



5/20

Preston Muir

I am        alone  
but        with you  
a man     not so  
             lonely







## The Theta and The Siren

Savannah Manhattan

The theta and the siren  
Crossed each other out  
Doppler rebellion dissolved my rest  
The cost of dying averages thousands of dollars  
yet it costs millions to stay alive

Thoughts, as I closed my eyes, unafraid

Squads and cubes  
roaring out of  
the window toward  
saving that balance  
or adding to  
the misery  
It's hard to tell

An hour before, the neighbors dispersed, full  
from celebrating Mother's Day  
or a 94<sup>th</sup> birthday  
or Easter  
or for the hell of it

The sirens cancel that out too sometimes  
Other times it's living room conversation  
The wet slap of shower head drops  
Rumble of bass from a cheap record player  
Numb nerves of vengeful wisdom teeth  
The never-ending needs of others

In a merciful moment of focus and fatigue  
Theta crosses it all out and the days I knew  
Become merely a myth



## Low tide

Jennifer Molnar

We lie on empty homes of the dead,  
small soft bodies picked out by gulls,  
  
remaining shells dulled by the tide's  
slow lull. We cannot see past our own

reflection on the inconsistent  
surface, our image repeatedly

broken, nor recognize voices lost  
in an ancient steady-rhythmed song,

luring the dead from deeper water  
to scatter remnants of their lives beneath

our backs and bellies, memories not our  
own into our open arms and mouths.







# The Bystander

Duke Stewart

Cal's vacation had not gone as planned: a tepid ocean, clouds of avaricious mosquitoes, and blobs of jellyfish, their strings of nematocysts like deadly jewels spread across the water. Stung, he suffered from an agonizing itch. Dancing in the strobe lights of the Mambo Club, he scratched his balls, an action misinterpreted as obscene by a roving head-shaven bouncer, muscles bunched in a Degas colored t-shirt, ears pierced with the cool dropsical face of a schizoid lifer. The enforcer dumped Carl in a puddle of sudsy kitchen backwash. Young women on the porch serenaded him with catcalls.

"Enjoy life while you can," he retorted. "Divorce, impotence, heart attacks, cancer. Feel free to choose your demise."

"Ya-Ya," one replied, sticking out her tongue. "You're too old to be chasing tail at the Mambo. And you need to forget that cheap ass rag you got on your head." Carl pulled on his forelocks. "As real as it gets, sweetheart."

"Haven't heard that since I was six years old." The girls laughed. Their boyfriends found them carrying drinks with little umbrellas.

"That man bothering you," one asked, his arms the size of balusters.

"Nah. He too old to cause any trouble."

It was the worst putdown of the night.

He missed Linda. A State representative, she had canceled her week with Carl at the last minute. The Governor had ordered the House back into special session for a new election map, just like every other red state in the Union.



Carl, having already paid the down payment, rented the condo anyway. He'd been with Linda for six years. He wasn't the type to cheat, and he was a poor pickup artist even with real hair. He hated small talk and at forty-nine, the plumbing didn't always work like it used to.

Carl walked onto the pier, stared into the sky. Humidity obviated any chance to see Orion. Shrimp boats patrolled on the horizon. The pier's underpinnings broke waves into foam. Miles off shore, fingers of lightning cicatrized billowy clouds.

The wind peppered his face, coating his lips with salt. His crotch continued to itch. His skin was dry as a dromedary. He saw a woman midway up the bluff, nestled in a barrier of granite boulders protecting the saw grass, her arms hugging her knees, head tucked, elbows exposed. In the mist, she seemed more ghost than human.

Carl wanted to leave. This late at night, any attempt to help might be misconstrued. If the woman started screaming, he was a goner, but he remembered a story his father had told about passing a man lying on railroad tracks. His father had assumed the man was fooling around but when his father crossed the tracks later that afternoon, he noticed a crowd working the rail beds, carrying croker sacks, searching for remains. "I should have stopped," he said, which was as close to a confession one got from Carl's father. Only years later did Carl learn that the man was black.

Carl leaned over the pier. The wind peeled back his voice. He shouted. The woman raised her head. Lights flickered off her cheeks, wet with tears and spray. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

"Too late for that."

"I'm sorry."

Words throttled in his throat. Linda complained about his lack of compassion. He grew up in a family where love was treated as a contagion. He'd been shaking hands with his father since the age of five. Not that he was mistreated. His father sold used cars. When he broke his arm while overinflating an exploding truck tire, he called Carl to take him to the hospital. Once in the ER, he sent Carl home to finish the tire repair, and walked home two hours later. Suffering was something you did alone. You were responsible for your troubles. Nobody else's.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She'd braided her hair. He figured she was about five foot six. The top part of a bikini enclosed her breasts. She smiled. A warning flare went off in his head. "It's a hot night," he said.

"When the wind blows, I hear children singing," she said.

He'd had his share of troubled relationships: an ex-lover who camped outside his door, who called at odd hours of the night only to hang up when he answered, who kicked in the side of his Miata. He



caught her one night searching through his curbside trash. Though he could never figure out how she did it—she intercepted his e-mail. When she set fire to his mailbox, he called the police who suggested a restraining order and a German Shepherd. Thank God Linda was stable. She penciled their dates on her calendar and had orgasms that were so quiet he sometimes had to ask.

"Come on down," the woman said.

He did not want to climb on the rocks. His gait was unsteady. He needed to piss. "I'm not going to hurt you," she said.

He stepped onto a boulder, slipped. The spray made the rocks treacherous.

"It's easier barefoot."

He leaned over, balancing on the balls of his feet. The alcohol shifted his fulcrum to his shoulders. He felt foolish, clumsy. His Docksiders barely measured up to the task. If he fell, he would bash his head on the rocks. He wondered whether the woman would help him. He could have benefited from a full moon.

Woozy, scooting like a turtle, he stopped just below her. Her dress blew up. She pressed it down against her thighs. He expected her to howl like a wolf. The setting was that surreal. He wondered if his drink had been spiked. Maybe he was hallucinating.

"Put your hands over your ears," she said, cupping her ears.

He put his hands over his ears.

"Hear it," she said.

He heard the sound the wind makes when it blows.

"It's the wee children," she said. "Lost in the sea. Crying for their mothers. Do you understand?"

"You shouldn't be out here," he said.

"I'm fine."

"It's not safe. You could get hurt."

"So chivalrous."

He felt uneasy. Carl needed a foundation under his feet. He wasn't the type to take risks.

"I gotta go."

He crept backwards, slipped and scraped his knee. He dug his nails into the saw grass, avoiding disaster. He lifted his pants to keep the blood from staining his jeans. He limped to his condo.

From the porch, he stared at the windbreak, the spooky polar caps of the waves. He thought about phoning the police; but since when was being weird a crime?

He called Linda and got her recording. It was after midnight. Linda should have been home. He stopped the kaleidoscope of progressing images: Linda strangled with a telephone cord, Linda, hips gyrating, atop some State page in bed.



He sat on the chintzy plastic porch furniture and listened to the splashing waves. He hoped the woman had climbed down safely. With so much erosion, when the tide came in, the shore disappeared. A boat patrolled, its powerful searchlight creating a diaphanous emerald circle, searching for something.

He admired the local fishermen. When he met them on the pier—crusty, haggard, skin tattooed by sun and toil, salt secreting from their pores, the tough neck and biceps and nonchalance—men and a few women who believed they were better than you because they'd exacted a truce with the Deep, the kind of knowledge only those who risked



their lives while working could understand. As they entered the bar, patrons moved to the sides. Their swagger was like a lawman fighting alone against the gangs in the West.

That night Carl dreamed. When Carl awoke, he remembered only the residuals—fish and knives and an edginess that made him sense something bad had happened

He opened his curtains, felt the fury of a malevolent rising sun, and saw the crowd. He hustled outside. A man sat on his knees in a muscle shirt and cut-offs, holding in his lap the head of a woman. Mothers skirted the crowd, keeping designer dogs and children at bay. The sun burned the top of Carl's head. The man hollered, "did anyone know her?" Carl didn't understand why this man had taken control. He had no authority—just some grizzled, gray-haired beach bum enjoying his chance at playing detective.

"She was on the rocks last night," Carl said.

The crowd whispered. They weren't too sure of him. The question they had was the same one Carl contemplated: could crabs really do

that much damage? Carl didn't want to get involved. He started easing away. The grizzard hollered, "don't let him leave."

Two bystanders blocked his path. Carl couldn't believe what was going on. One stuck a heavy hand on his shoulder. "You best sit down."

"You can't hold me," Carl said.

"Yes, I can," he said and wrenched Carl's wrist behind him..

"I'll sue your ass," he said.

"Stand in line, motherfucker." Gulls circled overhead, drawn to the body. Carl vomited. His blood sugar was abysmally low. To add to Carl's indignity, the man had stationed a teen to guard him, hyperdriven to fulfill his civic duty: dreadlocks, tattoos on the wrists, a T-Shirt with a large tongue on the front that said below it, "Cum one Cum all." Not exactly an apotheosis of morality.

"I didn't know her," Carl said.

"You shouldn't have been in such a hurry to leave. It makes you look guilty."

"You've been watching too much television."

"I know guilt when I see it."

Carl thought better about responding. The kid looked eager to hit him. Considering the circumstances, Carl doubted anyone would come to his defense.

...

A helicopter buzzed by. Squad cars arrived. The police wore black uniforms despite the swelter. Another policeman bicycled up and talked to the man who pointed at Carl. The policeman walked over. He wore white shorts, tennis shoes and a pair of Ran Bans. Two canisters of pepper spray hung from his belt. His game face was a mixture of angst and aggression. Something they'd taught him at the Academy, Carl figured. He had no gun, just a holstered Taser.

"Your name," he said, matter-of-fact.

"I haven't done anything. I need to go."

"You can answer here, or we can take a ride to the station."

Carl wanted to be polite. He'd had a few run-ins with the police: penny-ante traffic violations, and an arrest for peeing in the parking lot at Ruby Tuesday's. He didn't know the bushes were in view of a charismatic youth group from Alabama. The police roughed him up a little, showing the Jesus followers how the State treated exhibitionists. "Carl Spader."

"How do you spell that?" the officer asked, scribbling on his pad.

"Carl. C--A--R..."

"You think you're funny, don't you, Carl?"

"No more than the next guy."



"How about showing some i.d. funny guy."

The officer detested him. Out on the street it was guilty until proven innocent, make no mistake about it. "I left it in my room. I'll be glad to get it." He started to stand. The officer brushed Carl's chest with fingertips that poked out of his riding gloves, pushed him down. He decided not to say, "You just assaulted me." Figured it would not go down so well.

"So what can you tell me about the woman?"

"She was sitting on the rocks last night. We spoke briefly."

"What about?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean nothing?"

"I can't recall anything of substance." The officer scratched his nose.

"About what time?"

"Close to midnight."

"What were you doing out here at that time of night?"

"I was a little drunk. I can't sleep when I'm drunk. I figured the ocean spray would do me good."

"Anybody else around?"

"You think somebody did something to her?"

"Let me ask the questions. She tell you her name?"

"No."

"She say anything else?"

"She told me to listen to the wind. She heard voices."

"That didn't strike you as odd."

"Of course it did."

The officer shook his head, frowned.

"I didn't do anything wrong."

"Tell her kids that."

"She had kids?"

"Where are you staying?" the officer asked.

Carl named the complex. "All I got to do is check the register," the officer said.

"I don't lie," Carl replied.

...

The officer left him. EMT's arrived and placed the body on a stretcher. Carl overheard several people ask the bike officer, "Aren't you going to arrest him?"

"He's not done anything worth arresting," the officer said. "You should do something," a matronly lady said. Pressured by the crowd, the officer couldn't leave him alone. "How about we go get that I.D."



Two officers followed Carl. He felt like a dog on a leash. The officers refused any offers for conversation. The sun beat down, burned holes in his head. He decided he would lodge a complaint. He trudged slowly, breathing hard. He felt a panic attack arising then thought of his safe space: sitting in a grove of apple trees in the Shenandoah Valley.

"You should lose some weight," said the bike officer.

"I joined a health club."

"You should go then."

One officer waited outside while the other entered the condo with Carl, waited while Carl fished around for his driver's license. The officer saw his pack of condoms on the countertop. He didn't say anything, but Carl read his thoughts. The officer was young, in the prime of his sex life, had no idea what bodily indignities awaited him. Carl felt humiliated, like the time he was fifteen, and his mother found a Playboy under his bed.

Carl located his license on top of the toilet in the bathroom. He did not remember how it got there.

The officer glanced at it through his sunglasses. "Okay," he said.

Away from the crowd, the officer appeared more human, approachable.

"You knew her," Carl said.

"She was an artist from Atlanta. She had problems like everybody else."



“So what happened to her?”

“Probably slipped while descending and hit her head.”

"So I'm not under suspicion."

“We’re all guilty of something. You might want to avoid that section of the beach for a few days and crowds. They can get crazy quickly.”

“I know.”

His cell phone rang, Linda.

“I’ve missed you,” he said.

"I've met somebody," she replied.

He didn't bother listening to the details: six years down the tubes. “Look, I got to go,” he said, hanging up mid-sentence. The officer noticed the shift in his demeanor. “Problems?” he asked.

“Nope,” he responded. He was feeling reflective. “You know we all die alone.”

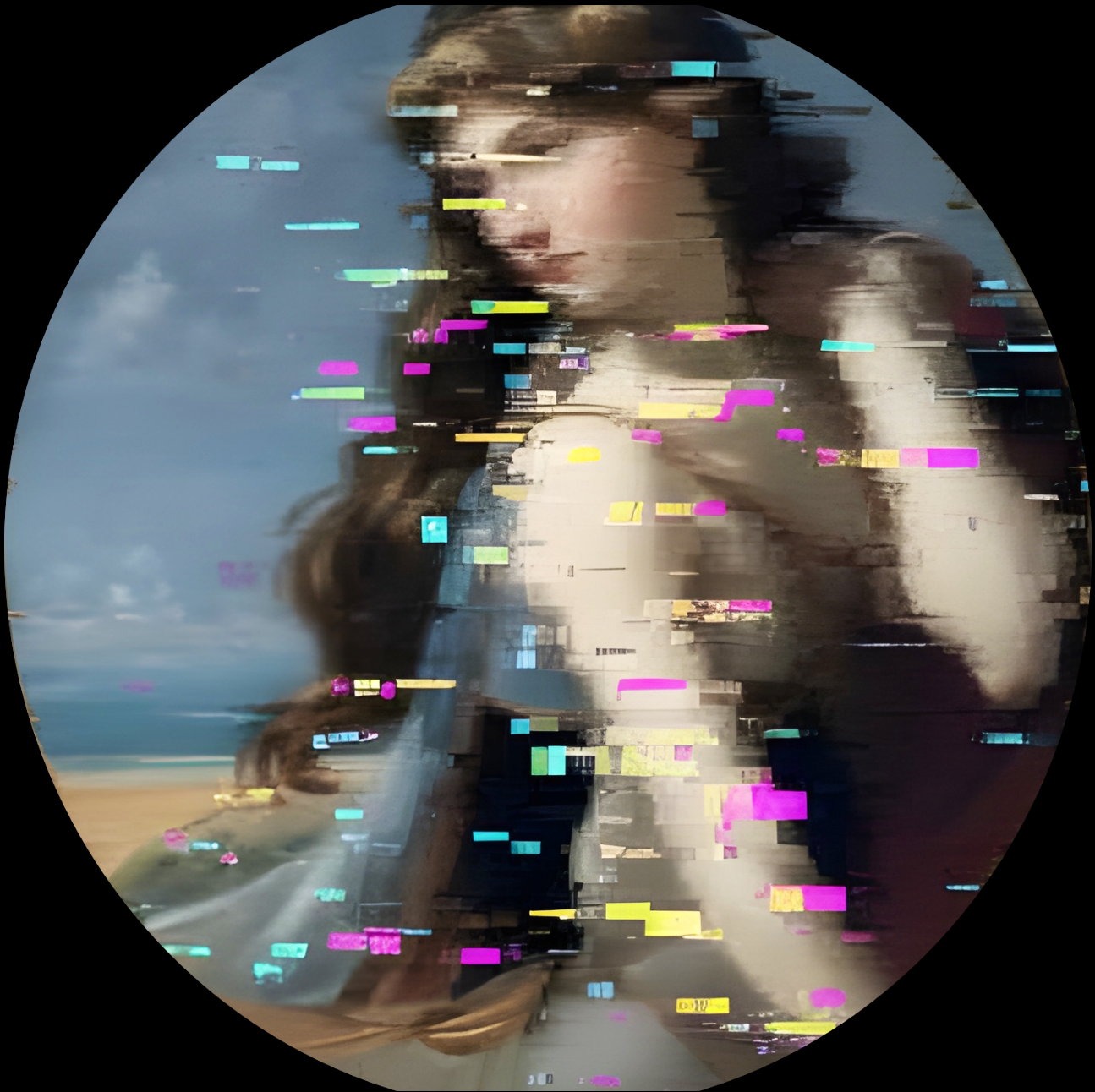
“ Like that woman on the beach.”

“Exactly. I should have done more.” He told the officer the story about his father. He did not mention the victim was black. The officer was black. “I tried talking to her. She wasn’t making much sense.”

“Not much more you could have done then.”

“I guess not.”

The officer left, leaving the bystander to ponder his guilt in a cheap seaside motel.



url: minimag.press  
subs: minimagsubmissions@gmail.com  
substack: minimag.substack.com  
twitter: @minimag\_lit  
insta: @minimag\_write  
book: <https://a.co/d/8bTfxxI>

“The Theta and The Siren” by Savannah Manhattan  
Insta: @savannahmanhattan  
Book: [The Deadname Triptych](#)

“Low tide” by Jennifer Molnar  
Insta: @nicotown  
Book: [Occam's Razor](#)

“~~5/20~~” by Preston Muir  
Twitter: @TerolusFantasy

“The Bystander” by Duke Stewart

ISSUE186 edited and ai art by airport

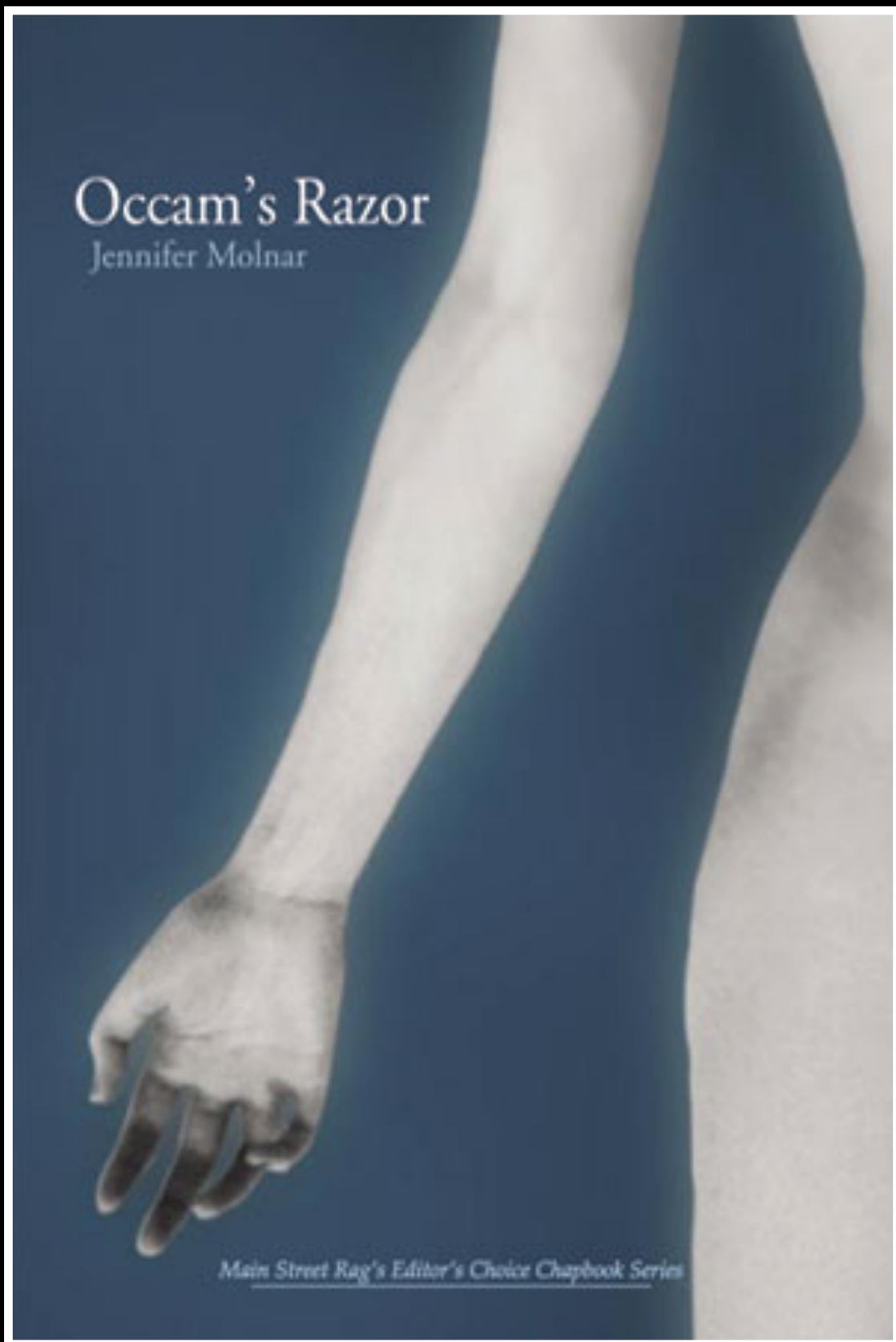


# ads



[click here](#)  
(amazon)

# ads

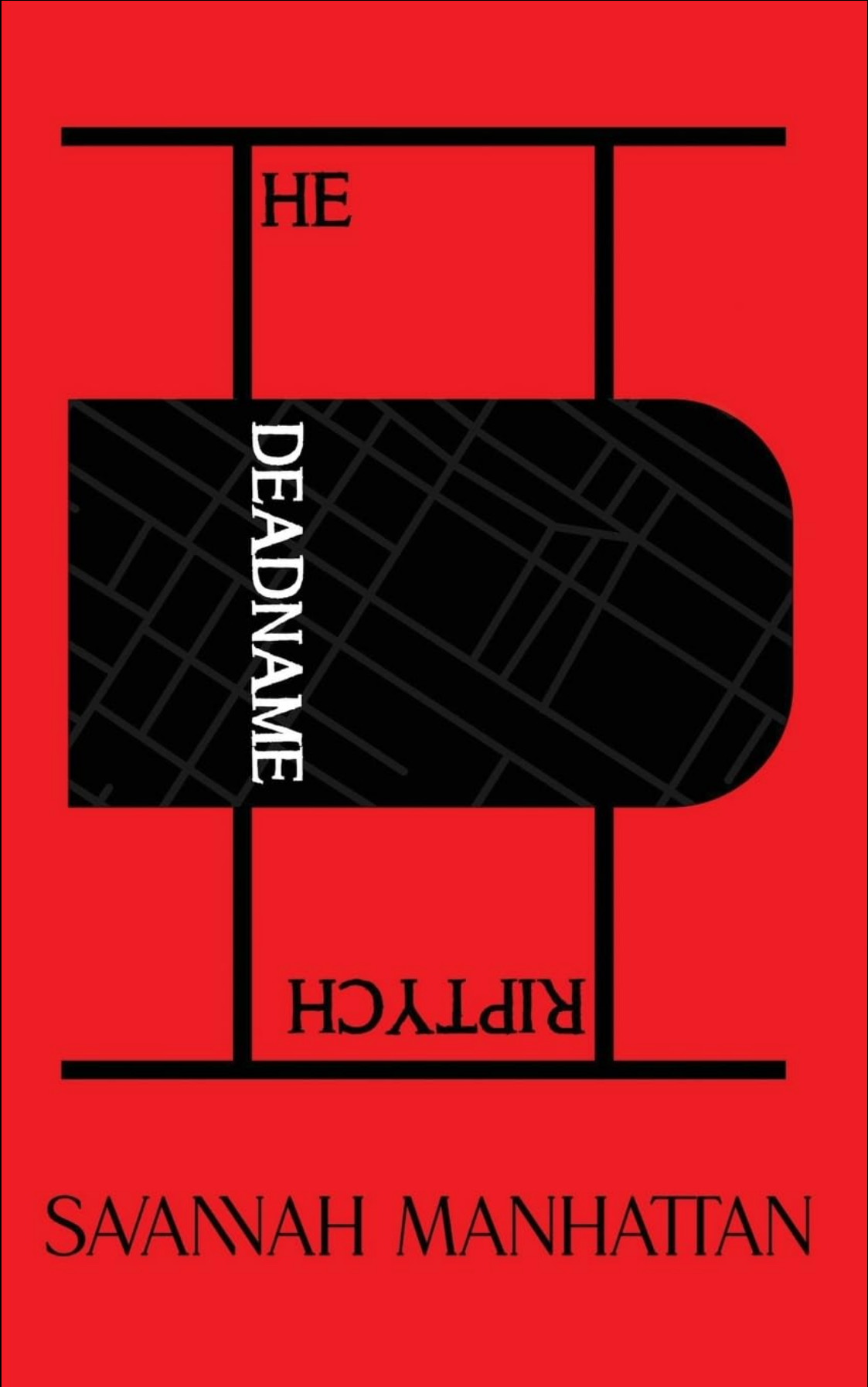


[click here](#)

(The Mainstreet Rag)



# ads



[click here](#)  
(The Mainstreet Rag)

# ads

Chill Subs

Browse

Features

Community

About

For Editors

SLUSHPILE

Support us

Login

Sign up

Get published.  
Promote your work.  
Grow as a creative.

(All without having a mental breakdown)

Login

Sign up

We list 4134 submission opportunities for writers, 1478 for artists, with 1188 contests and a community of 9080 creators who've tracked 31249 submissions. We've been around 443 days and there's plenty more on the way.

See all statistics →

We're building a submissions manager!

Learn more

[click here](#)  
(website)