

miniMAG

issue219

paragon child

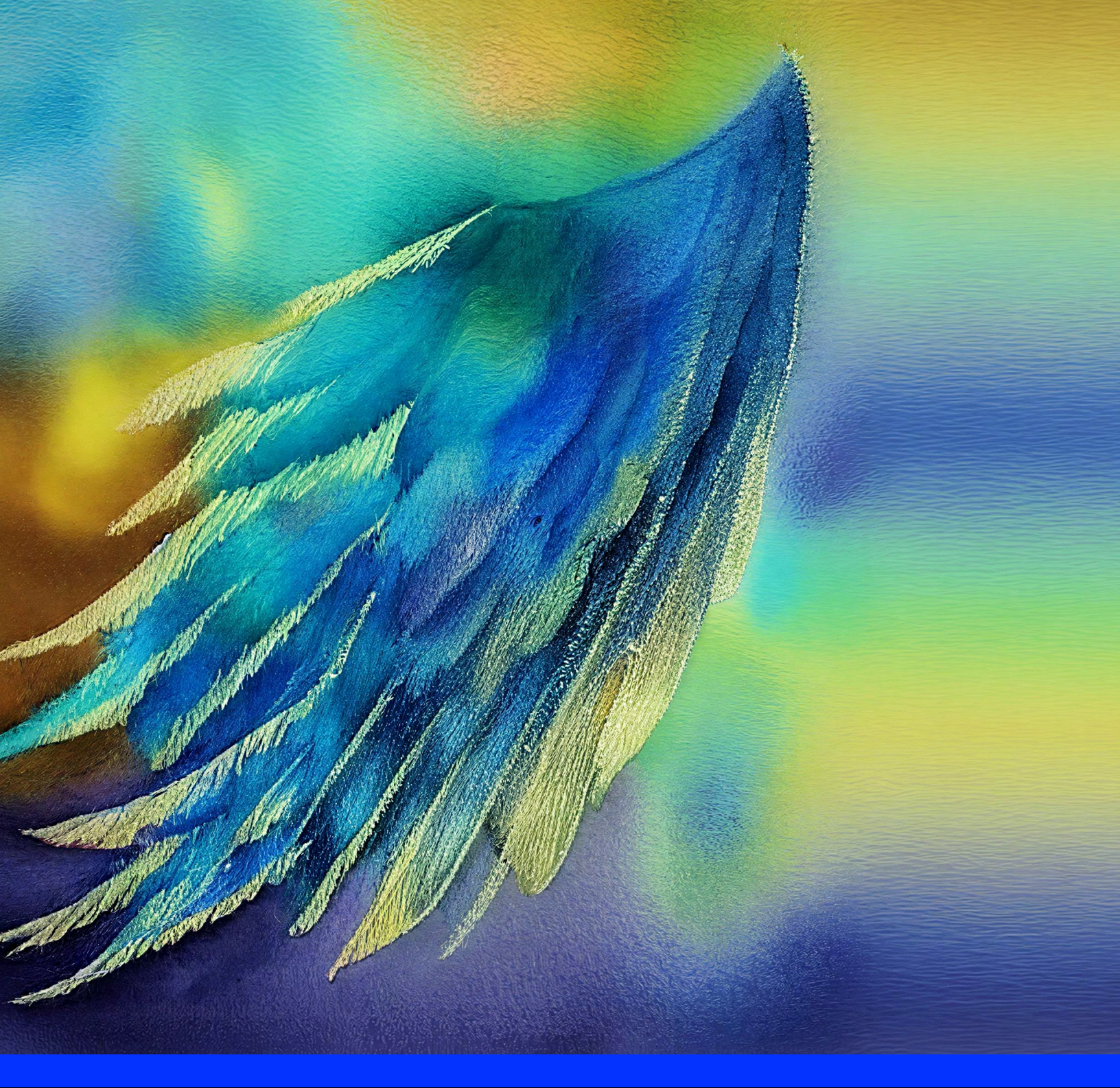




Hobart, Shower

Jack Norman

That's her frame that's so slight,
and nearly making me cry.
We don't want to get out yet.
It's freezing on the other side.
Gradually, since I knew she wouldn't notice,
I turned the cold water off, and
now it's hot beyond advice.
Behind a curtain of steam,
she plays games with soap, mum's pumice,
repeating lines I've said in anger.



Unnamed Blueberry

Gali Tym

We had you, but we lost you...
Filled with wonder, hope, and bliss.
We never got to see you bloom,
Or feel the sweetness of your kiss.

You were our blueberry inside my tummy,
A tiny fruit we longed to meet.
No name yet, no heartbeat...
Only dreams so tender and sweet.

Plans for tomorrow faded in a second,
Tears and grief washed over me.
My heart lay broken beneath the sorrow,
Thank God you stood beside me.



Dim Little Stars

John Brady

Early evening on a Saturday a few days before Christmas and baggage claim was full. Young parents with fussy infants. Older parents with surly tweens. Grandparents on their way to their children who had their own fussy infants or surly tweens or some combination of the two. And the full spectrum of university students home for the holidays. From the graduate students and upperclassmen with years of winter breaks under their belts already calculating the exact quantity of minutes they needed to invest in family interactions meeting minimum standards of quality to ensure the continued deposits of tuition and fees into their accounts. To the freshmen like Peter, home for the first time after a semester's worth of freedom, a freedom that had until touchdown been a source of elation and wonder but now gave rise to worried questions. How easily would they slip back into the grooves of family life? And how much did they want to? Bundled up in puffy jackets and thick winter coats against the cold that waited for them on the other side of the sliding doors, they all together—youngest to oldest—looked like a colony of impatient sea lions as they jostled for position around the carousel.

“Second busiest travel day of the year,” Peter's father observed to his family and anyone else in earshot. “Look at this crowd. It's true.”

Peter was quite sure it was not true and was deciding if it was worth it to say so when he glimpsed his duffel slide down the chute and onto

the conveyer. He pushed forward, wriggling toward his quarry. His sister, Mary, followed in his wake.

As he looped his hand through the duffel's straps and hefted it off the belt, Mary said, "Mom knows." And then she paused like that was sufficient information and Peter would clearly know what his mom knew.

Holding the heavy bag, Peter gave a quick, questioning shake of his head, "Knows what?"

Before his sister could answer, Peter's father breached the gaggle of travelers. "Come on, you two. Stop gabbing. I want to get on the road. That's the best way to beat the traffic. Get on the road early, leaving yourself plenty of time to get to your destination, so you don't have to rush," he added, offering it as a statement to his children and as advice freely given to those nearby.

Following their father, Peter turned back to his sister, mouthing, "Knows what?"

"About church," she whispered in reply.

In the car, Peter pushed against his brother Phillip's leg. "You're on my side!"

"Am not," and Phillip pushed back with more force than Peter expected. He was getting stronger, Peter thought. "Are too," he replied. And then punched Phillip in the leg harder than usual.

"Stop it, you two," Mary said, and then looking at Peter, "Aren't you in college?"

"Whatever their age, children, when they come together in family situations, tend to revert to tried-and-true roles," Peter intoned. "As a college student, I learned that in intro psyche," and then he whipped off his wool hat and threw it at Mary.

Mary took off her own hat, put it in her lap, and then handed Peter's back to him.

"Thank you, Little Miss Serious," he said. She *was* awfully serious. There had been no big hug and peal of delight at the airport as he expected. Just a shy little wave. Made him feel like a stranger. He remembered the last few days before he left. She flitted in and out of his room as he packed, speculating about his roommate and how delicious or horrible the dorm food would be. She had peppered him with questions. Now, not a one. Maybe they'd come later once they were home and out of earshot of their parents. He had some questions himself. Was she dating? Was she keeping her grades up? Did anyone ever ask about him?

Peter made an elaborate show of taking his coat off, pressing against Phillip, brushing his arm roughly against his face, and enjoying both his squawks of protest and Mary's sighs of exasperation. He added the coat to the sedimentary layers of outerwear settling on their laps as the car heated up.

"Dad," Mary pleaded, "Turn down the heat."

Impervious to high temps, their father still wore his coat and gloves. His only concession to the car's increasing toastiness had been to push his hat back off of his forehead. "It's below zero out there. If I turn down the heat, the windshield will frost up. If the windshield frosts up, I won't be able to see the road. If I can't see the road, there's a real possibility we could crash and die. Imagine the headline: Family on way home from picking up beloved son after his first semester away at college killed in tragic crash because children were uncomfortable and forced father to turn down the heat against his better judgement."

"That would never be a headline," Peter noted.

"Oh my God, Dad, that's not going to happen," Mary added.

Peter's dad raised a gloved hand, index finger pointing heavenward. "Watch how you use the Lord's name."

"Yes, Mary," Phillip advised, "Please be careful. Instead of burdening the Lord with your frustration, you should offer your suffering up to him."

As his dad nodded in agreement, Peter saw his brother sneak a smirk in the car's half-light. Stronger. And also more ironic. His little brother had some new layers worth peeling back, Peter realized.

They had made it through the last of the outer suburbs and were getting out into the country. Peter had some time to let his thoughts drift until his mom decided she was ready for her questions. First she took her coat off and passed it back to the kids to add to their pile, answering their protests with her usual and usually effective observation that she had bore them and raised them—willingly and without complaint—and they could do this—comparatively small—favor for her now. Then she started in. "Have you met other Catholics at school? Do they have a Newman Center? Have you joined?"

"And thus the inquisition begins," Peter murmured to his siblings, continuing more loudly, "Which question should I answer first, Mom?"

"You choose, dear." She paused a beat and then added, "This is not an inquisition at all."

Phillip smirked again. Mary stared out the window into the darkness, seemingly uninterested in the proceedings.

“It’s been a bit hard to meet other Catholics. It’s a big school and they tend not to walk around sporting *I’m a fan of Vatican II* buttons.”

“That’s why you go to church.”

She had him there. “Mmm, mmm,” Peter replied.

“Are they nice?”

Is who nice?”

“Your Catholic friends?”

Who said anything about friends? . . . But yes . . . the ones I’ve met are nice.”

“Any nice Catholic girls?”

“Mom! Jesus!”

”Language!” his father declared, once again raising his finger of re-monstrance.

His mom settled into her seat, seemingly satisfied, the first round concluded.



Peter occupied the time thumb wrestling with Phillip until his mom started in again.

“What parish have you joined?”

As Peter considered his answer, his brother took advantage of his divided attention and pinned Peter’s thumb. Mary continued to find the night-shrouded blur of the passing landscape fascinating.

Peter shook his hand loose from his brother’s tight grip to answer. “I haven’t really found one yet. I’m still exploring . . .”

“With campus right downtown, I imagine there are a good number to choose from. What are you looking for? Big? Small? Some must be more traditional. Others more progressive, right? The parishes I mean.”

“Sure, that’s true,” Peter agreed.

“Well?” his mom continued.

“I don’t know. I think I’d like a church about the size of what we have at home. I’ve always felt comfortable there.”

Peter had hoped his praise of their home parish, which he had in fact once believed, would lead to the conclusion of the second round. He was wrong.

“Your friends have certainly chosen by this time, right. Wouldn’t it make sense to go where they’re going.” His mom offered both more as statements than questions.

Before Peter could respond, Mary piped up and asked if she could sleep over at her friend Gretchen’s house. Like a beagle after a bunny, their mother was suddenly intent on chasing down all the details of the proposed sleepover. The day. The reason why it had to be now just around the holidays. Whether there would be other girls there or just Mary and Gretchen. Hadn’t the two of them recently had a fight. Whether Gretchen’s parents would be home. And on and on until she was satisfied she had the full brief and was thus in a position to ‘think about it’ as she told Mary and the rest of the car.

The car was quiet again. They were far out in the country. The divided expressway had devolved into an old two-lane state route. The forests of the river valley had given way to rolling farm fields. Far from the municipal illumination system of any town, only the porchlights of the occasional farmhouse twinkled on the land like dim little stars fallen to earth.

The third time his mom began, she clipped her syllables and spoke faster like she knew where this was headed and was impatient to get there. “You know, dear, you haven’t said anything about going to church in your letters. And this is the first time we’ve heard about your Catholic friends . . .”

Feeling pulled along, Peter tried to resist. “Mom, I just got back. This is the first time *I’m* hearing about your interest in the denominational profile of my friend group. Give me some time, and I’ll be happy to tell you about my Lutheran friends, my Jewish friends, my friends who don’t believe anything and all the rest in between.”

Giving time was not on his mom’s agenda. She plowed ahead, “And when we call you on Sunday mornings. You’re always there. Even when we call during normal mass times.”

“You’re forgetting about the time change,” he said.

It was, Peter knew, a lame excuse, and his mom replied with an appropriate scoff. “Are you even going to church? Be honest. I want the truth.”

They had arrived. Even as the car sped through time and space, they stood at the frontier of a new territory.

The coats and scarves and hats weighed on his lap. Phillip and Mary leaned toward him wondering what he would say. The air was thick with heat. He felt heavy in his body and would have liked to go to sleep.

The truth was he wasn't going to mass. Hadn't gone since he went with his family on the Sunday before school started. The priest had blessed all the soon-to-be college students in attendance and urged them to be good witnesses for Christ at their new schools. That, Peter had thought at the time, was not going to be happening. At least not with him.

He took a step forward into the new terrain. "No," Peter said as steadily as he could. "I haven't been going to mass."

It took a while for his mom to respond which Peter didn't expect. He had expected her to get angry quickly. To yell at him. To tell him in no uncertain terms that he needed to go to church. To make it very clear that he damn well better believe he was going to church while he was home.

He didn't expect that she would follow him and even push further into this new place, asking, with a mix of hope and dread and something that already sounded like knowing resignation, "But you're still a believer? You still believe in God, right, honey?"

Peter knew the answer and had known it for a while even if he only still whispered it to himself. He almost whispered it again but stopped himself. He said loud enough for everyone to hear, "No. I don't."

"You're an atheist!" Phillip exclaimed. He didn't sound strong or ironic. He sounded little.

"Such an ugly word," his mom said. Now there was anger. "How could you say that? How could you be that?"

"Mom, you said you wanted to know the truth." Peter had expected to say this. But it was Mary who did.

"That's not the truth," their mom spit.

"What else could it be?" Peter said.

"Sin," his father said quietly.

Peter laughed. Mary shook her head.

Down the road, a truck crested the rise of the next hill, its headlights bright.

His father took his hands off the steering wheel and placed them on his lap. He still had his gloves on.

"You have to have faith," he said. "You can't live without faith."

He said it quietly. So quietly that no one else realized what exactly was going on.

The car started to sway gently first toward the shoulder, then toward the center line, and back again as the truck neared.

Peter realized it first. “Dad, what are you doing? Put your hands on the wheel!”

“Faith, boy, you have to have faith.” He said it calmly as the truck’s lights grew more insistent.

“Mom,” Peter shouted, “Do something!” She looked at her husband but otherwise didn’t move.

The car’s wobble took them toward the center line. The truck driver laid on the horn.

Peter scrambled for his seat belt, digging between the coats and hats and scarves.

The truck’s lights filled the car. It burned as bright as day. Peter couldn’t get to the button. He reached for his siblings. “Close your eyes!” he yelled.

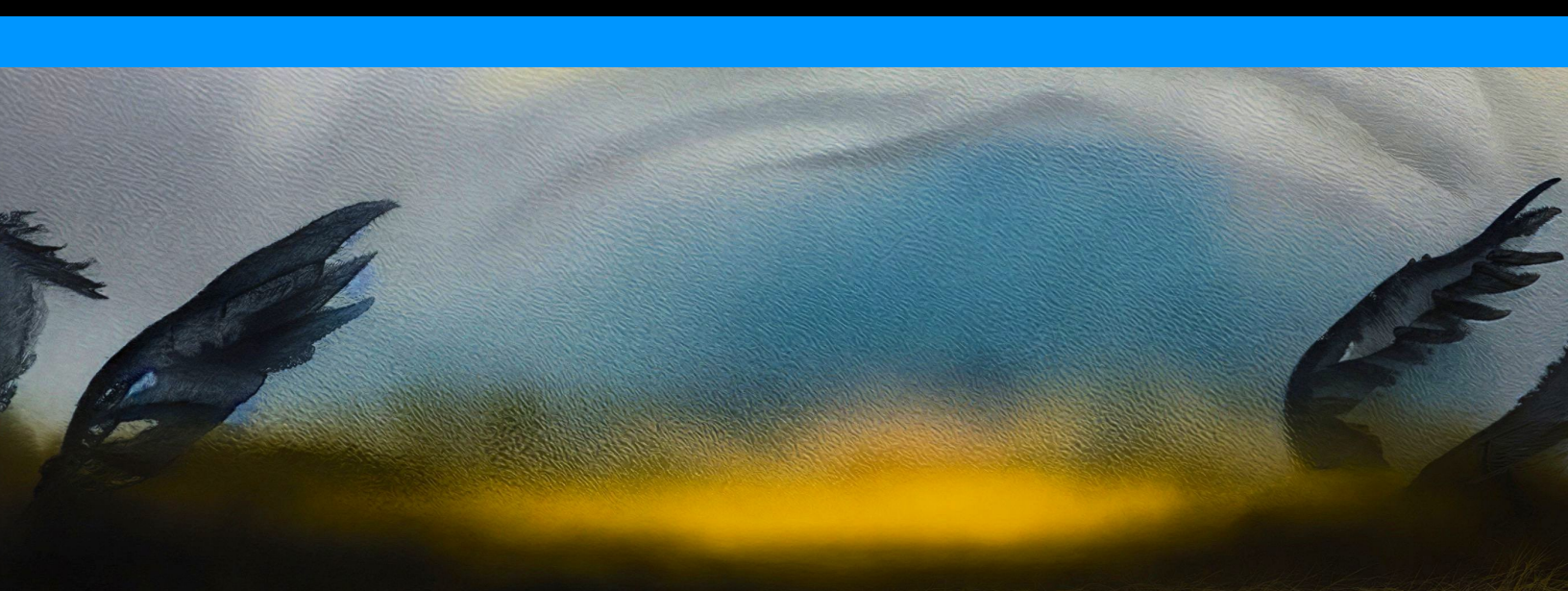
As he did, the car straightened and the truck barreled past, pulling its bright and horn-blare with it. His father put his hands back on the wheel.

Later when Peter told this story, people would offer different theories about what had happened. His father had used his knees to steer the car out of danger. Or his mom had reached out at the last moment and brought the car right. The road was old others would point out. Surely, the grooves in the worn-out pavement had steered the car out of harm’s way. A few saw the hand of God at work, although if they knew Peter well, they wouldn’t push this explanation.

That was later.

Now all Peter could say was “Jesus Christ, Dad. Jesus Christ!”

“Yes, son,” his father replied. “Jesus Christ.”





The January 15th Snowstorm

Richard Puglisi

The snow had stopped and the winter clouds departed
A born leader, Johnny rounded up his posse of Jimmy, Joey, and Fred
With shovel in hand they headed down to the boulevard
Cars were spinning their wheels, while trucks were gyrating their tires

First, they assisted the autos
With a rocking and a pushing
One by one stuck cars were dug out
Freed from the cold clutches of snow

Trucks were next on their list of those needing attention
With the stuck tow truck being the most memorable
With the posse pushing in the front and Johnny pushing in the back
The driver reversed the truck only to lay Johnny down on his rear

The drivers were happy and grateful so back to their street
They shoveled the stairs and walks of the old and disabled
All day long they would take no reward
For it was MLK Day, a day of service



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airport

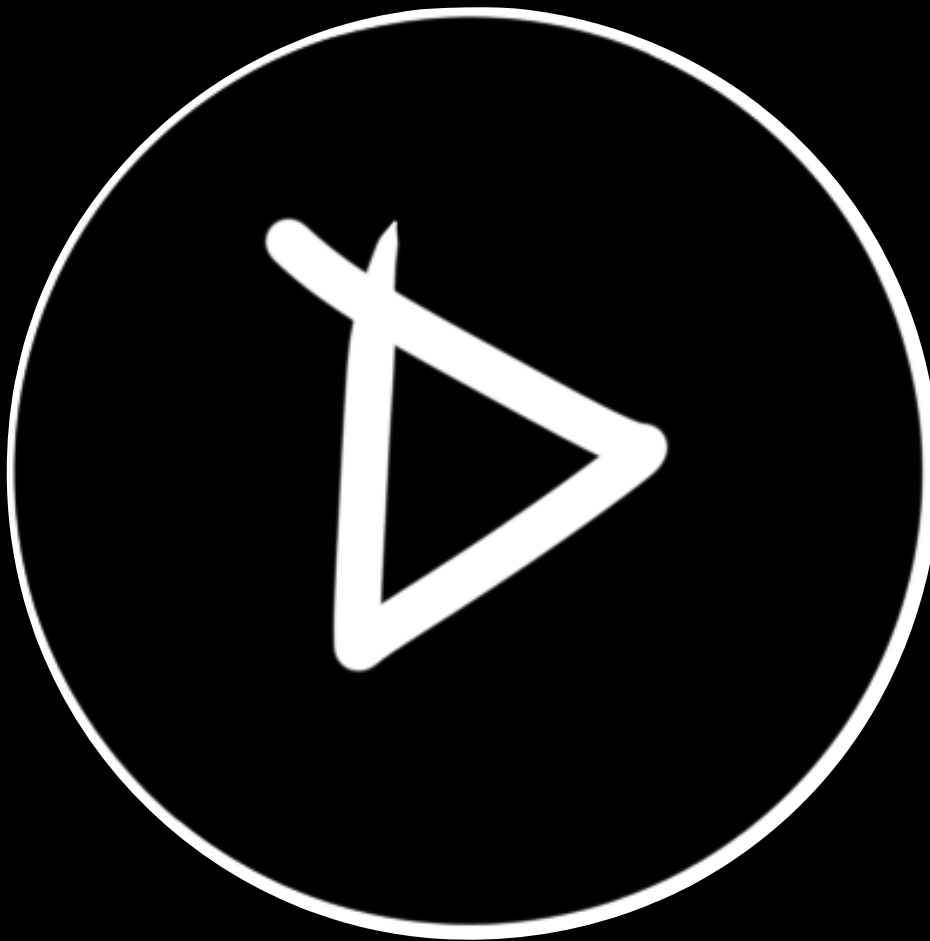
it's designed to be passed
they take pencils from my desk, start writing,
stare at the ceiling, write a little more
stop, start, stop; there's little for me to do
they'll get through it, there are so,
so many things that will trip them up
in this life, hold them back, "teach
them a hard lesson," but that won't be me
they'll walk through that door, after handing
me their 2 essays and a dainty matching section,
and forget me, because it was too easy;
or remember me, because it was too easy
from here it's all on them, i am no longer arbiter
of their future; no longer the guard of their prison
they hand me their essay and i hand
them the keys and they go off,
on their own, with one less thing on their minds.



Egg Line

Pravasan Pillay

I stand in line to Ms. Mann's desk. My egg is cupped carefully in my palms. When it's my turn I place my egg under the eierschalensollbruchstellenverursacher chained to Ms. Mann's desk, and crack the top cleanly open. I remove the eggshell top and hand it to Ms. Mann. She writes my name on it, and then drops it down her dirndl. The last in line will reach inside her dirndl and pick eggshell tops one at a time—this decides our places in tomorrow's egg line. While I wait for the draw, I sit on the bench behind Ms. Mann and sip from my egg.



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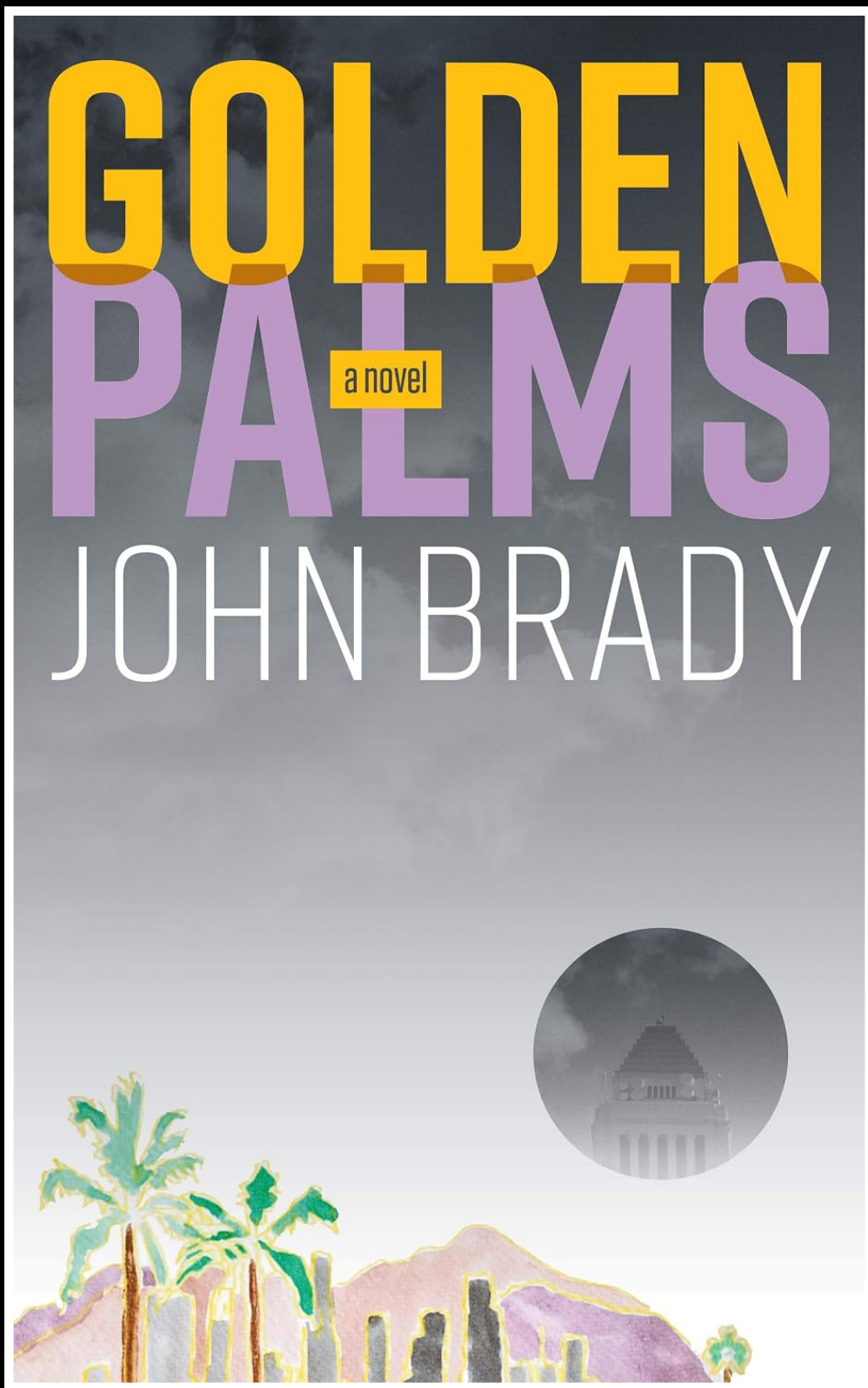
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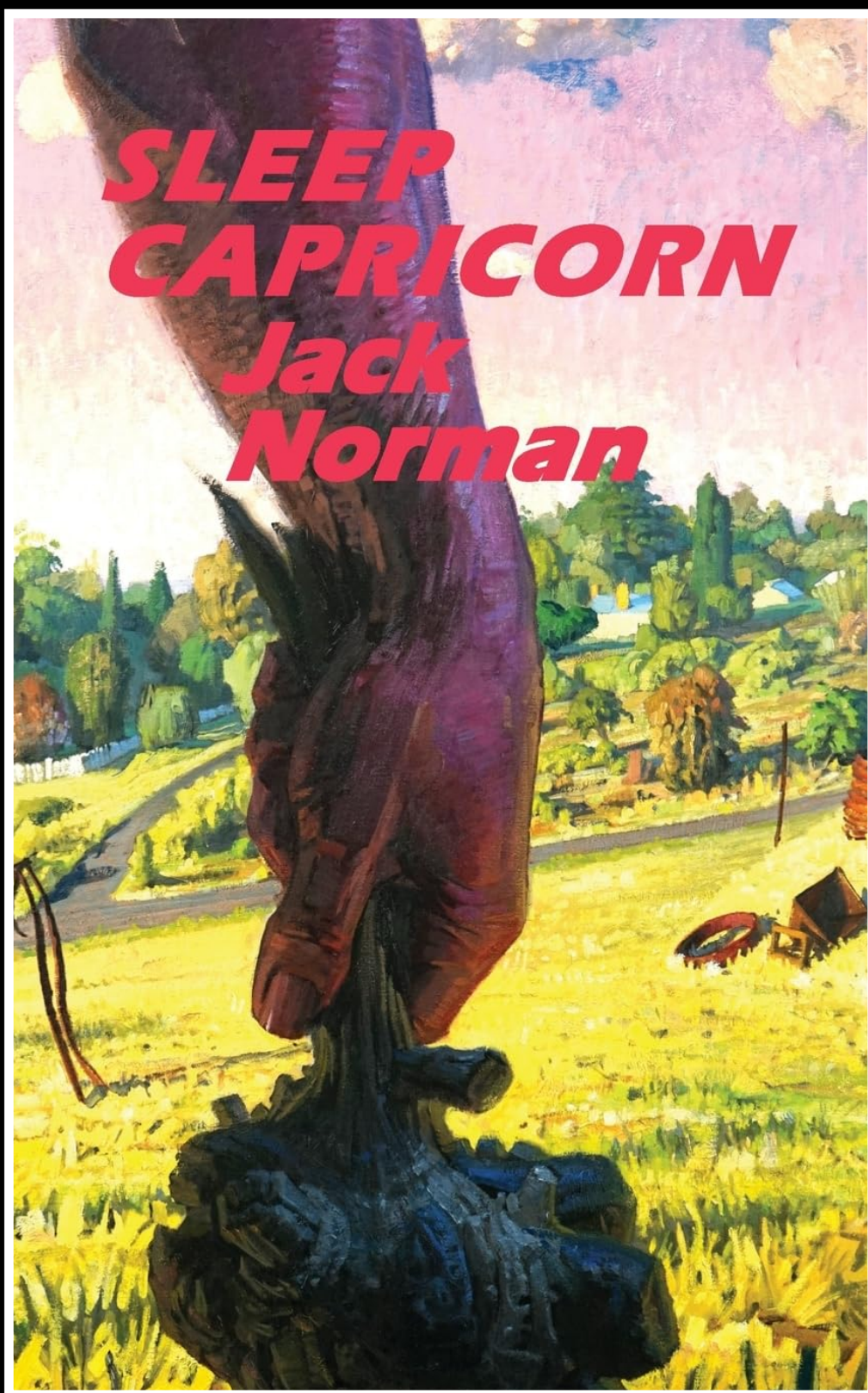
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