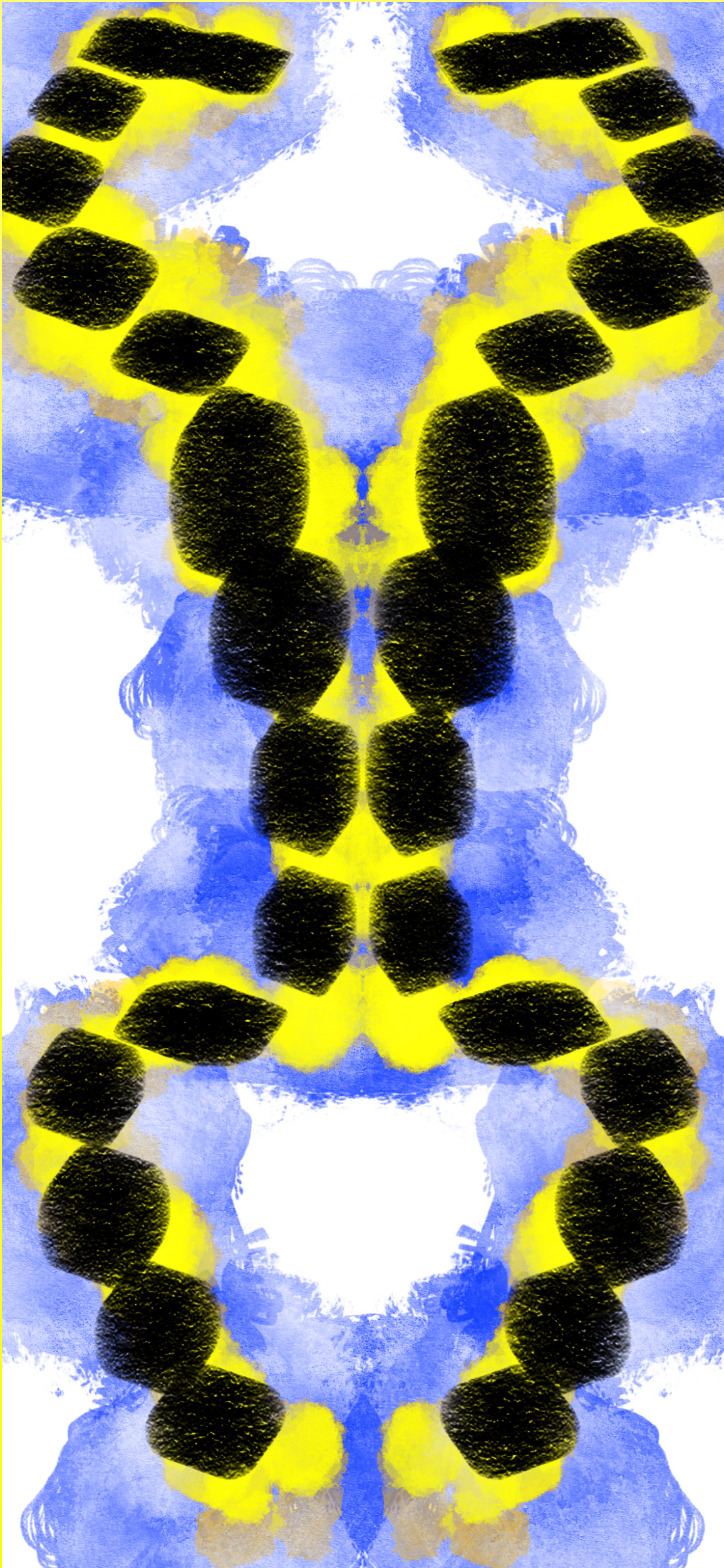


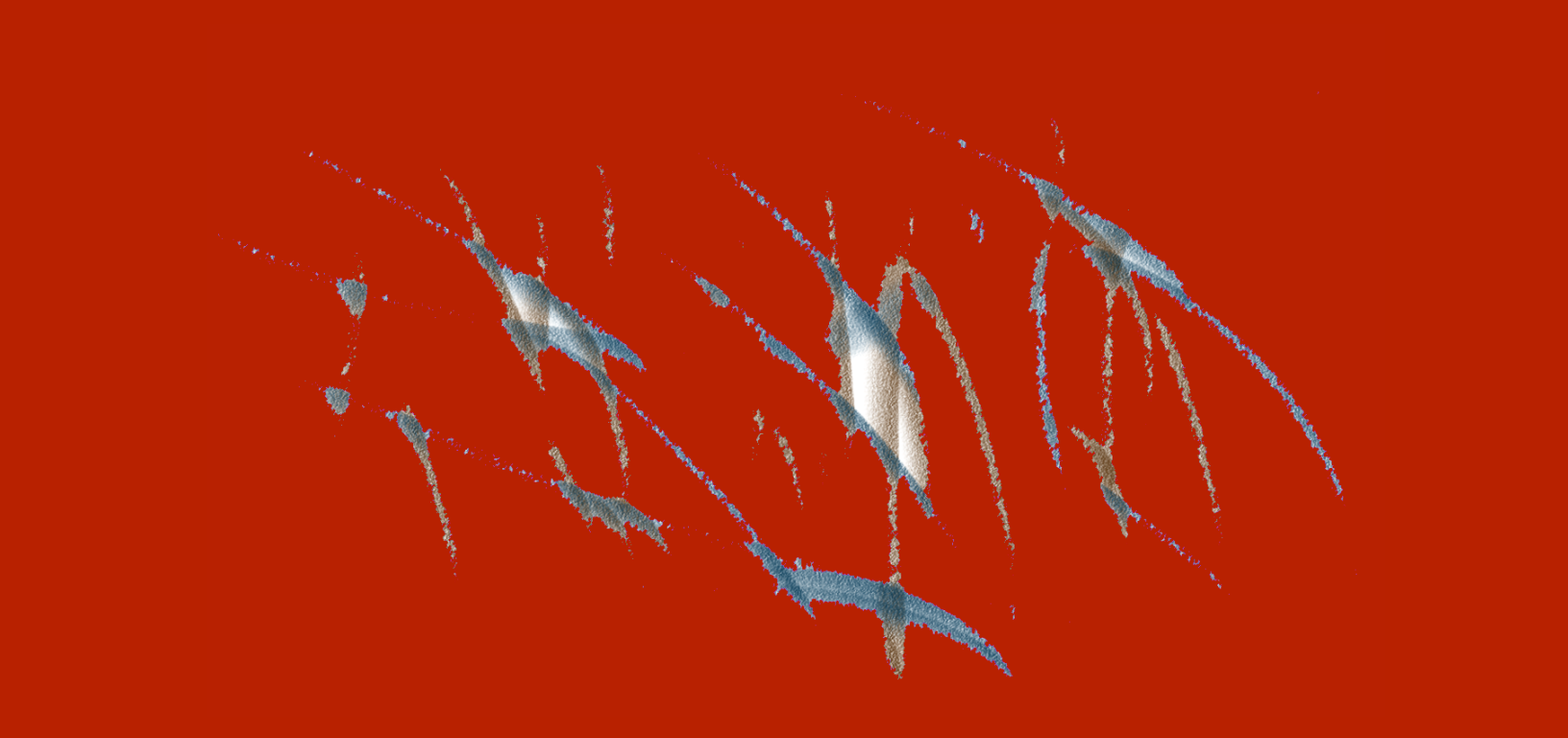




chest lava

Stephen Ground

my cavity's an aching sponge
that spews old bile & chunks of
lunch when hot lungs heave &
squeeze the sponge, squirting its
innards up-'n-out my fiery throat &
nostril holes—coating furry tongue &
blue-scaled lips in tumtum goo sieved
thru the gross sponge in my chest.



Dead Drop

Cameron Beale

Dead. How? I mean, it probably has something to do with that fucking Ford hitting me after running a red. But still, I can't believe that I'm actually dead.

I stand in a colourless plane, I see nothing. The emptiness of the vast space is almost too much to bear. I would shiver if I weren't dead. I always thought that heaven would have colour. Maybe a waterfall or two, gardens of flowers and endless grassy valleys, perfect for an eternity of frolicking. Yet, I appear to be the only thing here.

“Hello?” I call out into the pale void.

No answer. Am I alone? I can't be alone. Surely. Where are all the other people who have died over the last several millennia?

Something catches my eye. At first, I think it's a speck of dirt left behind from whoever last passed through. But then it starts to grow. It expands at a worrying pace. Widening and stretching until it crawls towards me. I turn on my heels and scramble away, my arms flapping at my sides like a deflated tube man.

I run at what feels like breakneck speed, but when I look over my shoulder, the dark spot threatens to lick my heels. It becomes clear to me that eventually the thing will catch up to me.

Luckily, I'm dead, so I don't get tired. I don't need to stop to piss or eat. I keep going, like an undead Duracell Bunny.

I don't know how long it's been. Nothing has changed. The white is still white and the black is still chasing me.

I run. And run. And run some more. Straight ahead, never turning.

I stop.

And drop.

I fall into the black that is not so black when you have been swallowed by it. Inside, I wish it were black. Black is a million times preferable to an endless mass of writhing worms. The red-brown worms encircle me on all sides, making my descent feel like an infinite slide into some kind of nightmarish theme park ride.

Down.

Down.

Down.

After a while, despite the surreal nature of my situation, I grow bored. I dare myself to reach out and grab a worm. Just to see what happens.

I throw out my right hand and grip. I stop falling and whack face-first into the worm wall. It doesn't hurt. Not physically, though I'm sure I'll be eternally grossed out by the sensation it gives me. It's one hell of a wet slap. One particularly rotund worm even rubs against my lips. I would throw up if I weren't dead.

I wish the sides of the pit were covered in anything but worms. I throw my head back when my wish comes true. The worms are gone and in their place is a rough, ribbed bark, chocolate brown and at some points, I see what looks like thick tufts of hair

“Oh.”

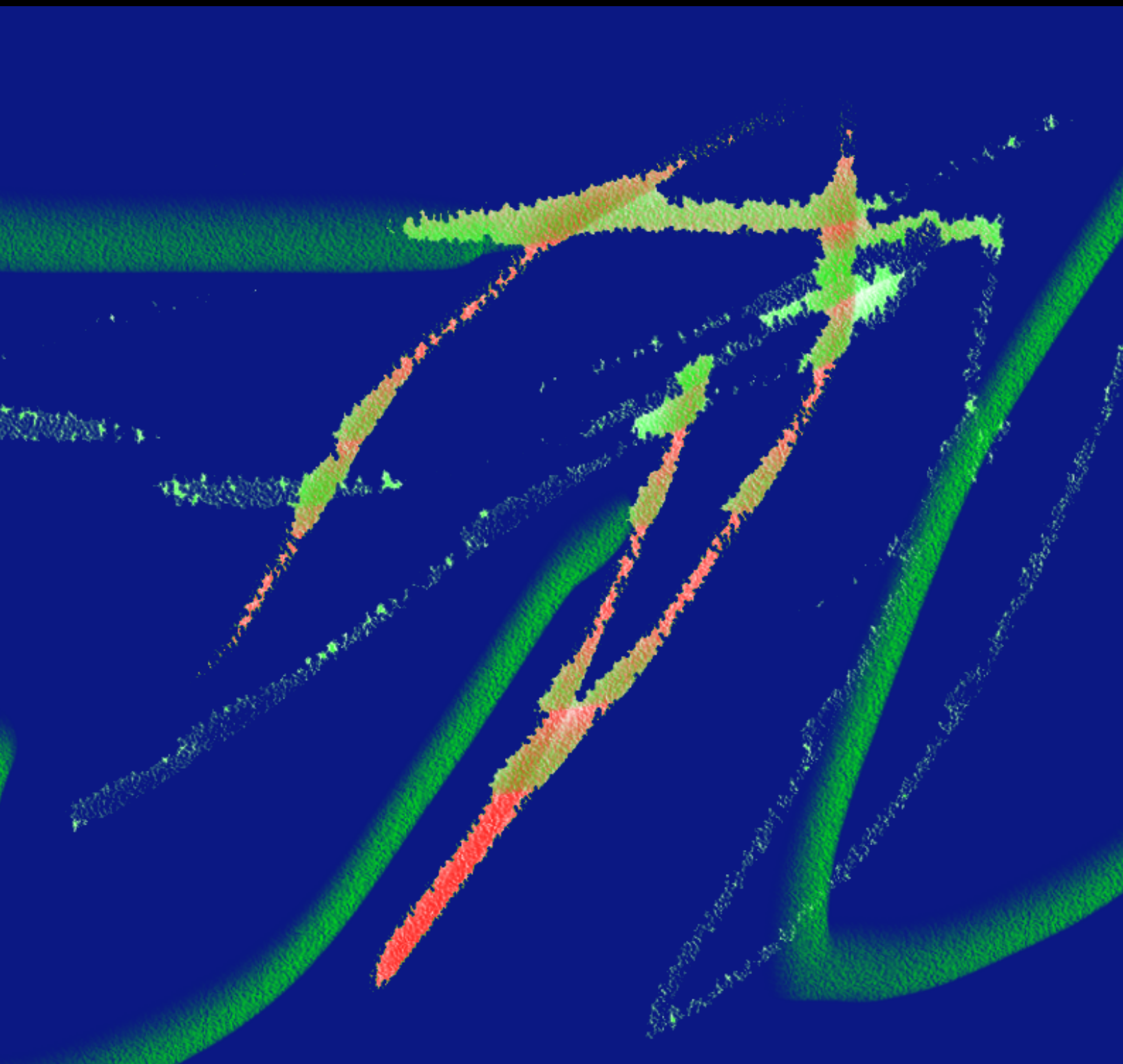
I start to climb up the bark. Hand over hand, each foot moving up over the ribs of the pit with ease. I haven't climbed a tree since I was a kid and yet the movements come naturally to me.

I climb and climb and climb and climb. Questions pierce my understimulated mind. Where am I climbing? Back to the white land above? Where nothing waits, nothing except a lonely existence. So why am I climbing? Should I climb? Or...

I let go.

The up I know. Down is where the mystery is. If there are others, if there is a paradise, it is down there.

I let the pit swallow me, not knowing what lies within its stomach.



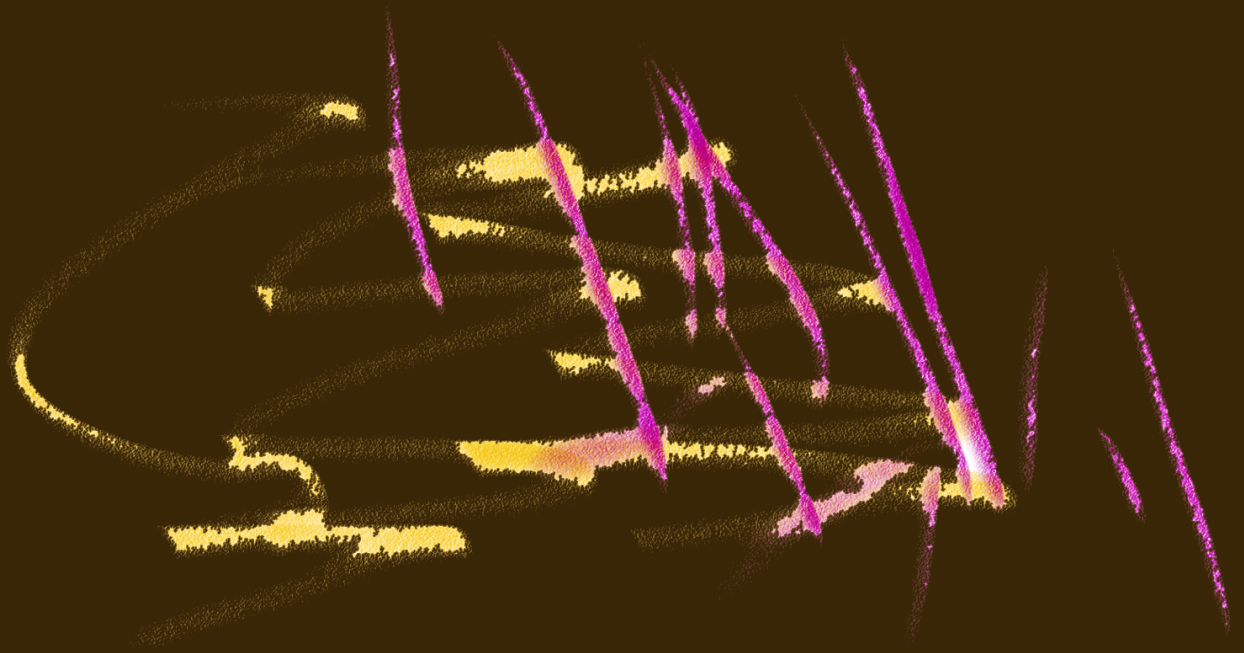


wormfood

Floyd Largent

Lift the spade when I decay
to wall me up in loving earth,
uncoffined,
open in death as I was in life.
If the worms can love me, then
good for them.

Life is too short and death is too long
to fret about the waxen perfection of your flesh,
or the seaworthiness of your soul,
splinted but fractured in your skull.
Don't worry about the little things, no --
let the worms worry for you,
at you,
that's what they're there for.



worms and all

Cassidy Kuhle

Everyone I know is mentally living in a pre-2008-recession mixtape of their favorite songs, tv shows, and books that are helping escape or contextualize the current moment we're in. And honestly? I'd much rather be listening to "Confessions Part II" for the first time on the radio, sitting in the back seat of my mom's grey suburban on the way to soccer practice, than videos of right wing media spewing hate from the feeds of the people I once knew and who claim to have suddenly Found God.

One of the only things keeping me sane during our strange and horrifically violent times is knowing that our experiences are not altogether so unprecedented, or at least, the fears and anxieties that permeate times of turmoil, are not. The middle ages, for one, were brutal, violent, and unending, yet, I can't look away.

These lovely, fucked up, feral medievals provide an unending stream for my chosen coping method against today's horrors: reading death-obsessed and worm-ridden poets; finding medieval monster maps that show how we've always created monsters out of people, places, and things we don't understand (PSA: the boogeyman is not your trans neighbor you absolute nitwit); and learning all I can about the good ol' trusty Peasants War, of which the political instability, crop failure, and the looming Black Death feel very... familiar.

I like to envision myself as someone who thinks about worms a healthy amount. Having grown up alongside the hum of desert wildlife, catching snakes and lizards, keeping cups full of larvae and soil in my family's fridge, critters have always existed within particular spheres of nostalgia and curiosity for me. It wasn't until I fell down a particular wormhole that I realized how absolutely wild they are, though. Whether the extent of your worm knowledge is RFK Jr.'s brain being half-eaten by one, or even Kevin Bacon running from giant worms in *Tremors*, they are everywhere: medicinally, culturally, historically, maybe even internally.

Medieval folk thought about worms a lot, too—perhaps unsurprisingly since their day-to-day existence was quite literally *covered* in them. They obsessively studied worms as the cause behind toothaches, draped themselves in larvae in attempts to cure the plague, used their image as analogies for class anxieties and secretiveness. The Anglo-Saxon medieval death poets even had a particular subgenre of poetry dedicated to inhabiting the perspective of worms.

The word itself finds its roots in the Proto-Germanic word *wurmiz* and the Proto-Indo-European root *wer*, meaning "to turn," to describe how these legless creatures moved, which was especially important for medieval thinkers who did not make a categorical distinction between worms, dragons, snakes, scorpions, or eels. "Worm" was all-encompassing for invertebrates that slithered and crawled, whether they breathed fire or ate your books. Bookworms are indeed exactly that: just a bunch of lil guys that love to eat your reading.

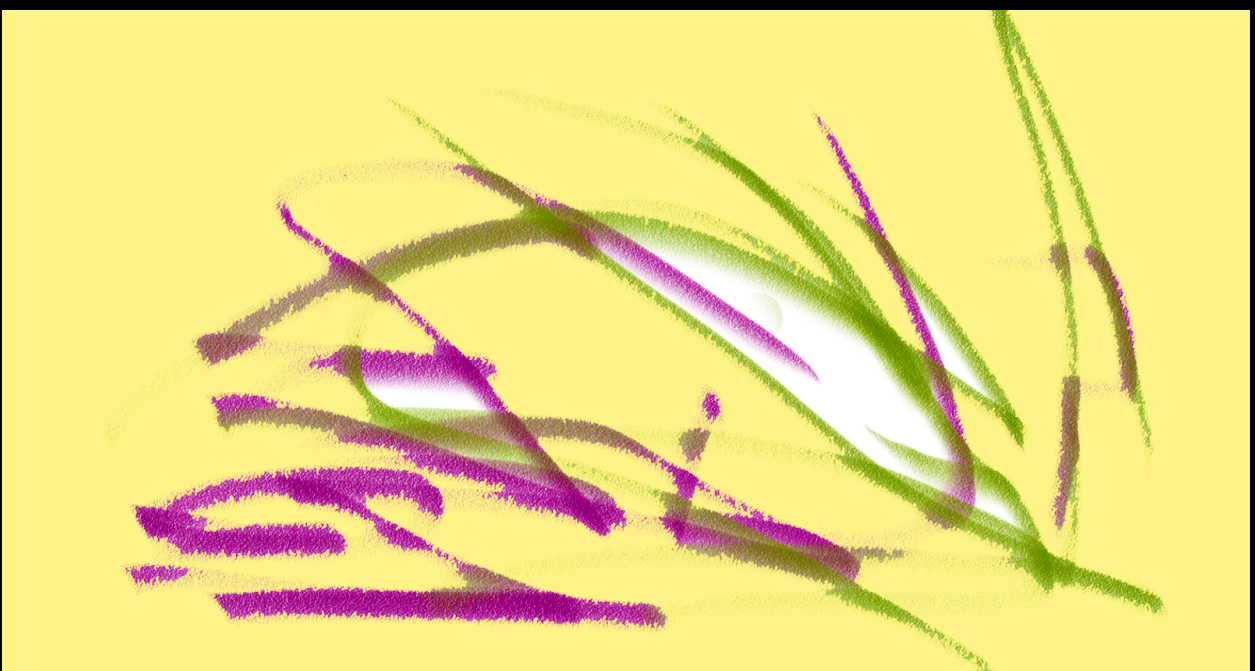
While worm poetry was a subgenre of the popular death poetry of the time, it was wrapped up in ideas of what our bodies can become to a world that sustains itself from our inevitable decomposition, and the creatures that derive purpose from the consumption of it. In one poem titled "The Disputation Between the Body and the Worm," for example, a woman's body and an army of worms exchange perspectives. When the body asks the worms why they consume her, the worms respond that they don't know why, all they know is that they *must*. It's their only purpose for existence. The one driving force behind all they do, no matter how spooky or fruitless it seems, and medieval poets were as captivated by that fact as I am today. They used those visuals of war, soldiers, worm armies, to grapple with and contextualize the brutal suffering they were met with daily.

Armies and soldiers plagued the minds of the peasantry, such as with a young girl named Flothilde, who had visions of demons crawling all throughout her town, in her home, just as pervasive as the soldiers who

were occupying her village, which was deep in a feudal war at that time. It was an unfathomably violent daily experience, one that Flothilde was able to deal with by dreaming up demons that took the place of men. She was one of many who used religious visuals and messaging to try to find a way out, a purpose, and a reason in the violence and death that surrounded them, ultimately resulting in an untold amount of End of Days communities who believed *any day now*, they would be raptured (sound familiar?).

Medieval folk lived in a world that they constantly, fervently believed was on the brink of Armageddon—a world which, time and time again, stubbornly refused to end. I feel comforted by this, by the fact that this is not uncharted territory, that our world isn't ending. It's changing, to be sure, and will likely be changing for the worse for the next long while. Rights will continue to be disaffected, financial freedoms imposed upon, genocidal agendas enacted.

Whether it be by founding apocalyptic communities or reading worm poetry to contextualize our political moment, we all find ways to negotiate living a life amid this daily violence, but we have to know by now that the far-right wing policies that are being popularized once again are not sustainable. It's a belief system that cannibalizes itself. It eats away at everything else until there's nothing left to consume but its



own tail. If the medievals can teach us anything, it's that no matter how much fear is sowed, violence is carried out, no matter how many court jesters are left out to hang, apocalypses are never about the end of the world, but about reform. The world will not end. It refuses to do so, which means that we have to do better to exist within it. Who knows if we'll live to see an American Renaissance, but why not *try* in the meantime? The worms will get us all in the end anyways—better it be in death than in life.

EXTRACURRICULAR WORM READING

PLUS! MONSTER MAPS

Not limited to the middle ages.

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“Song of the Worm” by Eliza Cook

“The Lambton Worm” by C.M. Leumane

“The Nine Herbs Charm”

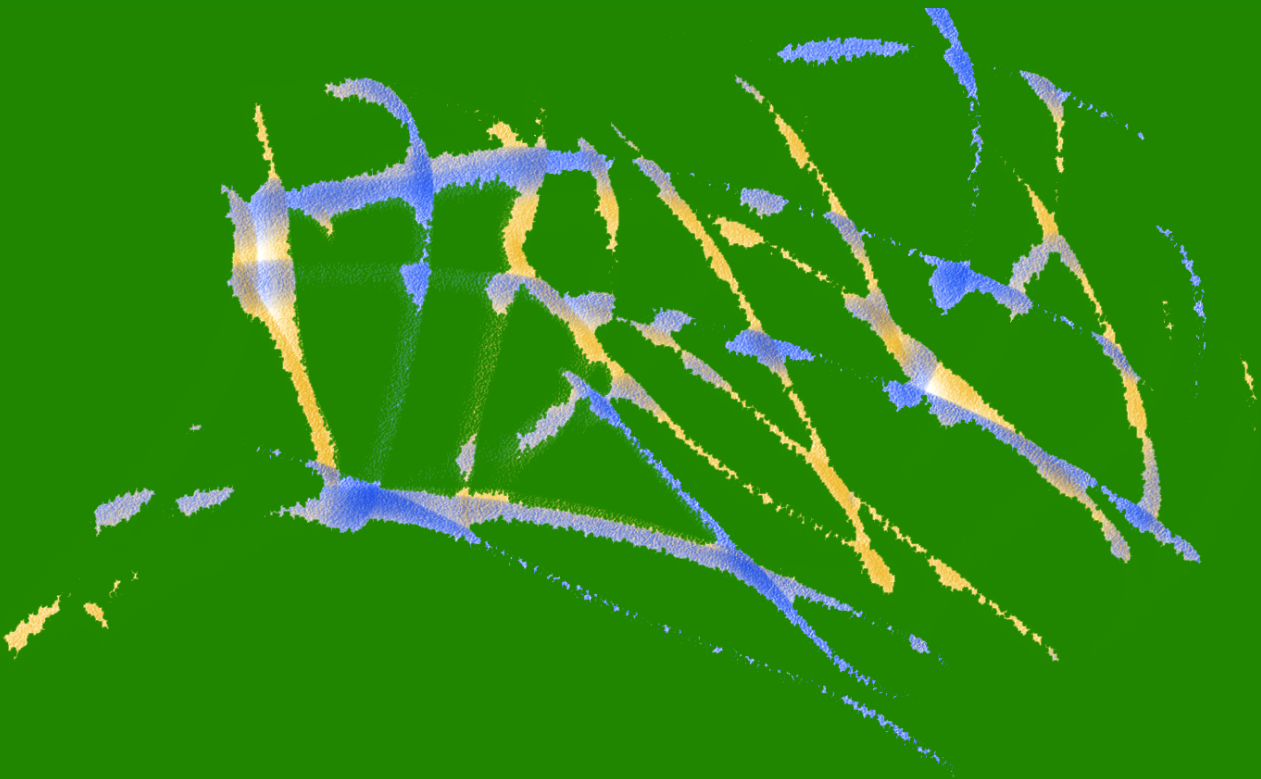
Soul and Body I & II

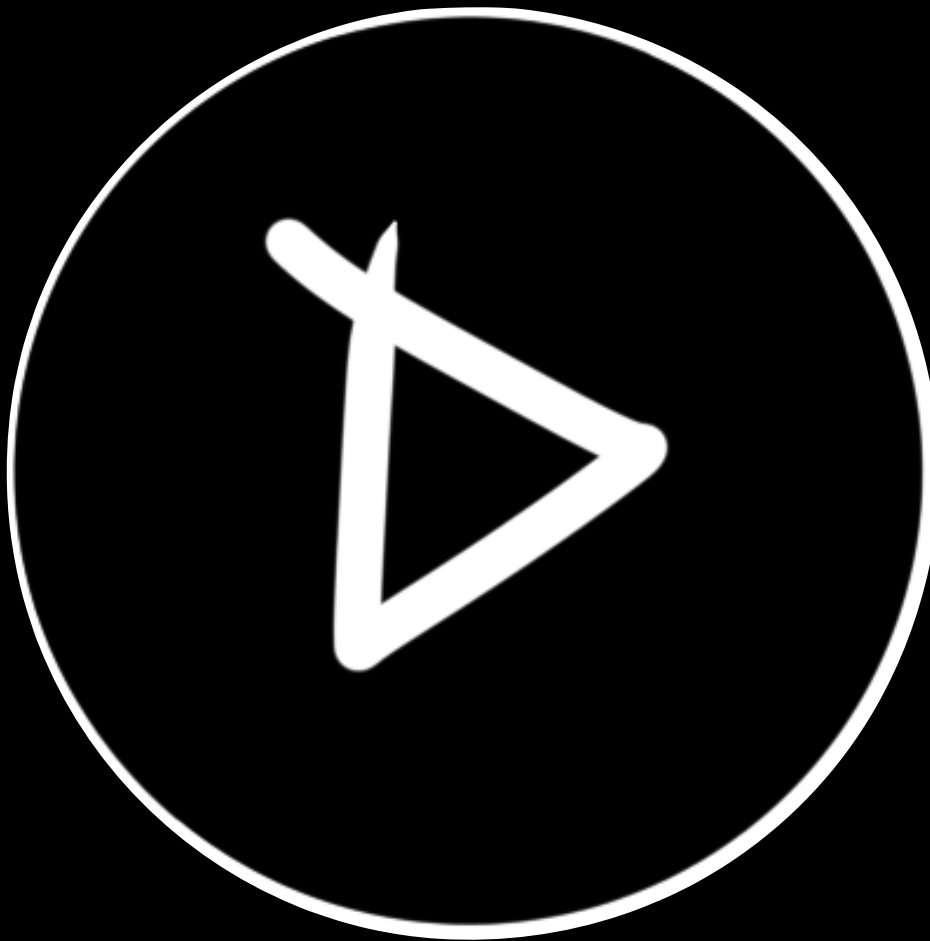
“Maxims II”

Mélusine by Jean d'Arras

Mappaemundi: Fools Cap, CA 1500

Mappaemundi: Hereford, CA 1300





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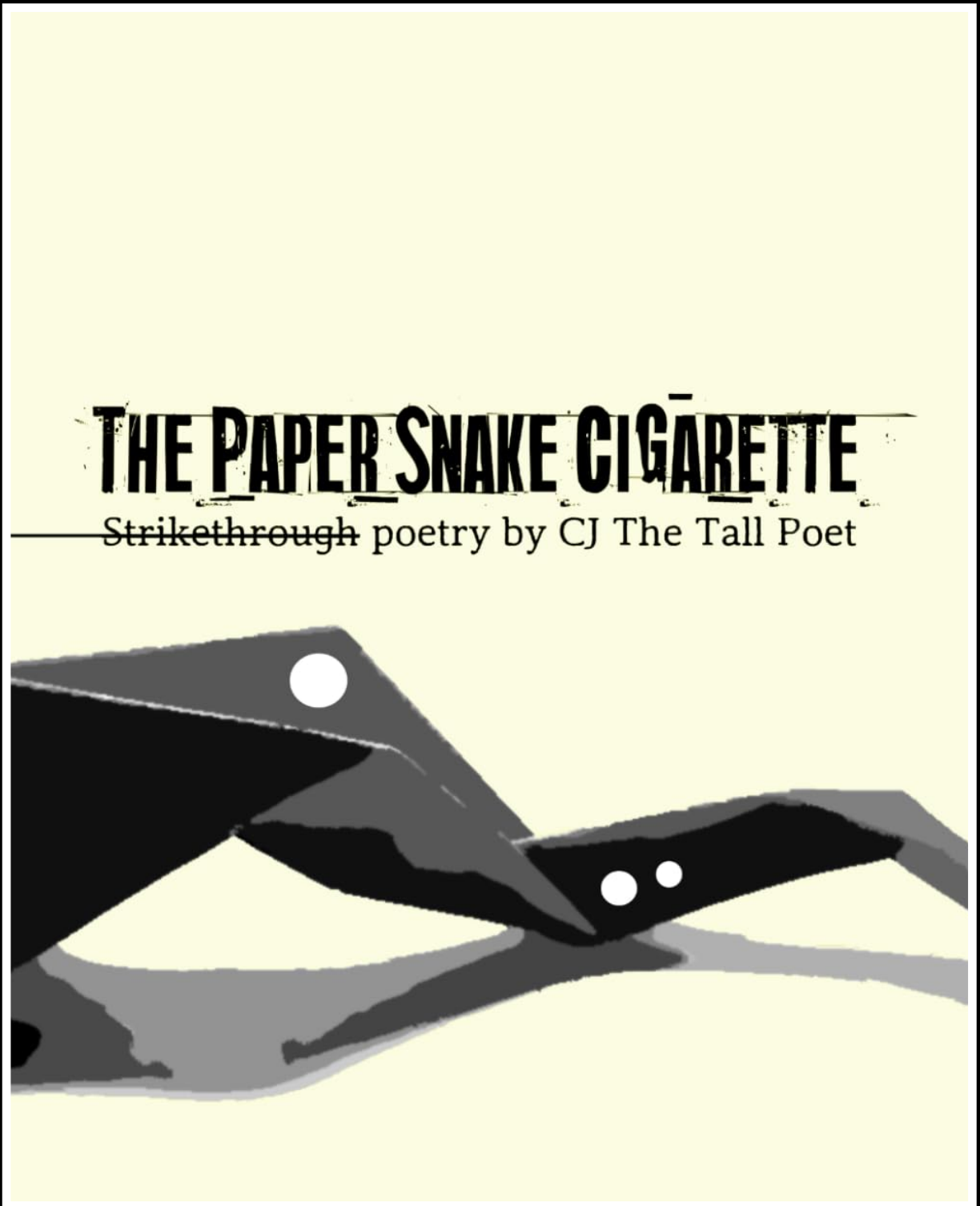
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Webstie: <https://www.cameronbeale.com/>

“wormfood” by Floyd Largent

“worms and all” by Cassidy Kuhle
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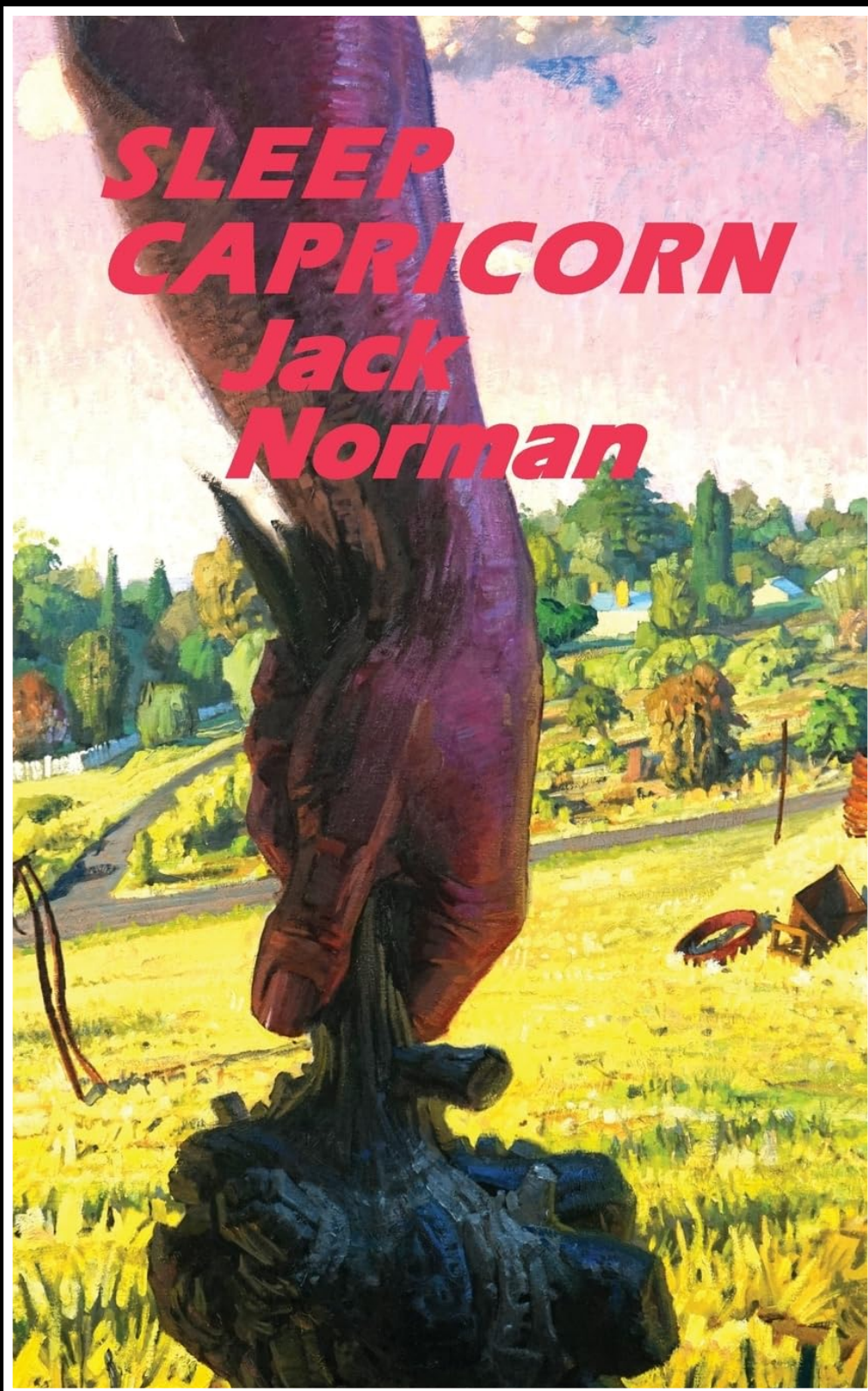
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