl friends. In the bottom part it gave descriptions and told you their names, and how old they were, and the thing that they struggle with. Because now that you’ve made your assumption, now you’re gonna know them. Understand who they actually are. So, in that first one it was my uncle, and the scar from his arm is because he struggled with heroin for most of his life. Then it’s my grandma. In the second photo it was her, like, crossing her eyes and looking all crazy. I made it blurry so that way it looked even more different. It said that she was, like, 70 years old and she struggles with Alzheimers. So that photo is essentially what her brain is like. She’s there, but it’s a blur.

Some things are missing. The next one was my friend and he was struggling with his gender identity. So the first photo was literally just him standing looking like a normal guy. The next photo we put makeup on him. And then he put on a cute hat, he put on a dress and a cute little jacket, and I was like, “Pose for me!” And he posed. The thing, it said: struggling with severe social anxiety, gender identity, and sexuality. Because you wouldn’t have known that from the first photo. The next one, that’s the hard one. That’s the one I struggle with the most. Because they passed away, so it’s a little bit harder, and that was like the last time I ever saw them. She struggled with anxiety, severe depression, and a lot of self harm, and attempts. In the next photo it was her and she was standing, and she had her leg up and I was like, “Do you care if for this photo we showcase your scars? If you do, and it’s gonna trigger anything for you I would prefer to not.” And she said, “You know what, let’s fucking do it.” So in the photo I put more light to showcase her scars, but she actually had a tattoo. Her tattoo that she got was actually to show that beauty can grow in the darkest of places. And, the thing was, in the first photo she just looked happy, and excited. Then the next photo I made it to where you couldn’t really see her face, so I made it more of a darkness. But the light on her leg just kind of made it pop more. And it’s honestly one of my favorite photos. Just because, like, it’s of her, and I haven’t seen her. Now I do film a lot. I like to do a lot with my family, just because I’m always with them. I have all the trips that we’ve gone on, or trips that I’ve gone on with my friends. I shoot whatever kind of, whatever makes me happy. I take a lot with my phone now, which are of here. The rain and the nice trees. The orange leaves. Just kind of all of it.

**CB: Have you published your poems?**

**NJ:** I’ve thought about making a book. It’s gonna cost me like $2,000! Paper, publishing, you know like, getting out there. And I was like, “No.” In all honesty, I would love to like, “Hmmm, is it a body with boobs? Is it cherries in a bag? I don’t know!” It’s up to your interpretation.

**CB: What does your poetry writing process look like?**

**NJ:** With the poetry I need to have an influx of emotion. So having a lot of feelings allows me to kind of hone in on what I want to talk about. What I’ll do is I’ll meditate for a minute and I kind of open that box. I let it just come out. I keep it and I just kind of put it into myself and hold it. I always finish my poems like, that night because ADHD means things kind of go away quickly. So, when it comes to the poems, because it takes up so much emotional energy and, like, time to get to, I have to write it then.

**CB: Thank you so much for sharing! I really appreciate it! I enjoyed listening to you talk about your art, and I know that the folks reading are going to want to see your art for themselves, so where can we find your work?**

**NJ:** I’m glad you enjoyed it! My clothing brand is @D3viants_clothing on Instagram, and my poetry is on Tumblr at barehearts.
Stone gray clouds, heavy and threatening, hover above the city as I make my way to the 7/11 on the corner near where I work. Despite it only being early Fall, it already seems the months of ceaseless rain are here to stay. Nothing new, really. It's Portland.

I cross the street down from the crosswalk, the thought of today’s work load on my mind. Thawing chicken. Refilling the deep fryers. Portioning and prepping and cooking. If I’m lucky, I’ll have some time to do some writing in the early afternoon when the spattering of regulars, flat and lukewarm, are working on their early drinks. Most people don’t want fried food and beer before 3 pm. Most people.

I almost walk right into this guy sitting on the sidewalk in a torn and stained flannel. I mumble an apology, pulling myself out of my own head and back to Earth. He holds up a piece of crumpled paper that reads “spare a dollar.” I don’t typically carry cash on me and I tell him as much. He holds up one hand to his ear and shakes his head. I begin to explain once more but he gives me the same motion. It then clicks for me that he’s deaf, so I pull out my wallet and show him the inside where only some paper punch cards and plastic lay. I shrug. As if to apologize. As if to say that I’m sorry I don’t have anything for him. He gives me a look of understanding and I make my way past him and into the store for a coffee.

Cheap coffee in hand, I push the bar door open and am greeted by the familiar sound of one of our regulars. A bicycle mechanic from down the street who seems to frequent our bartender more than he does his own customers.

“...tweakers and deadbeats, I tell ya! Quitters and burnouts… I’ve had enough of ‘em.”

When I first got hired here, this guy would typically come in at some point in the afternoon for a drink on his break. Now he was at the bar most mornings when I showed up at 11, talking some poor fool’s ear off about all of the neighborhood’s problems. Or at least, what he thinks the problems are. As anyone in the place would discover from his inebriated ramblings, the desperate cries of onlookers mercilessly ignored, he’s had some bad luck.

You see, I try to avoid too many interactions with the regulars. I’m just here for the paycheck, nothing more. The reason I never became a bartender is that I simply don’t have it in me to be a therapist. Especially not when booze is involved.

But alas, I hear it all this time.

For three nights in a row a group of people tried to break into his shop. He presumes some of the homeless people living around the area. Due to his security cameras, he became aware of these attempts after just the first night. The second night he sleeps in his shop, a 12 gauge shotgun loaded and resting in his lap. The third night, they try the skylight. He hears them walking about the roof, shaking at the frame that holds the glass in place, and in response he flips on the lights and the group scrambles. They hadn’t tried anything again since.

Amidst his storm of expletive laden rants...
about everyone in the world that wishes him and his ill will, he stops and redirects his slurred words towards the bartender and I, idly standing nearby.

“I can’t wait to shoot ‘em. You come into my shop, you’re getting pumped full of buckshot. I scared ‘em away that time, but if they come back… if I see their faces... I can’t wait to fill ‘em full of lead.”

I laugh, as I’m prone to do when thrust into uncomfortable situations, and make the long walk back toward the kitchen accompanied only by my thoughts.

I’ve heard it all before.

Sentiments of defensive violence wrought by privilege and often shared within gun savvy groups and the bottomless pits of online forums. Fantasies fueled by media and fetishized by angry white men.

How someone thinks they could live with themselves after ending a person’s life who’s most certainly acting out of desperation is beyond me. Further, there’s a certain irony in how our own poverty eludes us. The guy had already let on to how difficult it’s been for him to pay his rent. How one bad month could put him out of business, possibly out on the streets. With how much money, effort, and time he’d put into that place, perhaps he too could end up crowded under one of Portland’s endless bridges, seeking shelter from the downpour of the Pacific Northwest.

We’re no different; homeless or otherwise. Yet, we’re at war with each other.

While city officials enjoy their tidy and gentrified neighborhoods, relaxing in their mini mansions with two dollar Black Lives Matter signs out front to remind their neighbors of how progressive they are (in case they’d forgotten), we’re hiding behind the locked doors of our single room shops with loaded shotguns and a grimace.

Bicycle mechanic, line cook, bartender… we’re all barely getting by, typically paycheck to paycheck. Landlords raising rent after a global pandemic could be just the push that topples our mountains of finely balanced debt. How many of those out on Portland’s streets right now are bicycle mechanics themselves? Line cooks? People trampled by the city’s apparent disregard or out of towners who didn’t know that heroin is easier to access here than a decent job and apartment. People who simply ran out of luck or never had it in the first place.

I’ve lost track of the amount of times I’ve heard this kind of dehumanizing talk. And yet, perhaps that’s the problem.

Talk is cheap after all. Listening is something else.

Outside my window, where the rain softly patters and people rush past to whatever escape awaits them, a group of tired looking people huddle under a tarp strung between tents as water streams down and feeds small rivers in the street. An old woman wrapped in her patchwork blanket, the edges of which are becoming soaked on the wet sidewalk, hides under the eave of an abandoned storefront. The deaf man outside the 7/11 still sits alone, the crumpled paper cuped in his hand to avoid the oncoming rains.

And a voice trails back to my kitchen where I’m flipping burgers...

“I’m ready for ‘em. Just try me.”
On November 4, 2021, Oregon counties joined together in a vote to bend state lines westward—absorbing almost ⅔ of the state and a large portion of northern California into Idaho, believing the new borders will protect them from progressive Portland policies.

Harney county, from rural Eastern Oregon, voted overwhelmingly to approve the non-binding measure 13-18 that would allow the county to join the Greater Idaho Movement. The movement calls for Oregon state lines to bend westward, swallowing ⅔ of the state as well as a large portion of northern California to join Idaho. The movement’s website shares six subjective reasons why these Oregon counties should join the movement to redraw the state lines:

“American Values: Oregon will continue to violate more and more American values and American freedoms because normal rural Americans are outnumbered in Oregon. Not in Idaho.
Law and Order: Oregon refuses to protect citizens from criminals, rioters, wildfire arsonists, illegals, and the homeless, but then infringes your right to defend your family with firearms. Idaho enforces the law.
Low Tax: Idaho is the state with the 8th smallest tax burden, and Oregon ranks 33rd, according to https://taxfoundation.org/tax-freedom-day-2019. Combining all taxes together, including sales tax, the average Idahoan pays $1722 less in taxes per year than the average Oregonian. That’s averaging together every adult or child, employed, retired or unemployed. And cost of living is 39% higher in Oregon than in Idaho. Oregon tax rates will continue to go up due to a lack of willingness to control spending.
Safety: Idaho allows forests to be managed to prevent destruction of housing from huge wildfires.
Thriving Economy: Idaho has less regulation than any other state, leading to low unemployment and affordable housing.
Idaho’s approach to regulation and taxation would allow our rural industries to revive and employ us again.
Representation: The ruling party in the Oregon Legislature doesn’t have a single representative from a rural district or from eastern or southern Oregon, except one Ashland representative. But our reps would be in the ruling party in Idaho, where our concerns and needs would be heard.”

Most Pacific Northwesterners have noticed the upsurge of American flags and flags in support of our infamous former president flying off the back of our conservative neighbors’ lifted trucks. Last year we saw them in droves mobbing through the city streets, spraying bear mace at citizens dressed in black, deeming anyone who challenged their frail egos and unstable values ANTIFA.

This year, you see them mobbing school district meetings, protesting school mask mandates, picking fights with teenagers over BLM and 2SLGBTQIA flags and now,
demanding that we change our state lines in a measure attached to blatantly racist claims. I acknowledge that those who voted for this measure to pass aren’t all right-wing extremists. I also want to acknowledge that not every single person who voted for our infamous former president were right-wing extremists, but hey, look how that ended up.

The most recent state line change was when North Carolina and South Carolina clarified their state lines after years of negotiations and surveying back in 2017. This only affected 19 homes, whereas the greater Idaho measure would affect thousands. While during the entirety of the United States history, maritime borders, territories, state lines and continent borders have shifted, swollen and spat back land based on human desire and greed. This would be the largest change in the country’s territorial evolution since 1959 when Hawaii was finally claimed as a state. We are still patiently awaiting Guam, Puerto Rico and about a dozen more island “territories” to be welcomed into statehood.

I know, you must be thinking, “why give this any attention? It’ll never pass.” Why I shed light on this absurd movement is because it reeks of racism and white privilege. These Oregonians demand for state borders to change to “protect them from illegals,” and from our houseless neighbors that are in need. They shift the blame for the consequences of American consumerism onto imaginary “wildfire arsonists.” Meanwhile we still have Puerto Ricans without resources because this country possesses the oldest territory in the modern world, but does not take accountability for its economy and its people.

There are much older, sensible and important movements to bring Guam, Puerto Rico, and all of our other US territories into statehood for the betterment of the people that this country should be taking accountability for. We should be taking accountability for our neighbors that are in need, not trying to separate ourselves even further.

I gotta say though, if Greater Idaho does get its way, good riddance, folks! I’ll be watching the show from here. Watching y’all devour each other’s values and beliefs, holding them hostage until they submit to yours. All in the name of the “land of the free.”
18 months ago, we were all thrown collectively into a big pot of unknown. A space of newness, of alien characteristic, of unprecedented times. We sheltered in our homes, and were forced to reckon with our minds, with our lives as lived and constructed thus far, with all of the ingrained shoulds and need tos we had picked up in our years in this life. We were thrown into the fluid space of a universal shrug with a mirror in our hands. Our path to whatever life looks like after rests on how we find our way through right now, how we think of life and talk ourselves into it. So, amidst the viral pandemic upon us now, we find ourselves also within a very correlated pandemic: a truth pandemic.

By a truth pandemic, I am not talking about the presence of differing opinions, and how everything would be right in the world if your Aunt Carol would just understand and agree with your viewpoint. What I am highlighting instead is that very thought, that very need to control the way others move through the world around them. The truth pandemic is our collective, learned, fear-based urge to collapse all opinion, all perspective, all personal choice into one truth, into black/white, right/wrong, truth/lie. It is understandable, absolutely. Truth affords us certainty, and certainty feels good. Certainty feels safe. But certainty can be stifling, it can be confining, it can be restrictive. For too long, we have relied on this certainty, of the government or other bodies holding more societal weight than us, to define our reality for us and set the bar for what is true. The story goes: because they have more power, because they are elected officials, or because they are our parents, or because they have all this money, that they have some higher knowledge of what is true, and therefore we must agree with them. Mother knows best! The scientific research by the big institution says so, and therefore it is truer than anyone else’s lived experience! But does she? Is it really?

Further, the problem doesn’t rest in exactly whose word we’re placing this certainty on, it’s that we are attempting to at all. This inner and outer battle to find certainty is only leading us farther apart. It is not working. When we see that we are all in this space of unknown together, that no amount of money or governmental positioning or parental role give us any truer truth than any other member of society, we can begin to shift that search for certainty to an inner stability instead. When nobody knows anything more than anyone else, what is truth? Where do we look for certainty within an unknown space, in unprecedented times, when we have no guidelines for best next steps?

Here’s the exciting and terrifying answer: we let go of this need for certainty. We stop looking outward for what is true, and instead we turn inward, to find and free what is true for us. We stop trying to make everyone else fit our views, our perspectives, and we trust. We trust that everyone will figure it out for themselves, and that it is not our duty to condense all of our individual viewpoints, opinions, perspectives, life experiences, and decisions, into the paradigm of right vs wrong.

Peace within all of the unknown of the pandemic will come when we realize that there is no one way out of it, and that we already know exactly the next steps to take. They are illuminated for us, always. We just need to look inward, and swim in the outward unknown for a bit. Allow this universal shrug to be, without trying to paint it to match your walls. The stress and resistance of trying to force certainty will make us sick. It is making us sick. The fight to collapse all truths into one certain one, both internally and with the family members/friends/strangers around you, is self destructive and counterproductive.

So, dear reader, relax. Unclench your jaw, stop trying to force certainty, allow people to have their own opinions without judging them right or wrong, and swim in the big pot of unknown with me. Of course, check with yourself first. If this doesn’t feel right, sit with that feeling with open minded curiosity. Follow what feels true for you, and know that you are free to decide either way. The water’s warm, and you are safe, I promise.
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