

catalyst

Volume I Issue II: The Criminalization of Dissent

An Open Access journal that highlights
creative works with an emphasis on the
prevention of violence

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“Our personal and political agency is intrinsically tied to our collective worth in the world. We have to right to *be* and to *chose, anything*, because *we* are. Future generations should not have to ask for their humanity to be acknowledged by the state. The quest to humanize ourselves through the state is a difficult, if not, impossible – but our ability to live and thrive comes from decisions that people make everyday. Choose to be in community and demand that who we are becoming guides us towards collective liberation.”

Crystallee Crain, Ph.D.

BLOOD AND PUPPET THEATRE

Karuna Das

I realized what we'd done just before they ripped the head off my shoulders.

I always figured the revolutionary potential of art lay in provoking thought and social action and not, you know, actual violence in the streets. So I was caught off guard when a trio of spectators rushed me and knocked me to the ground. That's when they went for the head. Once they detached it, which didn't take long with six hands yanking on it, I crawled out through the opening, lest my attackers forget there was a human being inside the headless, oversized puppet of their president.

"Fuck fascism!" one of them shouted. The other two cheered.

"Right on!" I answered, to make sure in their frenzy they distinguished between character and performer, which can be challenging even under normal circumstances, and to demonstrate my alignment with their righteous anger, which should've been obvious, but wasn't something I was willing to leave open to interpretation under these circumstances. They'd already moved on to my scene partner, who doubles as my life partner. I watched them decapitate her larger-than-life CEO, impressed she'd had the presence of mind, and agility, to lower her puppet to its knees and bend forward so they could reach the head without knocking her down. The stilts inside the legs make that tricky to do quickly.

"Fuck capitalism!" yelled one of them at the headless, yielding capitalist. Sabrina shot her arm up through the opening, her fist clenched in solidarity. All three cheered. I scampered over and helped her out of the puppet body as the trio faced the two dozen or so other spectators.

“Come on!” one of them called. The would-be rioters--all young men, in case you hadn't guessed that--headed across the parking lot toward the wall of big-box stores. A few audience members went along without hesitation.

Others exchanged looks of confusion before following.

It dawned on me that at least some of them thought it was all part of the show.

“Looting is an affront to the Freeland way of life,” our real president told the nation that evening, using the popular shorthand for the country's awkward, and somewhat ironic, official name: Federal Republic of Enlightened Existence. (To be fair, it refers to the eighteenth-century ideals held by the founders, not mystical spiritual awakening.) When I say he's our president, I mean that's his recognized title. He did win, in a somewhat controversial manner, an initial term.

Facing an almost certainly decisive loss in his reelection campaign, he and his cronies resorted to various anti-democratic tactics to enable him to hold onto power, including the declaration of a state of emergency that now, two years later, seems to be permanent. He pulled off this “coup” and installed himself as President-for-Life with the help of compliant judges and legislators and loyalist military leaders, along with his fervent base of supporters in the general public.

“We salute the brave members of the security detail at the SuperMart just a few miles from our sacred home Liberty Manor, who earlier today brought a quick and decisive end to an extremist revolt,” he continued, prompting Sabrina to growl. We'd already heard all three young men were shot dead by private cops, and several other audience members killed or wounded, some while fleeing in sudden awareness of the very real stakes of the scene they were enacting.

We hadn't stuck around to see how our spectator uprising played out. We put ourselves in enough danger simply by performing “subversive” material, especially in a public venue, where pro-government passersby might disrupt the show, and sometimes do, although so far never violently. That's the nature of guerilla theatre.

“We understand the insurgents were incited by a guerilla faction,” the president echoed my thinking with a more sinister insinuation, “a nefarious group that spreads anti-Freeland propaganda, hiding behind the anonymity of masks, too afraid to show their faces to the world.”

It’s called costuming, I thought. And in our case damn fine craftsmanship. We’d suffered major damage to our puppet heads. But at least they could be restored, unlike the lives lost afterward.

“That’s why I’m announcing an immediate ban on all unlicensed theatrical performance,” he added. “These so-called artists are nothing more than terrorists. And they’ll be treated like any other enemy of the state.” Well then. I muted the television.

“That’s kinda cool,” said Sabrina. “We’re on, like, the Most Wanted List.”

“Innocent people died,” I reminded her.

“Totally not cool.” We’d seen a lot of that in recent years, so I understood how she might momentarily overlook the loss, especially with our little troupe attracting attention from the most powerful man in Freeland, as if we posed a real threat to him. I had to admit there was something kinda cool about that.

“Remember the good old days?” Sabrina asked.

“When people had the balls to fight this bullshit.” In the months leading up to and immediately following the imposition of martial law, folks all across Freeland rose up to assert the rights granted to them by our Constitution.

For a while there, we didn’t know which way it would go.

“You know that’s not fair.” As the mostly peaceful protests persisted and grew even more widespread, they were met with a concerted, increasingly furious show of force.

The combined military and police presence in the streets rapidly put down the usually disorganized instances of armed resistance. It turns out nearly all the “anti-tyranny” militias side with this particular tyrant.

Over time, mass demonstrations of dissent faded. “And it’s not about having balls, girlfriend.”

“Anyone can have balls.” She grabbed my crotch and gave my nonexistent balls a playful but intentional squeeze. She can initiate sex at the weirdest moments. I pushed her hand away.

“It’s about having the stomach for violence. Having the heart for it.” Truth is, most of us don’t. I still believe that’s a good thing. I just wish we’d better anticipated how strong a stomach, how hungry a heart for it some others have.

“Sometimes you gotta suck it up and get nasty.” She swung one leg across me to straddle my thighs. She grinded her pelvis against mine. Her hands crept up my torso.

“Damn, girl. You are relentless,” I said, bringing my mouth to hers in surrender.

When I slid onto my favorite stool at Intersect the next afternoon, I was the only non-employee in the place, as usual. That changes quickly after the end of standard business hours. I head there right after school most days, delayed a bit by a teachers’ meeting on this one. I don’t drink much, tempting as it is, especially after seven hours in the classroom. It’s super stressful to have to be so cautious about what I say in that space. If even one student reports me for expressing anti-Freeland sentiments, I’ll be fired on the spot, and quite possibly face charges.

Fortunately, it’s not that hard to avoid political commentary in most interactions with second graders, although these days it is harder than you might think. I’d barely kissed Sabrina hello when a woman came through the door and nonchalantly took the seat right next to mine. That got my attention. Bars like Intersect can be a safe haven, as long as you stay vigilant. Sometimes someone who’s less than friendly to queer folk strolls in, on purpose or not.

The president's public position on people like us, and on people with dark skin, and on anyone who doesn't worship Jesus Christ their Lord and Savior is live and let live. But there are rarely repercussions for the offender when that's not what happens, most often and most visibly to people with dark skin, including and especially by cops. This woman's blackness made her an unlikely candidate to be dangerous. Could be she just didn't waste time making the first move.

"What can I get you?" Sabrina asked.

"Bourbon," replied the woman. "And whatever she's drinking."

"They," said Sabrina. The woman glanced around in confusion. "Their pronoun is they."

Sabrina's damn cute when she's setting people straight on that.

"Oh." The woman looked at me. "My apologies. Please put whatever they're drinking on my tab." I smiled and nodded thanks. I don't get too upset when I'm misgendered, especially by someone who has no reason to know better. It's not like I present as ultra butch.

"First time here?" I asked, after Sabrina had poured the woman's bourbon and my seltzer and gone about her prep for happy hour. I knew she'd keep an ear cocked in our direction. She likes listening in on my flirtations with other women. Every now and then we bring one home.

"Is it that obvious?"

"I'm a regular. Never seen you before. That's definitely something I'd remember." I shot a glance at Sabrina, who covered her mouth with her hand to hide a silent giggle.

"Hmm. Well, I've seen you before."

"Oh?" I stared at her. I felt Sabrina do the same.

"Not in person. On a video. Recorded only yesterday outside a SuperMart."

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Perhaps I’ve made an error.”

“You have.”

“Then once again my apologies.” She raised her glass. I did the same. I turned to face the mirror behind the bar and saw she continued to gaze at me. “In any case, the video in question is in safe hands. No one dangerous to the person I took you for will ever see it.” She waited for me to respond. I sipped my seltzer. “I enjoyed their performance. And its effects.” She finished her bourbon in one gulp, then set the glass on the bar, got up, and left. Sabrina and I locked eyes.

“What the fuck?” we asked each other.

People sometimes record our performances and post them online until censors take them down. That’s why, when we don’t utilize the figures controlled from within, we wear masks. The president was right about that part. (We make sure they have an artistic function as well, for the sake of professional integrity.) It hadn’t occurred to me someone might have captured my puppet beheading and identity reveal. The mystery woman didn’t indicate any recognition of Sabrina.

Our next presentation was a piece in the style of Italian commedia dell’arte in which we each play two non-puppet characters. The nose of my Capitano mask protrudes like a short and stubby erection, as if the blustering coward’s tiny cock gets hard at the sound of his own voice.

On my mask for Pantalone, a lecherous but impotent old merchant, the hooked nose hangs like a limp penis. As you might expect, I perform both of them as caricatures of our dictator. Our troupe zanni, Sabrina wears either the cat-like mask of the scheming, acrobatic valet Arlecchino or the simple eye mask of saucy maid Colombina, which shows off my girl’s very kissable lips.

We also operate puppets of those and other characters, historically appropriate in the case of Pulcinella, a favorite of Neapolitan puppeteers dating back to the Renaissance and forerunner of England's brutally violent Mr. Punch. For the unmasked young lovers central to the plot, we coerce audience members into reading sappy romantic verses.

This time every single spectator refused to participate. That meant we had to improvise even more than usual to enact our scenario in which the servants deceive, and physically beat, their masters, getting away with it--and even reaping financial reward from those same masters--thanks to the use of disguises. When Sabrina swung Arlecchino's slapstick at the backside of my Pantalone, she made more contact than stage combat training instructs. She knows what I like.

At the conclusion of the performance, we passed a hat for donations. We don't care how much money we collect. We do it in keeping with the tradition. Even so, it's usually a decent amount. This time we got none. And not much applause either.

When we opened the rear doors to load our props into the van, we found the woman from Intersect waiting inside. We don't announce our performances ahead of time, obviously. We pick a somewhat random location where we can expect to draw a small crowd and go there.

"Bravo!" she cried, lightly clapping her hands.

"What do you want?" asked Sabrina.

"To show my appreciation."

"That makes one of you," I said.

"Oh, they were with you. I was watching them as well as you. They're afraid to be branded as accomplices in your criminal act." That would explain it. "I myself particularly appreciated the old patriarch wanting to trick his own daughter into going to bed with him."

“One of our original touches,” I noted, unable to suppress a smile. “I figured.”

“What do you want?” Sabrina repeated her question.

“To show my appreciation,” the woman repeated her answer. She hopped out of the van and loaded an armful of items into it. “We should get you on your way.”

And a few moments later, we were.

We found the unmarked envelope as we unloaded the van in our garage. It contained numerous printed pages. On top was an email from what appeared to be an official government account, the recipient’s name obscured.

“Shit,” said Sabrina, gazing at the page.

“Yeah.” I stared at the subject line: Commencement of Real-Time Drone Surveillance in the Nation’s Capital. I didn’t need to read any further to understand what this meant for our odds of getting away with even spontaneous pop-up performances.

The other pages were articles from an online news source unfamiliar to me: Freeland Free Press. They reported on small-scale actions around the country, some with photos. None of it would get past censors. Yet there it was in print, proving efforts like ours were far less isolated than state-controlled media led people to believe.

That came as no surprise. The organizational capacity of whoever published the seditious paper both surprised and impressed me.

The large, flat envelope contained one final item, a brick-shaped lump at the bottom. I shook it out into Sabrina’s waiting hands.

“Whoa,” she said. She slipped the band off the bundle of cash and fanned out the bills.

“How much?” I asked.

“Definitely more than we earn in a month.” Enough to make the point. A light rapping on the side entrance drew our attention. It didn’t take a stable genius to deduce who was outside. I opened the door and ushered her into the garage.

“If we’re gonna dance like this, maybe we should know your name,” I said. “Within the movement I am called Sister Shakur. To friends, I’m Aisha.”

“What do you want?” asked Sabrina, yet again, eliciting a grin from Sister Shakur. “Simply put, we want you to join us. To use your skills to serve a greater purpose.”

“Why should we do that?” I asked.

“We have a common adversary and a shared goal. The movement can offer protection and resources in exchange for your contributions to the cause.”

“How’d you get this?” I waved the email in the air.

“Not everyone who opposes our dear leader has been expelled from his administration. We recruit new insiders on a weekly basis. Sooner or later the house of cards will fall.”

“Then you don’t need us,” I said.

“We prefer it happen sooner than later. Lives are at stake.”

“And lives will be lost. Innocent ones. I want no part of that.” No further part of it. I looked at Sabrina and gestured toward the house, then started in that direction.

“Morgan,” said Sabrina, stopping me in my tracks. “I’d like to hear her out.” I turned and stared at her as she waited for Sister Shakur to continue, which didn’t take long.

“We feel the weight of that, same as you.” She closed her eyes. “We wish a bloodless revolution were possible.” She opened her eyes. “If we grant the State, particularly this State--a white supremacist one--if we grant it a monopoly on violence, we’ll never change the dynamic. I assure you we’ll strive to minimize casualties. But ask yourself who’s truly innocent in all this.

Are bystanders to systematic murder and other appalling injustices innocent?”

“No,” said Sabrina.

“So nonviolent resistance isn’t good enough?” I asked. “We’re still complicit?”

“I didn’t say that. I said bystanders. ‘Fascist-neutral’ is not a thing. ‘Racist-neutral’ is not a thing. Your nonviolent resistance is a valuable form of allyship. We’re asking you to become accomplices. No one’s asking you personally to commit violence.”

“Just to incite it.”

“To help incite a mass uprising that will almost certainly turn violent, yes. To serve as a distraction while we launch a coordinated attack on strategic targets. If all goes as planned, the worst of it will be over quickly.” She didn’t need me to point out what a big if that was. “That’s why we’ve waited this long. When the hostile takeover went down, all those aligned with us in the military and civil police, and they are many but not a majority, they were at a loss how to respond. To disobey orders meant killing their fellow soldiers and cops or be killed themselves.

In the face of all the chaos, the Resistance retreated to evaluate and reflect. To plot where and how to break through enemy lines. It’s taken a year to prepare for revolution.

“Now we’re ready.” “I’m sorry,” I said. “I do understand why violence, why bloodshed will be necessary. But I don’t have the stomach for it.”

“I should really get to work anyway,” Sabrina added, avoiding eye contact with me. Her shift did start soon, but it felt like she was apologizing for my lack of figurative balls.

“I’ll show myself out,” noted our visitor, collecting the printed pages to take with her.

“For your time,” she said, indicating the cash.

“Can we talk about this later?” asked Sabrina, once Sister Shakur had exited.

“No.”

Try as I might to focus on my lesson plan for the next day, I could think of nothing but Sabrina and the unusual degree of tension between us. I decided to go see her at Intersect.

I didn’t know what I’d say to her when I got there. But I knew something needed to be said.

As I left the house, I thought about how we’d come to own it. How she had, that is. Her parents died young, in a plane crash most likely but not indisputably due to a neglected safety issue. (The courts had since rejected a class-action lawsuit against the airline.) Between their savings and retirement accounts, Sabrina’s parents left her enough assets to pay off the mortgage.

We’d been together a few years then. Our income covers the property taxes and homeowners insurance and our other basic living expenses, but not much beyond that. She actually makes more serving drinks than I do preparing Freeland’s young for success in our society. (I did a double major for that?) We scrimp and scavenge to get the materials we use in our performances.

I know our “struggles” pale in comparison to those of many people, especially a lot of Black and Brown ones, and I try to practice gratitude for everything we have. As I tramped through our middle class neighborhood that evening, I felt an even stronger than usual sense of unease about living among its residents, with their manicured lawns stretching to the street from their well-maintained structures. It was more than my distaste for their bourgeois values. They couldn’t help that. But how many of them were not-so-innocent bystanders of the kind identified by Sister Shakur?

Probably a lot.

Maybe even most.

On the subway ride into the city, I thought back to how Sabrina and I met, performing together in a college production of Othello. She played Desdemona’s maid Emilia, wife to my Iago, a role the director cross-gender cast unaware of my non-binary identity, which I was still figuring out. But I’d figured out I liked girls. And by the end of the run I’d figured out I really liked Sabrina, with whom I’d hung out--and hooked up--regularly throughout the process. I didn’t want our relationship to end upon completion of the project like a “showmance” would.

In the play, Emilia calls out Iago for inciting the unjust murder of Desdemona, provoking him to stab her to death. At the final performance, I nearly didn’t go through with that action, as if not killing her onstage would somehow keep our offstage passion alive. Remember what I said about the challenge of distinguishing between character and performer? I guess I didn’t trust her to do it. Maybe I couldn’t do it.

Playing Iago really messes with you. You have to commit to embodying his sickening combination of cruelty, vulgarity, and egotism, unlike anything else in all of Shakespeare, if not all of drama. Until recently I would’ve added maybe even in all of humanity. You also have to decide what motivates him to lie about essentially everything to essentially everyone, possibly including himself and the audience. He gives multiple, shifting reasons for his behavior, some of which seem credible (but invalid as justifications) and some of which seem made up on the spot.

What does he have to gain from destroying so many lives? Is he simply a sociopath who gets off on others' suffering? And then there's all the racist things he says. Do they reflect his actual beliefs, or are they feigned to exploit the racist attitudes of those around him? He certainly uses them that way.

Other characters ultimately see Iago as a monstrous departure from the norms of their culture. But he's really the epitome of them. In rehearsal we talked a lot about the racism in the play, and why the faculty chose to produce it.

Freeland had recently elected its first Black president, a major milestone in a country with a history like ours, a nation built on a foundation of colonization and slavery. Some people-- more of them than a lot of folks expected--didn't see this milestone as progress. Overt and subtle racism, individual and structural, started becoming more visible to liberal-bubble residents.

Like me.

In our cast discussions of this, we all turned to the actor playing Othello for the "Black" perspective. Only now did I realize how fucked up that had been. Like he needed that burden on top of the burden he already bore in his daily existence in our oppressive society. And if I found it so psychologically challenging to play Iago, what must he have gone through to play Othello?

To portray a character truthfully, you have to see them from their point of view. Better still if you can feel empathy for them or even find some aspect of them admirable or enticing.

With Iago, the most obvious candidate for that is his skill as a manipulator, and especially his ability to dupe people into thinking he's on their side even as he works against them. For most of the play, until fires he's lit burn down everything and everyone around him, he proves himself to be an expert puppet master. In the end, I managed to develop a kind of double consciousness. I identified with Iago's perspective and his talents even while I detached myself from his actions, and especially from their results.

At the cast party, Sabrina complimented me on my integrity.

She said she loved that about me.

As I rode the escalator up from the underground train station and completed the journey to Intersect, something cracked open inside me.

“I don’t have the stomach for it,” I told Sabrina. She stared across the bar at me with an unreadable expression. I couldn’t tell if she’d even heard me over the buzz of the sizable crowd. “I know,” she said, setting in front of me the glass of seltzer she’d poured. She started to move away. I grabbed her hand.

“But I do have the heart for it.” She raised an eyebrow but said nothing. “I despise that motherfucker and every one of his minions.” She snorted. “Still, I refuse to let hate rule me. I refuse to let it motivate my actions.” I searched for words to articulate what I felt flow through me. “Justice motivates me. Compassion motivates me. I want that to be true for everyone. Do you think we can pull it off? Can we incite an uprising of love?” Her lips formed a slight smile. Damn I wanted to kiss them. So I did. People around us cheered.

“I think we just incited one. A mini one anyway.”

“Compassion for everyone. Even for him and his minions. And all his other enablers.”

“Hmm.”

“They must be stopped. Whatever it takes. If we claim to love the people most harmed by them, we have to stand up to them with everything, with our very lives, and destroy the system they perpetuate, that they epitomize. Otherwise we perpetuate it, too. If that means destroying them, then that’s what we need to do.”

“Okay.”

“But not with hate in our hearts. We don’t have to like them or even understand them.

We do have to feel compassion for them. For their emotional suffering. Same as we feel it for the emotional and material suffering of all those they harm. Think how much pain they must have inside them to be able to cause so much pain for so many others.”

“Or maybe they’re just evil.” She recited a familiar line: “Villainy, villainy, villainy!”

“We all have a potential Iago inside us. Can we get people to see it that way? To see the potential inside themselves?

So if they do commit acts of violence to stop our Iago-in-Chief, it’s out of and with compassion?”

“Realistically ...” She gazed into my eyes. “Probably not gonna happen. Not everyone.

But your integrity comes from your heart alone.” She leaned across the bar for another kiss, then slipped away to take someone’s order.

I sometimes get the feeling Sabrina is one step ahead of me, waiting patiently--and playfully--for me to catch up. Sure enough, just as it occurred to me we had no way to contact Sister Shakur, who might well have given up on recruiting us, Sabrina returned and slapped something onto the bar in front of me. I recognized it at a glance as the paper band from the bundle of cash. When I gave it a closer look, I noticed the phone number.

“Good evening, ladies and gentleman,” I said, spreading my arms wide. “And the rest of you!” I tipped my carnival barker hat to the camera. “My name is Morgan. Morgan Le Fey.” I fluttered my mascara-laden eyelash extensions and blew an exaggerated kiss to the audience, by far my largest ever. “Not to be confused, I hope, with Morgan O’Fay.” I gaped at the camera, then glanced at Aisha, who shook her head at my ad-lib to the script we’d collaborated on for over a month. She knew to expect extra irreverence during the live broadcast, which Resistance hackers were patching through to numerous streaming sites. No way for censors to silence us.

“Welcome to the debut performance of the Blood and Puppet Theatre!”

Sabrina, hidden inside a much more impressive larger-than-life CEO costume than the one we’d built on our own, led a parade of company members onstage. The ensemble carried our diverse set of puppets, a mixture of marionettes, ventriloquist dummies, rod puppets, sock and other hand puppets, and even finger puppets, their individual appearances together representing a broad spectrum of human identity.

“Here at the Blood and Puppet Theatre we believe two things above all else,” I continued.

“First, we believe theatre is as essential to life as blood!” The puppets cheered. “We also believe theatre should open the veins of society and purge deadly toxins from its lifeblood.”

The puppets cringed. “In order that we might heal!” The puppets sighed and hugged each other. I tossed the barker hat aside, accepted the huge president’s head from CEO Sabrina, and held it aloft above my own, ready to perform an act we hoped would incite--that is, inspire people to play their part in cutting the strings that control us.

“Without further ado,” I declared, “we give you ... FREELAND!”

Title: Eye Sides of Time
K. Johnson Bowles



The Almighty Black Vote

Khalfarni H.

Seeds-of strange fruit-seethe.
In soiled skin-they have grown
into birches, bloomed and thralled.

Carved-by the lovers of hate-romanticizing, grooving, knives into hearts. Shaping, marking, the record of a union the man on the penny had needed to move. That tone-deaf song they tried to bring back is a track that's trebling, scratching on loop. And the party's derided, The house is on edge, there are cries from the basement,
the people are sick.

But who shook the jukebox joint to a hush, and lifted the 45 out of the slot!?

We.... We have stood in line all morning.

Bodies in gird-belly chains on buildings.

Once or twice we would wrap these streets like the pilfered mummies who bore our features. Walking it, bussing it, pushing and rolling, and riding, while covered in masks-this clan.

Came to make sure our voice were felt like the cold wet whisper on the lobe from a niece. In the name of the lord, of George and Breonna and all those sons of bitches on their knees.

The fire-lit dawn met them in their cups. and they danced like leaves rigor mortised on tar.

Sons of/and money

Karina Lutz

Sure, some of us have never seen war,
but we're still bitter.
Our country is still bombing.
Our country that says we get to decide.

We've never wanted to bomb
countries we've never seen
but hear are full of people.

Our country doesn't want us to see
their bodies or their anguish or even
the beauty of their countryside.

Most of us have never met anyone from
Afghanistan unless you count the American vets
who told me,
"No, it's not made of rubble, it's the most
beautiful place I've ever seen."

So we decided again no more bombs, but see?

The mother.
I am not the mother of bombs.

My own mother taught me this.
She died with a bumper sticker
inside the back window of her last car.

Taped there in hopes she'd soon
be able to take it down.

It said: End ~~less~~ *this* war.

She taped it there 17 years ago.
She died since of natural causes,
like a broken heart.

She'd taught me not to let them take
one's sons to war. I aborted any sons.
We'd like to abort this mission, sir.

Our country answers,
these are your bombs,
so you must pay for them.
We grit our teeth to rubble.

We spit again: these are not our bombs.
Yes, he insists, these are your bombs
because you paid for them.

We will not pay.
We will not make enough money to
owe you anything.

A country who calls itself ours.

And these guns are not ours,

A country who calls us free.

Inside job
Karina Lutz

He worked at a nuclear power plant
and secretly hated his work,
though no one was able to tell
(like the serial killer who “seemed like a nice
enough guy, kinda quiet”),
certainly not the guys and wives at the country
club,
against whom he always argued defense,
half high, around the small punctuation
of ice in glasses, glasses half empty of the ghost
of juniper and tonic.

But at some invisible point,
he had half fallen for one of
the hippies at the gate he drove past every
morning
and evening, as she held vigil with her
untamed,
curly hair,
her absurd herbs & feathers to stop
nuclear power & weapons,
as if.

His muttering stopped inaudibly at that point,
like a river-crossing in winter
(the water’s movement under a foot of ice),
the solidity silent and shoe-shushed over.

Nothing then was the same, except everything
on the outside. The spent fuel rods still needed
monitoring, as they would for the next eon,
by some beings he dared not imagine.

New fuel rods still needed, it seemed, to be
lowered
into place, the fail safes engaged,
the protocols observed. But he was able to
discover
and plot more reasons to delay the lowering,
and
to shut down the plant more often until the
profit margin shrank
to a shadow of its former self, and one day,
one fine day,
he worked his way out of the part of the job
he’d grown to hate most

the loading of fresh fuel, the birth of the next
quasi-eternity,
the setting in motion work for future
generations,
work that will be for no good at all, just
dangerous drudgery,
only to have served power
to the hair dryers and factories and Xboxes
the future’s ghosts will have once used,
back in their day,
our day.

Self-coup: a dialectic

Karina Lutz

If there is to be no rule of law,
perhaps there is to be no police state.

If there is to be no police state,
perhaps there will be no mass incarceration.

If there are to be no police to call,
perhaps there will be community reliance.

Perhaps the community will be laid bare.
Perhaps we will look to each other.

If there are no police to call in
the guns to solve the problems,
if there are to be no guns,
perhaps we will learn how to solve the problems.

If there is no one who understands government
running the government,
perhaps there is no government.
Perhaps there will be no one paying the arms makers.

If there is no one to take away the guns
from the people who are lawless,
perhaps we all will be lawless.
Perhaps laws won't save us.

**Dear Karl, Dear Martin,
Karina Lutz**

Historical inevitability,
like an underhanded pitch,
appears now upside down:
the arc sags, the axis flips.

Fascism seems to be winning
over Russia, Britain, and the US,
not with bombs, but with time:
time, pernicious time.

Time's longness, Martin.
What works, Karl.
At least for a time,
what works.

Despot

Paul Glenn

Lift heavy the lies I've told.
Hoist them high
with stressed steel and warped frame.
Rivet girder and plate
to a monument of grift
raised on the foundation of my name.

Harden your souls and
follow me to the end.
Up slopes of muddied facts,
to dark corners of the universe
where waves of light bend.

Though, heed peril you faithful
anointed in nonsensical guile.
Surely destined to stand
knifed backs to the wall
riddled with bullets and bile.

Blind your ambition when the edifice falls
and pretense goes to ground.
Take to hand and knee
down serpentine slopes,

through dusty light and muted sound.
There you'll find reason
held baited under viper's breath,
amidst a slithering nest of toxin and ire.
Truth to the jaw left undigested,
deception's strength fortified liar to liar.

With callous heart
wrought dull in desuetude.
Gripped paralyzed in will to act.
Exhale the stench of rotting virtue.
Confirm the fable left intact.

Come harvester of evil reaped.
Writhe through the bones
of corpses yet unsung.
Grope for bits of trust in the darkness.
Shout victory hymns with divaricate tongue.

Then let's dance
in sardonic rhythm
upon the grave of lost sanity.
Bid a toast to conspired wealth.
Raise our fingers in silent profanity.



RESIST

“Fatima and the Pimps”

Khalfarni H.

Muslim girl, 12, forced to remove her hijab before boarding an Air Canada flight - Tuesday, 24 September 2019 2:20 am

Graft her to the purlieu and archive her faith.
Her crown bereft as centuries peel
like a bill for a pimp’s fat wad of Franklins.

“Break her off some pimpin’ pimp.”
Peel the leafing away from her head
Like lettuce precisely
because it is brown....and ugly....
because it’s been left to the spoils.

Snatch her off the arm of her God.

You cold, Pimp, you is cold to be making
her lids grow veiny and tremored with wet
mascara that rolls like processions of hearses.

And how gut wrenching-how screwed is the act.
Your lewd and twisted crusade in her stomach
has brought this 12 year old girl to a knee.

For much an indecent proposal-this is.
This is....indeed....a fucking....raw deal.

You’ve rolled back what she has
deemed her protection,
and thrust her deep in the naked city.

To streak it in tears with a conscience blurred.
You’ve de-shelved her, razed her library down.

Culture, folklore, spiritual canon-All Shot
Like a firing squads on her nerves
feel them? or do you still feel the need
to picnic on her prayer mat?

I suspect you feel this is food for her spirit.
To serve her-seconds-of western aesthetic.

Or so you think, and, so you think ultimately
you’ve done her a favor.

But by freeing her hair to blow in the wind Its an
astral plane you’ve hi-jacked.

She came to play squash, but, leaves with jihad.

You’ve kicked her globe from its axis-shit!

“You cold-pimp-you cold.”

The Blood In Your Phlegm

Khalfarni H.

We scream because melanin has no voice. Rap Singers no voice.

Black police no voice.

1619 curriculum no voice.

Our village no voice.

No roots and no voice.

We were telling the country

that we couldn't breathe

and New York cops gave C.P.R. to a door. A "door" or heap of metal-on a hinge

that's been swallowing Hebrews whole since forever.

Then breaking them down and shitting them back In the dirt to fertilize seeds with fear.

Saying "we cant breathe" was like putting on airs to the hot blooded brood who shape our condition.

The acronym waxed in paint on the side was to pimp their rides and "Xzibit" sang froid. What's funny?

Our humors spilling in the gutters? Our fathers being choked on civilian cam? Choked-in frozen frame-melting on the world stage, Lip-synching the quicksand song.

George had no voice.

His tribe had no voice.

His hope had no voice.

His God had no....

The cop with the pocketed hands had a voice. Of the systems, the patriarch, White male rage! but the Kaepernick knee to the pulse faint throat, and the smirk he gave in knee jerk jest, made the zeitgeist rise and become one voice. Like a melting pot steamed on a stove of voice. May the flawed power structure behold this voice or we'll burn, we'll loot, we'll be the

blood in your phlegm....

Again.

Aggression has always been a matter of perspective

Jennifer Schneider

Mama went missing two days prior. Papa's on the prowl as baby cries. All bellies rumble. Media relies on big words to coin brazen and audacious behaviors while Maslow writes simply of sleep. Food and water, too. Grains of oat cereal, breads soaked in tomato, garlic, and alfredo sauce. Napkins of excess butter and surfeit chowders. Crusted stew droplets. Rich buttercream frosting. Chocolate and vanilla. Cream cheese, too. The underground's always been hot. Now getting hotter. Back alleys fans and open doorways offer rare relief from a life on the run. Overstuffed metal cans. Surplus plastics, too. Humans never good at pacing. With no warning, the dark of the night turned yet darker.

Desperation is contagious.

Tempers flare as instincts ignite. *Papa?* No, only more breaking news alerts of aggressive rodents - brown, black, bush - while aggression has always been a question of perspective.

Mirror, mirror on the subway wall – who's the most aggressive of them all? Indigenous people persist. Native species, too. Darwin remains studied via cell and electronic archives - while headlines come and go. The *Dow* and the *S&P* carry on while we hunt the food you waste.

Ouch.

Blades sharpen while singular incisors dull and options fade. We seek not what is not ours. All bellies rumble. You ask not of the children. They send *Greetings*. Do you know their name?

When That Cop Died Khalfarni H.

When that cop died,
gun control hung on the pundits lips
like a dope fiends unlit bogie.

When that cop died,
The Mayor harangued and pulled strings to have
John Mayer “sang” and pull “strangs.”

And the march went borderline parade, and the
ride from the station was televised, so the station
was flooded like channels are.

From your station in life can you channel this?
Each news reel loop was lupus to me. I grew sick
with resentment swelling inside, like an air bed
leaking where empathy lied, when that cop died.

For when that cop died,
no one, do you hear me? (NO ONE!)
confessed to how he lived,
or how his job and occupation
was a job.....of occupation.

Breaking up dice games and families alike.
Stopping and frisking the puppets of shadows.
In shade, he'd throw them
like animals on the wall.
No one seemed to recall,
the boxes and boxes of black boys,
shipped back to their makers

like something defective.

But now a detective is dead
and instead of shed light
they darken the truth.

Social platforms get raided to show
them as; thugs, heathen, wildlife, brute.

So when that cop died?

I realized he'd long been dead-to me.

Not the legend per-se but the legacy of slaves
overseers, and convict leasers, of torches and
sheets with holes.

Then I began to unload on this loose-leaf. And the
margin became my bloodline! running all the way
down my mother's side.

Men dropping like dominoes
black dominoes with white eyes.

That darkness in cartoon land.

Their coughing don't need a tune up.

They did not turn the car tunes down so they
themselves were blasted! so when that cop died
to me he just died.

He died like everyone does....



CATALYST: **THE CRIMINALIZATION** **OF DISSENT**

EDITOR - DR CRYSTALLEE CRAIN

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CATALYST IS PRODUCED BY PREVENTION AT THE INTERSECTIONS.

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