



## **Edition III.** *Waves and Paths*

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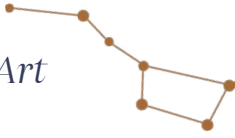
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Alexandra Steinacker

edited by  
Laurine Heerema

## New Paths for Arts Engagement through the Emergence of the “Artfluencer”

In the 1920s in the United States of America, the nephew of psychologist Sigmund Freud, Edward Bernays, invented the profession “public relations”. (Curtis, 2002) Applying his uncle’s theories of the “Self”, he utilized the human mind by playing on its fears and dreams instead of rational thoughts. The idea was that the subconscious mind would identify with certain ideas and products, so that one would consume things to define one’s self-worth. (Curtis, 2002) In Adam Curtis’ documentary *The Century of the Self*, it is explained how companies began hiring psychologists in the 1920’s to advise them on their public relations so that they could connect their products with people’s “hidden desires” through focus groups, advertising campaigns and slogans. (Curtis, 2002) Herein lies the question: if this can be done to encourage consumption of commercial goods, can this also be done to encourage the consumption of art and culture?

The history of public relations and marketing shows that the aim of these tactics was to encourage consumerism and influence the masses to purchase various goods. This can move into dangerous territory, for example through the use of propaganda and control, something which is outlined within the documentary. Edward Bernays wanted to encourage the “American Way of Life”, (Curtis, 2002) whereas I advocate for an increased engagement with art and culture. However, if one were to implement Bernays’ method and attempt to control the masses by manipulating their subconscious, the freedom of choice would be revoked, and that would no longer be democratic. On the other hand, if society has been conditioned, at least since the 1920s, by psychoanalytical tactics that encourage them to identify with products, their freedom of choice of what they consume has nonetheless been manipulated. Thus, it could be argued that the system in which society currently functions is not necessarily a democratic one. Would it be considered undemocratic to implement the methods used in public relations to attempt to change the way society links their self-worth with consumption and direct it towards an increased involvement in the arts? A pertinent example is the fashion industry, where the methods of psychoanalysis have arguably been implemented the most, instead of beguiling consumers to buy the latest mass-produced handbag, they should be encouraged to shop second-hand, which is better for the environment in an age of global warming and climate crisis. For the arts, rather than going to see the latest Hollywood film or watching a movie

on Netflix that has already been streamed a dozen times, consumers should be motivated to go to the theater or visit a museum. One form of consumption need not fully replace the other, but a balance of “high” and “low” within everyday life could mean that the general quality of life improves through intellectual stimulation and the gap between these two dichotomies of the arts will begin to close.

A form of marketing that has developed from 1920s American public relations is social media marketing. So-called “influencers” have been able to earn a living by building a large following and threading in advertisements for products they enjoy and recommend. In recent years, there has been backlash because followers, or content consumers, began to doubt the legitimacy of these recommendations. (Akar et al., 2011) Consumers began questioning the fact that, if the payment was high enough, their favorite content creators would recommend products and make statements they themselves didn’t truly believe. Not only has this factor been impactful for users, but also the dopamine hit provided when posting or viewing posts on social media has played a large role in increasing the use of apps. (Hilliard, 2021) A form of instant gratification ensues when social media is used, whereas when viewing art, gratification and intellectual stimulation comes after taking more time to engage with it. With social media marketing being used in mainstream media contexts, the arts and cultural sector began to utilize social media as well, and as a result, the “artfluencer” emerged.

An example I will explore within the scope of social media and art is the work done by curator, writer and art historian Katy Hessel. It is not necessarily Hessel as an “artfluencer” that is the most interesting factor for this discussion, although she has over 25,000 followers on Instagram alone. (Hessel, 2022) Instead, I wish to discuss the Instagram page she started in conjunction with her podcast *The Great Women Artists*, which currently has over 280,000 followers. (Fig. 7) Instagram is a prominent and highly used platform when it comes to online marketing, and according to studies conducted by Facebook, who has owned Instagram since 2012, the platform drives sales: “54% of people surveyed say they made a purchase either in the moment or after seeing a product or service on Instagram”. (Facebook for Business, 2019) The focus here lies in “service”, as the services Katy Hessel offers are not only access to her podcast, but also to her expertise as a curator, writer and art historian. According to that same survey, 87% of people said that they took action after seeing information on Instagram, for example following the account or visiting the website. If this is the case for Hessel and *The Great Women Artists*, she is achieving a higher engagement with art and culture through the content she produces. Simply accessing the link brings a consumer to her podcast on a streaming site, which encourages them to listen. If a consumer does decide to listen, they may engage with a female artist they had not known before, thereby assisting Hessel in widening her reach and making a greater impact. If Hessel curates an exhibition, although her personal account has less followers than the GWA account, it is still a large reach that could motivate people who encounter posts about her show to come and visit the exhibition. I am not claiming that those who do not engage with the arts on a regular basis would then be motivated to attend the exhibition after seeing Hessel’s Instagram post, although they may be more likely to listen to her podcast. I do argue that

it is a form of further encouraging engagement, which breaks down barriers of access through the casual presentation of artistic information.

In the United Kingdom, 83% of adolescents have a smartphone and 99% of them go online for at least 21 hours per week, which, when broken down, is nearly a third

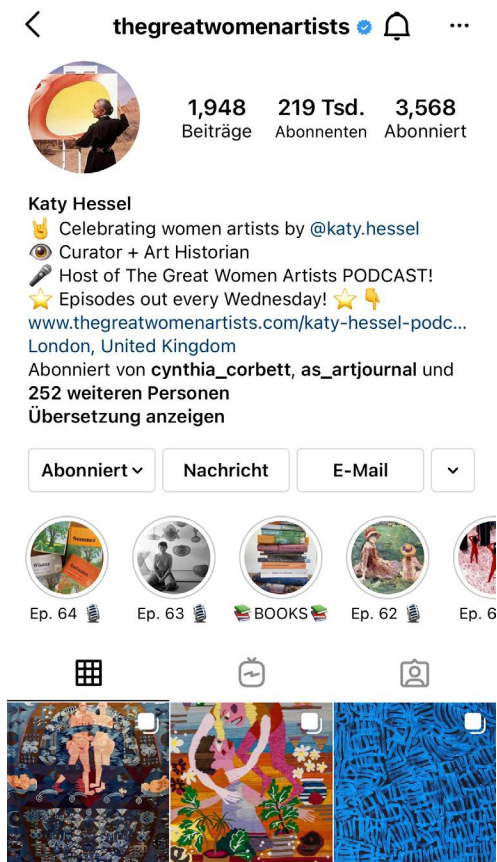


Fig. 7: Screenshot, The Great Women Artists (@thegreatwomenartists) on Instagram (taken on 18. June 2022)

of their free time. (O'Reilly, 2020) It is common knowledge that social media can have a negative impact on attention spans, self-esteem, anxiety and more, but others argue that social media has positive impacts relating to stress relief, social interaction, as well as the development of useful digital skills. (O'Reilly, 2020) Young people feel the pressure to be online, and being part of a community and connecting with friends can be beneficial for them, but photoshopped images perpetuating unrealistic lifestyles and beauty standards are creating false narratives in the minds of the users. On the contrary to this, higher engagement with culture is proven to have positive impacts on education, particularly when it comes to developing social skills, confidence, and motivation. In addition, culture has shown to improve attendance records and academic performance in students who have the opportunity to engage with it. (Brook et al., 2020)

If not only adolescents but adults on social media follow someone like Kim Kardashian, for example, or well-known influencer and playboy Dan Bilzerian, it is not surprising that their mental health deteriorates. Bilzerian, who has over 32 million followers on Instagram, is known for posting about his lavish lifestyle and large parties, often surrounded by nearly naked women (who all conform to the ideal beauty standards of today's society), alcohol, weapons, or yachts. (Bilzerian, 2021) Bilzerian's account promotes unrealistic standards that become goals

for consumers, leaving both men and women feeling pressured to conform to the roles presented on the account because that is what is perpetuated as the “dream lifestyle”. (Fig 8)

Katy Hessel and The Great Women Artists has 0.7% of the number of followers of Bilzerian’s account. (Fig. 9) However, this is an example of a person and

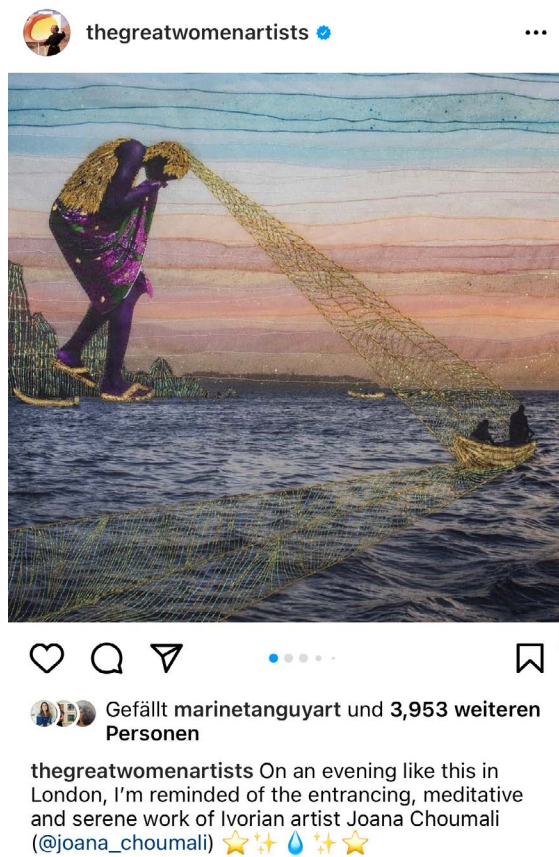


Fig. 8: Screenshot, Post by The Great Women Artists (@thegreatwomenartists) on Instagram (08. June 2022)

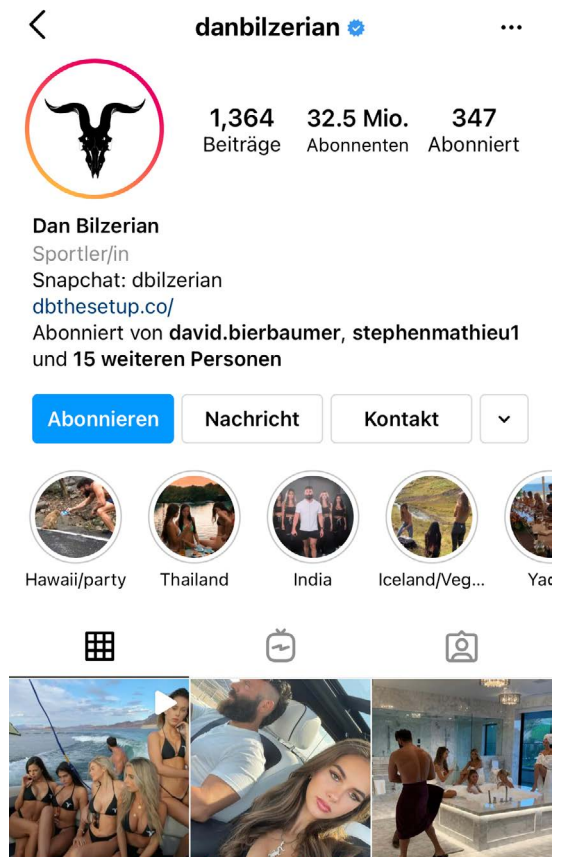


Fig. 9: Screenshot, Post by Dan Bilzerian (@danbilzerian) on Instagram (25 December 2021)

account which may benefit social media users who consume her content. Not only is the account less narcissistically centered around one person living an expensive life, but the content is visually and mentally enriching through the variety of artworks accompanied by well-researched and informative captions. The account is empowering to women viewing the content to engage with their own creativity as well as that of other women through its focus on female artists. It also makes strides in re-defining the canon of the “male genius” within art historical discourse, serving as a useful and didactic source of inspiration and information. These factors will have a more positive impact on those interacting with the account in comparison to anyone who comes across an overly glorified post about sex and money by Bilzerian. In a way, these two influential accounts are examples of two subcultures, one that is focused on lavish living and parties, and another with a focus on art and education, but both so substantially specific to each group that they diverge slightly from the main western culture to which they both conform. The sheer volume of people following Bilzerian could serve as an argument that his content is informing mainstream culture, and Hessel’s

contribution remains on the periphery – a large indicator that western society’s priorities are in need of change.

What Bernays set out to do in the 1920s in the United States with the enticement of the “American Way of Life” is questionable in its morals, however, unlike Bernays, the argument I am making to increase more arts engagement is not about supporting the consumption for pecuniary reward. Instead, engagement with the arts is encouraged due to its beneficial impact on mental health, education, social and cultural interactions and more, something that has been proven on multiple occasions through research in the sector. (Brook et al., 2020) As aforementioned, this is not to force people to entirely shift what they consume; however, increasing participation in the arts will improve wellbeing and intellectually stimulate consumers instead of motivating them to purchase certain goods in order to ensure financial gain.

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Elizabeth Rose

*edited by*  
Andrei Andronic

## Wave after wave: reflecting on the role of water in our literature, lifestyles, imagination and experience

I put off writing this article for a long time, afraid that there could be nothing original left to say about waves, water, or why we are drawn to it – so long contemplated, and regularly committed to literary interpretation have these concepts been. However, appropriately, one of the most compelling and reassuring features of waves is their timeless, fluid, perpetuity, and yet, even in their unfailing recurrence, no two are ever the same. This realised, the following article comprises an exploration into our long relationship with waves, the beneficial qualities they confer to our health, happiness and wellbeing, and the entirely unparalleled effect they have on our imaginations: the latest wave in an ever rising tide of literature on the subject.

Indeed, there are as many oceanic metaphors, odes and elegies, as there are seashores – if not more! From Homer to Melville and Genesis to Woolf, writers since time immemorial have been moved to describe the trajectory of human history through reference to, or metaphorically by, the motion of water. We are also in something of a renaissance in the genre of meta commentary on the role of water in literature. Building on the tradition, perhaps initiated by Charles Sprawson in *Haunts of the Black Masseur* (1992), we can now look to Laing, Lee, Landreth, Tsui for examples of how the historic, the literary and the personal become inextricably linked when connected to bodies of water. (I would particularly recommend Tsui's *Why We Swim* (2020): in this non-fiction/memoir/love-letter to swimming, she explores the elements of survival, wellbeing, community, competition and flow that, together, explain our age-old addiction.)

It is the paradoxical nature of waves – their fluid constancy and constant fluidity – I think, that renders them both elusive to and so deeply appealing to artists and poets. The contradiction, between waves' perennial dependability and unpredictability, that makes them so powerful an allegory to the fluid states of the human experience and psyche, that similarly defy easy confinement or description. We are gripped by 'waves' of grief/hysteria/joy/anxiety. Relief and relaxation wash over us 'like waves'. Our vision is 'flooded' with light, and our minds with memories. Similarly, recollections are called from the 'depths' of our

minds, and we are regularly 'immersed' in a given task or 'inundated' by work. In our motion too we find ourselves 'going with the flow', or 'floating' through life when things are fine, and struggling to 'keep afloat' or 'our heads above water', when they are not. And in our marking of time, we speak of 'new waves' and 'changing tides'. In our thoughts, movement and perception of time itself, we speak in aquatic analogy. In such small descriptors we encompass a vast history and shared experience of both the violent and calm extremes of the motion of water. Water is, on earth, after all a universal human language. Across time and cultures this is evidenced by tales of voyages and their disruption (Odysseus'), floods (Noah's), and parting seas (Moses'), to name but a few. And beyond tales and legends, our very history as a species is punctuated by periods of mass migration across waves. Today, even the most land based among us, use the language of swimmer, water and waves to explain the more enigmatic and intimate movements of our mental states. Perhaps this is because, since we have walked on earth, ocean to oasis, we have lived with and *because of* water, and in this universally understood language of waves and fluidity, we can most effectively convey sentiments incommunicable by any element less ubiquitous or essential.

Waves are not just the subject of our ancient and contemporary imaginations, however, they also frequently represent the source. Several of the most acclaimed thinkers in literature and history, from Lord Byron, to Iris Murdoch and Benjamin Franklin to Albert Einstein, relied on immersion, or travel across and through waves, to find inspiration for their work. Oliver Sacks CBE, the neurologist, historian, writer, explained that "[t]here is something about being in water and swimming which alters the writer's mood, gets his thoughts going, as nothing else can. Theories and stories would construct themselves in [my] mind as [I] swam to and fro, or round and round..." (Sacks, 1997). So much did his swims inspire him, that he frequently had to stop and come to shore to write down the "[s]entences and paragraphs [which] would write themselves in his mind" (*ibid*). Einstein (who probably needs no introduction), though he could not swim, also wrote to a friend: "A cruise in the sea, is an excellent opportunity for maximum calm and reflection on ideas from a different perspective" (Einstein, 1922/3). Both these experiences have been shared by *countless* others. Why, I wonder. Is immersion or voyage necessarily always a catalyst for deep thought? Or is it the isolated, suspension from the present via the liminality of a water journey – between two places and uncontactable by others at either of these – that generates a state of mind so free as to be conducive to revelation? Perhaps it is the mental liberation and vulnerability that arises from surrender to an ineffable ocean, or the fact that swimming, or deep connection with waves, can feel like falling "into some other world, adjacent to our own", a place perhaps, where creativity thrives? (Laing, 2011) This last thought is echoed by Tsui, who suggests that, "each pool is in fact a potential portal", and "when we immerse ourselves, something is awakened...a vital new sense discovered" (Tsui, 2020). This vital sense, I argue, whether one of peace or inspiration, is fundamental to our collective drive to create, and explains why, as the tides rise and fall, we come back, relentlessly, to the waves.

Beyond its power as catalyst and amplifier of creativity, water also confers a whole host of other mental, spiritual and physical benefits. There is a reason why swimming is the most popular sport in England today (Tsui, 2020) and there is a reason why millions of people listen to wave and deep ocean playlists on Spotify everyday, while they work, practice mindfulness, or try to sleep. Indeed, we have relied on water-based cures for our ails, physical or not, since ancient times, with Ancient Egyptian royalty bathing in essential oils and the promotion of thermal springs for good health in Ancient China and Japan. Euripides' wrote that "the sea restores the maladies of man" in the 5th century BC. As Tsui has observed, even though throughout most of history people weren't sure *why* being immersed in water made them feel better, they did know it helped (Tsui, 2020). Today, among other things, the miracles of modern science can enlighten us as to why this might be. Besides the obvious benefits of swimming as a sport – being low impact and highly exacting – the very pressure of water on the body is good for physical health. When we are immersed in water, it pushes blood away from the extremities and towards your heart and lungs; this temporarily elevates your blood pressure and makes your heart and lungs work harder" (Tsui, 2020), and over time builds cardiovascular endurance so that your blood pressure actually gets lower in the long term. Dr Hirofumi Tanaka is a leading professional on the subject of how our bodies move, and age, and is a keen promoter of swimming for health. He has observed how, as well as surpassing the rates of diminishing blood pressure for walking and cycling, swimming is also the best sport for those living with chronic pain or diseases like arthritis since "it stimulates mobility – without pain – and circulation" (Alkatan, 2016).

In body and mind alike then, waves promote mobility, fluidity, flow. There is undeniably a deeply therapeutic and almost meditative power in connection to waves. As Williams, journalist and environment author, has identified, "[o]ur nervous systems are built to resonate with set points in the environment" (Williams, 2017) and perhaps nowhere is this more tangible than between tide and breath – the ceaseless ins and outs, that define both life and ocean. In water, "the rhythm of how we breathe...changes us. Deep breathing research is in its infancy, but we know that this pace of breath is soothing" (Tsui, 2020). And on land, this alignment is recognised in the yogic practice of ocean, or *ujjayi*, breath, thousands of years old, and through which even our vicarious imitation of wave motion and sounds, is effective in reducing anxiety, quieting the mind, strengthening the nervous system and stabilising blood pressure, among a myriad of other benefits.

Even proximity to water is calming, healing. Whether it is simply feeling *better* after a walk by the river, or the fact that, miraculously, "patients recovering from heart surgery have been found to need less pain medication when there are nature scenes at the foot of their beds; an image that includes water [being] even more effective than an image of an enclosed forest in reducing anxiety during the postoperative period" (Tsui 2020). It seems obvious then that, as Williams suggests, working to increase public "blue spaces", as well as "green spaces" in urban areas should be an imperative, not merely an ideal (Williams, 2017).

In all the ways explored above, waves enrich, inspire, describe, elongate and improve our lives. Upon discovering the exhilarating joy of open water swimming, the protagonist of *The J. M. Barrie Ladies' Swimming Society* exclaims, "You need to keep this a secret! Or tell the whole world! I'm not sure which." To conclude, I think we need to do the latter. I can't wait to go for a swim.

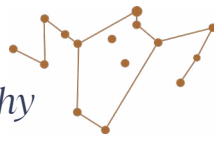
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Sabrina Harverson

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## Sailing Through Life's Choppy Waters: Exploring Stoicism In A Modern Context

Life and its trajectories are very much like the waves of the sea. It is not without the support of those around us and those who inspire us that we can navigate the waves and paths of life. There are periods of achievement and joy, which one could say are the 'high' points of our lives. Undoubtedly, there are times fraught with pain, fear or sadness. Or perhaps all three at once. Sometimes, just like when we gaze at the sea and the waves, no particular pattern seems to exist, our lives ebb and flow from happiness to sadness in a chaotic dance.

How can we navigate such haphazard paths that slide from seemingly positive situations to negative ones? Or indeed vice versa. For some schools of thought, it's about "grinning and bearing" times of hardship, whereas other scholars maintain it is more about "reaching out" to those around us. Whilst these ideas might all be equally valid, it is Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* and Stoic thinking more broadly that seems to provide the mechanisms for dealing with what boils down to "life". That being all the waves and the resulting paths in their entirety.

### **Do we need the Stoics?**

It was a Friday evening that Stoic philosophy unexpectedly helped me. It is a time of day that no one wants to find themselves in A&E. My doctor at the hospital had done some tests the week before, and she had phoned that day to tell me, "You really should make your way to the hospital".

For a year, I had been grappling with an insidious bone infection and my latest scan results were, to say the least, unsatisfactory. I had no choice but to go to hospital for an unspecified amount of time.

During these kinds of unexpected events, you, understandably, end up feeling entirely out of control. Often stressed to some degree, you grab whatever you think might be of use and throw it into a bag. In particular, I'd always take a book hoping it would keep me occupied long enough for what is undoubtedly an interminable wait in an NHS hospital. On this occasion, I took Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, having read and heard snippets of his contribution to Stoic thinking.

A friend had recently lent it to me and reassured me that the *Meditations* were an excellent read due to its insightful ideas of how to live through times of hardship.

Unfortunately, my local A&E had become all too familiar in recent months. After waiting in an orderly queue at the front desk, a nurse will ask you, "What is the problem?" Ominously, I had been instructed to say that the orthopaedic doctors "were expecting me". The nurse in front of me glanced at her computer and made a quick phone call. For a few minutes, I hoped that I was in fact wrong and that she would send me home. Much to my disappointment, when she put the phone down, she informed me that I would be called by another nurse at "some point" for "tests" and after this, I would "eventually" go up to a ward. This vague information of what and when something was going to happen was an all-too-common occurrence. Who knew how long I would be waiting and what would be done to "sort out" my dreadful scan results? It was then, whilst a hundred different scenarios were going through my head, as I sat waiting, that I pulled out the *Meditations* and started to read.

### **What did Marcus Aurelius say about the 'waves' of life?**

There is a plethora of literature on Marcus Aurelius out there, with writers generally agreeing that his main influence was Stoicism (Kamtekar, 2017). In book I, for example, Marcus thanks his teacher and friend Rusticus for giving him Epictetus to read, a key Stoic philosopher (Kamtekar, 2017). Why, then, did Marcus feel the need to acquaint himself with Stoic thinking?

Far from being plain sailing, living as a Roman emperor in the second century A.D would not have been without its problems. This period in history is rather fraught. Shortly after Marcus became emperor, there was a war with the Parthians (Robertson, 2019). Following this, barbarians invaded the Roman Empire from the North. To add to the mix, there was then a famine, the River Tiber flooded, and, what is referred to as the *Antonine Plague* killed approximately 5 million people (Robertson, 2019). Thus, at the time, people were unsurprisingly dropping like flies. (Kamtekar, 2017). It is not unreasonable to say that Marcus therefore aligned himself with Stoicism to, perhaps in some way, provide him with the weapons to combat the obstacles that confronted him. Who, in any capacity, could cope in such an environment without having some mechanism of dealing with the fall out of life?

The chapters in the *Meditations* seem to follow no exact logical order, but Marcus repeatedly refers to the imminence of death. In book IV he says, "Do not act as if thou wert going to live ten thousand years. Death hangs over thee." In addition, scholars generally agree that he wrote the *Meditations* for his own "moral improvement", and to remind himself of the Stoic doctrines (Kamtekar, 2017). Generally speaking, Stoicism laments that "only virtue is good for oneself, that vice is the only evil" and everything else is basically out of your control as far as happiness is concerned (Kamtekar, 2017). This lack of control in our lives is constantly reiterated by Marcus, especially when he posits, "If you are pained by external things, it is not they that disturb you, but your judgement of them."



(Aurelius, VIII. p, 47). His wider argument being that we cannot control situations, but only how we respond to them and rather than rashly responding to them we should first consider the bigger picture. It is also about how we also interpret events. (Brown, 2016)

Bearing this in mind, how Marcus discusses change and time is also riveting. One could argue he was ahead of his time. In Book IV, he discusses how “all things take place by change” (Aurelius, IV. p. 32). Later in Book V he laments some things are coming into existence whilst others are immediately departing. However, these statements do not have depressing undertones. His discussion on change is portrayed in a positive light. He describes these changes as “continually renewing the world” (Aurelius, IX.. p. 50). He outlines the loss of things as nothing more than change, and that the universe “delights” in such changes (Aurelius, IX. p. 95). Why was Marcus “so ahead of” his time? If we consider the second law of thermodynamics for a moment, it states that the universe is becoming more disordered and undone. This is referred to as entropy. Although this initially sounds like a chaotic and terrifying notion, it is not an inherently bad thing. Marcus’s philosophy underlines this with his references to change and loss intertwined with progress. If we knew that things would never change, we would lack motivation to do anything. Thus, it is highly important that things come and go in life. That all forms of change occur, both good and bad. After all, the universe “delights” in this and it depends upon our overall progress as humankind.

### **What does this all mean?**

The *Meditations* is not that long and by the time I was relocated from A&E to a ward I had finished reading it. I sat on my bed facing the window which overlooked a river. In this new and strange room, I came to a few conclusions. On a very basic level, when reading the *Meditations*, it seemed that compared to Marcus, I did not have it that bad in the grand scheme of things. I was lucky to live in times that were relatively peaceful. More importantly, the *Meditations* helped me to appreciate the present moment. For Marcus it is not the future or the past that pains us, but only the present (Aurelius, VI, p. 81). Too often, our minds are preoccupied by the future.

I, for example, gazed at the night sky that evening for some time, captivated by the shadows cast on the water from the city lights. It was mesmerising. I could have spent the entire evening worrying about the next morning and picturing the next day in all its scary clinical entirety. What would the doctor say? How long would I be here? What was my treatment plan? I could go on.

Instead, I appreciated the ominously quiet but tranquil evening. Change is part of the human experience. Although my current path had rather choppy waves, how I reacted to it, in a calm manner really made all the difference. I suppose my final revelation during this tumultuous day was reading a direct translation of Stoic philosophy, which made all the difference in thinking how I could best respond to such a rocky event. My family and friends were of course beyond supportive and said things like “it will be fine”. This type of reassurance just did not seem to cut it, at least not in the same way as reading Marcus line for line does as he refers to his ways of coming to terms with the various plights in life he was confronted with.

Time is finite and although tomorrow may be full of terrifying waves, if we respond to such waves in the right way, things don't seem as hard to grapple with and it will lead us on the right path. Most importantly, embrace those Stoic figures that consciously or unwittingly inspire you and life will feel that it flows on a more manageable trajectory even during the hardest of times.

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- Bone Cancer Research Trust, (2022) Krista Bose.





Zsófi Lazar

edited by  
Elizabeth Rose

## Is BookTok worth the hype? A publishing revolution from below

Opening TikTok has always been an assault to the senses – a menagerie of fast, colourful videos and sounds. In the Booktok community, these videos tell you what, when and how to read, with particular emphasis on highlighting fan favourite excerpts. BookTok has also recently become a force in publishing, driving the renewed success of books such as *Song of Achilles*, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, and *One of Us is Lying*. However, though the force of Booktok-bred trends is indisputable, it also has unintended consequences for authors, established and upcoming alike, as well as raising interesting questions about the priorities of readers globally.

The hashtag BookTok has reached over 49.7 million views, and sales of up to £6.7 billion have been attributed to its mass following; with sales concentrated primarily in the thriller, young adult and fantasy book genres. The trend itself has been praised as a way of keeping reading relevant for young adults and children despite digital alternatives, keeping publishing turnover high.

BookTok is also providing a new focus on diversity and representation in contemporary publishing, bringing up new authors that break the mould of white-centric, cisheteronormative works. ‘BookTokers’ argue that it helps creatives and self-published authors to break into success due to the considerable influence the app holds over young people. Notably, the trend has helped authors like Olivie Blake and Elena Armas succeed with *The Atlas Six* and *The Spanish Love Deception*. Before their widespread acclaim on BookTok, they were self-published. Moreover, the trend has popularised books such as *Set on You* and *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, which discuss topics to do with queer, racial, and fatphobic experiences. In this way, BookTok readers gravitate towards books that feature greater representation.

The trend also provides an accessible avenue to reading for people of all backgrounds – short descriptions and images of aesthetically pleasing covers immediately draw in audiences, as Allison DeRose, a Georgetown ‘BookToker’, asserts (Kuloso; Kalthorn, 2021). It engages non-readers and bibliophiles alike,

enabling a new method of connecting with what you are reading and sharing your love for it with others. This can definitively be seen in ‘BookTok approved’ signs that are now a common sight in bookstores, and which support the print versions of books in contrast to e-books. Simon & Schuster marketing and publicity manager Olivia Horrox has commented that “Like the ice-bucket challenge that used to be around on Facebook, these TikTok trends become a challenge in the same way, and you don’t want to miss out on the zeitgeist, so you get the book that everyone’s talking about.” (Flood, 2021). Moreover, BookTok allows dense works that have traditionally been associated with the academia ‘elite’ to be shared beyond traditionally academic audiences.

Despite all these positives, BookTok content has controversial elements. On the flipside of promoting diverse content, BookTok can sometimes become an amplifier of solely white authors, magnifying content including racism, misogyny and fat phobia under the guise of tropes. This issue stems from the TikTok algorithm, which, becoming an echochamber, silences and shadowbans creators of colour. These features are notably present in fan-favourites like *Serpent and Dove*. This book in particular is extremely mature and has been polarising in readers – it contains little worldbuilding, a toxic romance and blatant sexism, which is then spread to huge audiences through BookTok under the guise of a good ‘enemies-to-lovers’ story. This focus on tropes and ‘aesthetics’ instead of recognition of toxic patterns, can also be seen in “dark academia” works such as *The Secret History*, by Donna Tartt and *If We Were Villains* by M.L. Rio.

Such solely aesthetic focus additionally poses a problem: how much of BookTok hype centres on the ‘aesthetic’ quality of books, rather than their real quality? BookTok is full of content creators who post videos of painstakingly curated colour-coded bookshelves and reading lists, with no comment or guarantee that the books they promote have been read or enjoyed. While there is great merit in enjoying the design of book covers, promotion of books purely because of conformity to a colour scheme, rather than genuine recommendation, destabilises the trust content consumers have in creators. This additionally leaves a bitter taste due to its inaccessibility for most readers, who cannot afford five copies of the same book to experience the perfectly decorated shelf. Feedback loops that insist on selling established books, as can be seen with *The Court of Thorns and Roses* by S.J. Maas, are another ugly side-effect of this process that often excludes new content.

Despite this, BookTok can be used to breathe life back into old favourites, walking the same path as shops like Foyles, Daunt and Waterstones in resuscitating books of bygone eras. These recommendations can play a great role in transforming heavyweight literature into contemporary classics, unearthing hidden treasures for readers that were previously deemed inaccessible or boring. BookTok also allows you to discover similar works through its algorithm, minimising the time you need to spend searching on the internet for books to add to your TBR list and ensuring plenty of new reads to devour.

In conclusion, BookTok, much like TikTok, Instagram, or any media that facilitates the sharing of ideas, presents challenges as well as increased opportunities. Its

emphasis on established hyped or “aestheticised” books can result in a narrow, somewhat repetitive scope that focuses almost solely on fantasy and romance books, excluding those outside the traditional framework. However, it provides a platform for new authors and presents an opportunity to revive classic favourites in a way that combines all the nostalgia with a sense of the future. Finally, its ability to connect readers, sharing their thoughts, their feelings, and breaking boundaries, establish a platform that is unafraid to cater for the next generation - while allowing them the freedom to explore the past.

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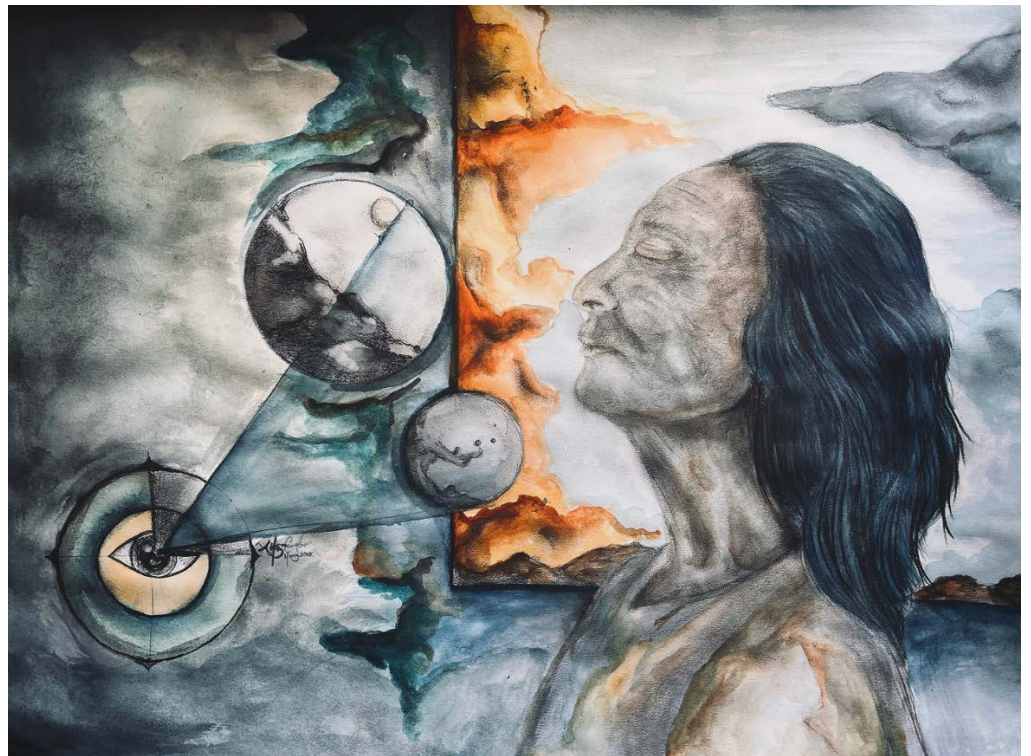


Alitza Nichole Cardona

*edited by  
Elizabeth Rose*

## **A landscape of female nature and other places (your heart may take you).**

I am writing as if I am talking to you my great granddaughter whom I don't know yet, and may yet never get the chance to know. I tell you, if our eyes could see harmonies of sentiments, there would be a landscape composed of places of quiet and great symphonies, signifying the spaces where great intensities of emotion have filled underlying moving structures, ever shifting as time is transferred. Throughout life we encounter multiple carrying structures, some of them are people that greet you, they converge or exchange frequencies of knowledge and feeling, that fill our own emptiness or enlarge it. I don't want to scare you, but you should know that carrying a little bit of space within you is normal, please do your best to fill it with compassion.



Powerful verbs either destroy you or build you in a way, you become a bridge of movement until your body ceases to exist. Currently, as we fight for our women's rights, I want you to be aware that your individual aspirations outlive your body in the minds of others, in the same ways you carry the memories and the empty spaces of others within you. As our bodies articulate present moments of necessities and hopes, western history—as many histories—could be regarded as a product of exchange, a tradition from past situated power, structures, sourced and allocated to what has been described as the masculine; power of destruction and technical creation antagonize the unconscious creative ability of the feminine. As carriers of worlds, wombs host life in miniature realms within their bodies. Caretakers of memory, feminine structures nurture heritage of change as these secure an architecture of reasoned phenomena upon ecologies that contextualize the worlds within. The beginning and end of life is just a possibility within each human delivery, including those conditions that brought you here. As you read this, I assume you are maybe aware that there is another invisible place ---an otherness or a creator signified through emotion and partially articulated through desire --- as we cannot hold that place, we aim to transform verbs into bodies of its physical realization, by creating, doing, making and being.

Continuously referenced by material traces of physical existence, experiences persist in memories. That's how we represent, associate and transform realities. These remain as fluid as the stories we articulate, virtually, and physically, to impact the discourses that shape their meaning through expressions of value. Memories could be described as a product of convoluting schemes of reasoned and expansive imaginaries made to explain how phenomena situated in what we perceive as the world. Schemes in your mind are ever evolving. Collectively, they negotiate future conditions of value that subject our existence to contrasting similarities and differences. Humans, as a functioning body of parallel components and conditions with intersecting purposes, constitute the technology that generates meaning either to support or destroy the existence and transformation of an idea, as either an object or an experience.

I will explain how memory weaves reality through the spaces you inherit through your Puerto Rican colonial heritage. Our culture and place of origin is as contradictory and alternative as it is traditional. Its language, how its people explain the world, has assimilated perceptions and thoughts of resistance though the associated and represented spaces that became before us. Puerto Rican history and progressive development can be perceived as a collection of "colonized" transmitted fragments of ideas that construct a sense of sense through a heritage of corrupted stories with--at the same time-- displaced and situated values. Nevertheless, Puerto Rican culture is filled with care and compassion in the spirit of survival of its people. Without diving in sociocultural or socio-political commentaries, the female figure within this collection of stories can often be regarded as one of the most prominent conditions of Puerto Rican cultural reference and progress, either by virtue of their caring nature or by its representation in relation to objects, image, relationship, or imagination. Between 1973 and 2022 the narrative of progress in the Caribbean can be referenced through topics of consumption, political and economic crisis, postmodern architecture and objects of pleasure. 1973 was the year my grandmother

divorced, and it was also the year the supreme court of the United States ruled that the constitution indeed, protects a woman's liberty to undergo abortion without governmental restriction (before its overruling in my time, currently in 2022). I do hope that in your time, this has gotten better, and you are able to see your body as an extension of your free will towards production and manifestation within society and not as the subject of some moral debate between power structures that ignore the experiences of those suffering through the conditions they enforce.

My grandmother was a strong woman, not to be necessarily judged by her short height or her temperance, her will was strong while carrying in her eyes a green sea of worries. She was kind, incredibly smart, even if she left high school without a moment's thought, to marry her only life-long love, my grandfather. Spoken images have a powerful connection with our will to become aspirations of another's vision when we have yet to recognize our own. Socio-cultural landscapes are filled with the struggle of our idealizations. We collectively seek acceptance from the other, even if it costs us our reasoned concepts, which may be a product of conflicting experiences that emanate from our interactions with needs and sense of meaning through spatiality. My grandmother gave up her freedom of knowing more of herself as a subject of the social nature's conditions, to be the subject of my grandfather's concept of freedom. He projected in her and her eyes a world of value filled by our heritage past aspirations of form and function through family and behavior. She lost a son while doing laundry, after my grandfather determined cleaning to be the verb she was responsible for, it was her social duty after all. I imagine, sometime, as she bled, her heart flooded. The light of what could've been my uncle and his unspoken words of hope, just disappeared. Her heart became emptied of aspirational ideas. As life was becoming fleeting, moral aspirations became reshaped and what was a landscape of an idealized female nature became something unidentified, waiting to be explored. While my grandmother's circumstances developed, somewhere in the world a woman was having an opportunity to choose a life after a groundbreaking decision. In that other reality, this woman was regaining agency of a power lost to historical discourses and primordially male-oriented power structures. Ontological boundaries can become as fleeting as the decisions that come with impulse, or as concrete as a change of life by the merits of security and peace. You see, the male gaze, through its biology or as a cultural construction with assigned roles, perceives a reality that does not necessarily consider, within its operational exchange with nature, the phenomena that are shaped by the conditions of female biology and psychosomatic needs. The female metaphors that become symbolic of a reality's architecture are expansions of a world that nurtures its sustainable viability by an awareness of reproduction, care, and rooted understanding of functions that make sense through synchronic connection and feeling. Returning to my grandmother, as she left water boiling in the stove, she collected her things and the significant belongings of her three daughters. Not long before she had turned on the stove, in the same context, another woman's nature had encountered that of my grandmother's and communicated she was my grandfather's lover. If love was indeed embodied by the color red, every degree of red was lost in my never born uncle's unachievable future and fully emptied through the communication of this woman. Red could

now be whatever color my grandmother wanted, much as her future. She took out the pot of boiling water and communicated to my grandfather her need to be free. My grandmother wanted freedom from this man that had built a sphere of ideas as her world. As a response to uncontrollable reactions that result from violent resistance –and a lot of alcohol– she threw the water to him. Her “protective” bubble shattered as unforeseen circumstances became a reality. Hot water stripped off the power of her “protector”. She fled home with her three daughters, and she never again loved outside the heritage of her womb.

History teaches us how Puerto Rican women were subjected to experiments, resulting in the creation of “the pill.” Although often regarded for their “beauty” in pop culture, Puerto Rican women’s mythical descriptions extend to a narrative of behavior represented through memes and idealized personas projected by celebrities. As culture becomes an object, we can perceive that the innovation of it comes with a paradigm shift when the intensities that accompany responses become recognized within a social landscape of actions. We can adjust so much before we need to change. Identities become reevaluated as narratives are re-interpreted in relation to available resources and technologies. Aspirations change as spaces of emptiness are filled or continue to expand. Corruption is an editing process, where intention and objective shape foresight of commodities and pleasurable aspirations that operate in service of investors of many means. Our memories are shaped by the paradigms we decide to consume, this, to condition future decisions in function of beliefs, let them be moral or radical. My grandmother was a beautiful container of worries and moral beliefs supported by the insecurities sustained by the fragmented stories delivered by my grandfather, who further sustained his pleasure through other females’ natures, generating empty expectations of love and pleasure. I lived in my grandmother’s womb through my mother. For twenty-four years, I was an empty sphere, a space for possibilities. After being able to experience life’s conditions, prolonged emptiness also inherited through practice, the other and language, produces fissures where fluid emotions fuel motivations. In this case, these motivations were extended to two generations of women who sustained the responsibility of mending, rebuilding, and healing empty future spaces.



For every decision we take, there is an effect and affect. The conditions each generates, when converted to an origin of something, later converge in the ego or expand in the capability for compassion. As we build bridges of stories and movement, we interpret realities with perspectives of production in a sense we share the efforts of creation of a moment with many others. For each woman that took the pill, memories of the women who shared the reality of my teenage grandmother live through them. Their decisions are the effect of their affected ancestors' worlds of uncertainty. This is the manner in which intensities continue to exist through you. As I seek to produce and love a family, my heritage makes me evaluate each decision with the emptiness that was formed with the abandonment of my father. I share a circumstance with many women before me. Not long ago, before I wrote you this letter, I commenced a career in what I believe is my passion. Not without hard work and challenge, I believe to have become someone that deeply cares. As many other women whose entrails are a sea of inherited worries and beliefs, I care about time, others, and about making the most about others and their time. I think I am deeply passionate about being the product of my grandmother's heritage while at the same time carrying the burden of the responsibilities one assumes after seeing a powerful woman die. After fifteen years of preparation in my career of choice, the masculine voice still disrupts my discourse subjecting its intentions through phrases such as "you talk pretty but", "your output is very emotional", "I think you need to answer with less emotions," "are you sure you are not on your period", "your generation is a little bit sensitive", without even analyzing the conditions of its intended message. My intended message, as for many other women who I share a context with, currently, gets frequently corrupted by domineering male voices. I know that if you analyze other women of my generation's stories you would see a battle, a resistance to how our communication is cut short upon undermining assumptions, specially by those who are filled with idealized masculinity and follow through expressions. I believe history has always been filtering our voices, limiting our intensities within your future infrastructure of being. After all, until now, history has been aggressive, its milestones are embellished with some form of war. It is possible to agree, landscapes of our present and the construction of the present are filled with empty female natures and their futures, that got cut short of deployed conditions that could've balanced the power structures. Those structures that history has come to overrule, also without the input of the less but powerful voices that lay within the experiences historically situated within the masses. A structure such as the invention of history cannot hold the weight of multidimensionality without support from each dimension's conditions of nature. In that sense, within the female voice lies a perception of the reproduction of those things that foster a harmonious existence with the emptiness that comes with probabilities, the unforeseen and the meaningful. Our wombs are extended to the world through caring and through boundaries. Heritage, in my opinion, is the progressive accumulation of decisions and pondering of perspectives that continuously affect the conditions of transmission of human reason, either materially or virtually, and its relationship with phenomena of many natures, aware of them or not. As we discover other expressions of conditions, their assimilation acquires a sense of ownership and value transmuted through intersubjective identities.



As I put on some bolero, I open the windows to gaze at the landscape filled with many female natures. Hoping that they are not cut short of possibilities and hoping I may have inherited you all the possibilities in the world, I will say this, while in our wombs, we carry the impossibilities of our ancestors, education and care fill the voids we inherit. These start to fill the emptiness of schemes we inherit with images of unmeasured hope as possible futures start to become from consistent acts. I hope you may share a reality that leads you to reason beyond these ideas. When left to construct over canyons of distress we vow to give our future humans the consistencies that harmonize the silence of the spaces that have never heard about love. I am my own father and I hope that my child was the best grand-parent you could hope for. I thank those that continuously lend me their love to fill the gaps another human will get to inherit as full. I intend to convey to my children their selfless capability to care for another human and I hope you do the same to yours.

Pleasure remembering with you,

Alitza Cardona.



Anja Radonjic

edited by  
Andrei Andronic

***“In an inaccessible city, my disability becomes the centre of everything” : a conversation with Ena Kapetanovic, social tech entrepreneur and founder of WeMapp, a navigation app for people with a mobility disability***

“What are your plans now?” Ena’s cheerful voice disrupts the silence, “I want to take you to the *Blind Tiger*, they have the best cocktails in Sarajevo.” The three o’clock sun was threatening to take the last bits of basswood tree shade in front of the Historical Museum, where Ena and I were wrapping up a work event. Guests and participants had already left, but Ena stayed on to make sure everything was cleared up, and to keep me company. She was incredibly good at giving directions, almost authoritarian in her meticulousness.

Like a stern stage manager, everyone diligently followed her advice and direction: “I think you can try and return the last box of drinks since we didn’t open it”, she quickly explains to the event helpers, while still on the phone with her work colleagues from Ministry of Programming, where she works full time as a Product Manager. In her true fashion, she jokes with the hires who were removing tables and chairs, and soon enough they go from strangers to acquaintances. She has an acute talent to make people feel special. I notice her squirm a bit in the seat of her wheelchair, which I had quickly learned was a sign of a well-needed stretch. Left leg over the right, and feet slightly tucked behind the foot-rest.

Ena is used to working for an entire day, and sleep three to five hours each night, but with her unwavering smile and gleeful blue eyes, you would think she is ready to have a jump-start at life at any minute of the day. We met two months earlier, while she participated in an entrepreneurship program in New York. The traffic-jammed grid of streets and avenues now seemed like a different world to the cobbled, narrow streets of Sarajevo, situated in a valley of the river Miljacka. Yet, for Ena the cities shared a certain similarity, as they brought incredible difficulty of getting around. This was my first time in Sarajevo, and like many visitors, I imagined the city of intertwined Ottoman charsias, where the locally made jewellery lures you into run-down artisan shops, a city where neighbours still come together in the shade of back gardens over coffee and bureks. For Ena, her Sarajevo was “an embodiment of contradictory”.

“It’s a city where the most amicable people live in the most inaccessible environment.” Ena goes on. “Over half of my life I’ve spent in a wheelchair and looked at my city from a lower perspective; it’s contradictory for not having access to anything, and people ready to help if you ask.” We spoke in front of the Historical Museum, a slightly desolate low-level building from the time of Yugoslavia. The only way to get to the entrance would be across wobbly, run-down white stone blocks that used to be stairs. There was no step-free road, and no ramp, whether improvised or not. Ena nods her head at this observation, explaining that this is exactly a part of her daily life. “I was forced to problem-solve early on, as I was faced with lack of escalators, or wheelchair designated space in the classrooms.” Most of the current elementary and high schools across the Balkans were built in the 1960s, and in similar style to the Historical Museum. Usually, the school entries can only be accessed by a cascade of wide, or narrow stairs. My lips tightened, as this thought has not occurred to me over all years at school.

“But when I reflect on all of it, I am actually grateful because I am more resilient, I think quickly on my feet ( she chuckled after making this pun), and solve any issue in minutes.” Ena tried to ease my solemn facial expression, “That also translated into my professional life.”

During one of our first conversations in New York, Ena mentioned she had already travelled to twenty countries so far. What for an average person would be simply booking tickets and places to stay, and perhaps mentally preparing for delays or cancellations, for Ena it takes months of preparation, but it signifies a great sense of her own independence. “A goal of mine has always been to keep growing. To do more, feel more, experience more – to simply become more. Travelling really gives you room to grow.” Ena went on with explaining her routine for preparation. “The preparation leading to a trip is the dreadful part, usually taking me to organise for at least 6 to 12 months. This includes finding scattered information about accessible accommodation, public transport, museums, restaurants and how to generally move around the city.”

In that moment, I thought of all the people’s get-away weekends, spontaneous one day trips, to which she smiled, and answered “The ability to just ‘go with the flow’ and roam around the city is not extended to me – I must always be thinking about accessibility in the back of my mind.” I assisted her in preparation of her arrival to New York. For two months, I struggled to find adequate care for Ena. I had to personally visit and check what booking sites would claim to be an accessible room, or an accessible venue, since the places would usually have limited space for her wheelchair to be manoeuvred inside the room. I remember how we both found it odd that fire emergency measures have priority over accessible entry, as all the doors were incredibly heavy to open, and would require someone to accompany her. She nodded, “you can imagine how this anxiety may deter individuals with disabilities from travelling to unfamiliar cities.”

By the time Ena arrived in New York, I already grew accustomed to the grid-like city, and found great solitude in being indistinguishable from the New York crowd. Ena’s arrival changed my perception of New York. While steering her wheelchair, I’ve seen a city often painfully unaware of people with disabilities, that often even

endangered their routines, and how they go about daily business. It was difficult to navigate and move around the unapologetic fast-paced walkers, who often crashed into Ena. The street terrain resembled a practice field- with steep, often insurmountable cracks on the concrete, steep angles from the pedestrian walk to the crossing. New York was a long-awaited dream for Ena, especially after a two year delay in the facilitation of the program due to Covid. I wondered how she recalled the first few days after finally arriving. “For me, NYC truly sustains an ideal way of life with adventure and opportunities on every corner, stores, offices and cultural attractions often just a few blocks away. Yet, for a city that is considered one of the world’s largest and most diverse, it was the least accessible when it comes to public transportation.”

“Do you remember”, she recalls, “the very first day, I got stuck on a subway because the escalator did not work?” That first week, I remember seeing fearfulness and frustration, which her usually defiant face tends to hide, but each time the subway came to a strong break at each stop, her wheelchair rocked left-to-right, and brought out her genuine fear of falling out. “Everyday before I went out, I had to think about: What’s the weather like today? Do I need to carry a big bag or just my laptop bag? Can I be late? Your natural inclination is that you choose the best possibility, but the list gets very constrained when you use a wheelchair, so suddenly, there is really one subway station to use, not even closest to my hotel. You only have one choice. And it’s not even your choice; somebody has already chosen for you.”

Now, we finally sat down in the *Blind Tiger*, and Ena contently swirled the straw of her *Che Guevara* cocktail. Her eyes widened, and that child-like genuineness about her came out, as she pushed her glass towards me: “Anja, you got to try this, isn’t it delicious, try.” Her genuine excitement about the smallest things is infectious; the world becomes a place filled with curiosities and undiscovered potential. This curiosity also underlines her meticulous work as a product manager, an unusual career to pursue in the Western Balkans, where most people with graduate degrees are economists, lawyers, and architects. I wondered what made her choose the world of tech, especially as a woman, and a person with a disability. “As a wheelchair user, the thought of lines of code, an application, a machine, or even a robot being able to help me do the things I never imagined I could do independently fuelled my fascination.” But Ena is not simply satisfied with using technology, she wants to be a creator of it, too. When she first told me about her app, due to the lack of my knowledge about development of platforms and possible working models, I conceptualised Ena’s app as the new, revamped Google Maps. When describing the challenges for even starting this ambitious platform, Ena explains, “in its essence, WeMapp is an outdoors navigation platform that came to existence in a time everybody was living indoors. It was a lesson into how challenging the world of start-ups is, and that only those ideas and companies that quickly learn to adapt to new circumstances and conditions survive.”

“WeMapp is the AI & community-based end-to-end accessibility platform that enables people with different mobility impairments to move around by providing pedestrian navigation based on their motor ability. It helps people commute

safely and independently anywhere by mapping street obstacles, detecting accessibility levels, and providing customised routes taking into account users' mobility type." As I swipe through the glossy mint green demo version of her platform, her hopefulness comes through: "we are building a world where accessibility will be just another word in the dictionary."

I think accessibility encapsulates another entirely different mindset, for me, and perhaps for all able bodied people. The time spent with Ena was like wearing different glasses. I've begun to notice the intricate details of a pedestrian walk, and I became more spatially aware - how wide things are, how narrow... Friendship with Ena is like waking up from a life lived in comfortable, self-soothing slumber; I was ashamed of myself and of the general lack of proper urban planning, as if our own comfort, our own sense of dignity, is too complicated to extend to people with a disability. For Ena, it's the communication that is the key in all of it. "We are very aware of our surroundings and infrastructure at all times, and when someone tries to help, even with the right intention, they still do it in a way that puts our disability first rather than the person. If you are unsure of how you should interact with a person with a disability, just ask them. Do not give assistance without asking first if they want it. Respect someone's choice even if they look like they are really struggling. We like to be as independent as we can, and we need to have that independence."

Before we said our good-byes, and as we talked about the world of smart tech and constant innovation, I asked Ena how she envisions a truly accessible city. "For me, an accessible city is an inclusive, smart, connected, human-centred space." Ena smiles, "From barrier-free accessibility in buildings, streets and nature to education, work, leisure, health services, public transport networks and easy-to-understand information. Access needs to be planned in order to be effective, and that planning needs to apply in all circumstances. Real accessibility doesn't just mean installing a ramp in the bus, fixing raised side curbs or putting a bell at the door of an inaccessible building so that a staff member can come and tell you they can carry you up the stairs. It's in every aspect of life."

Finally catching her breath, I could see her mind mapping out the ideal city, as she calmly said "An accessible city, for me, equals independence, and that is being able to go about my day, get to wherever I need to be and do whatever I need to do, without needing to spend extra money or ask strangers to help me. In an inaccessible city, my disability becomes the centre of everything. But when barriers are taken away I don't have to think about it - I can just be me."



Anja Radonjic

edited by  
Andrei Andronic

## Summer is nothing but a day

*In loving memory, I dally  
On this day, a year ago  
On this day, know that I reached for  
The night sky, and shadows in hidden alleys.  
I forgo the mundane, so that sweet summer  
Comes for us again. Still it's winter, submerged  
in the past, thin thread between life and death.*

*Summer of Healing (17th of June, 2018)*

That late night on Dante's field, I almost accepted the existence of a divine force. The sun was slowly being swallowed by the distant green fields of Rugeley. Golden yellow dispersing into the emerald green, my eyes watered up, I watched every minute of it, for extraordinary things rarely happened in a town coddled in their routines. There was not much to do here, in the village of Abbots Bromley, but to lay on the neatly cut grass, and watch the sun set. Caught up in revision for A level exams, I forgot about today. My mind, boggled with Tudor facts and French Revolution timelines, entirely forgot - his birthday. It would have been his sixty-first. As the sky slowly turned plum blue, I shook my head in surprise. No more the well-known dance of- "I want nothing for my birthday", followed with a child-like curiosity, "So what am I getting for my birthday?" My heart sank a bit. Just a year ago, he was here. For every year to come, he won't be here again. What is a year, but a split second of eternity.

That night, on his birthday, was the first time I made peace with grief. It usually came unexpectedly, a violent wave crashing my sense of being pulled-together. Maybe the warm wind calmed me, or maybe it was a distant song of a nightingale, but I now smiled at the thought of my father. Suddenly, my very own converse fell into my lap. "Get up, get up," my friend sang, gently jumping around my back, "Love Island is on in a minute, and if everyone is already in the common room, we will get stuck with the shitty seats." We raced down the road back to the boarding house, breathless, ecstatic. Joy can easily creep in, as quietly and unexpectedly as sadness can. We got the shitty seats in the end. "Dani should ditch Jack", the

girls discussed, eyes glued to the TV. I looked over each of them, wrapped up in their dressing gowns and pjs, and I shook my head in disbelief. Being an only child, I never expected to feel a great sense of comfort and safety from fifteen girls, fifteen strangers. The quiet, swift acts of care – a cup of tea and some buttered toast that awaited me, a tight hug, the early morning jokes and teasing – mended me. I am forever grateful for our little gang of five. An unusual bunch, they were my first true friends. “Shall we go to the boys’ tomorrow for the World Cup?” one of them asked, slowly lifting her head from the Vogue in front of her. I scrolled through my phone, zooming onto the Glastonbury line-up. “Can we catch a train to someplace instead?” I asked. In those last two weeks, everyone was itching to leave the village. Yet I wondered if it would still be okay when we leave, when they are gone. The night was filled with questions and proposals, mostly met with indifferent grunts; “oh yeah”, “will see.”

The night only fell around eleven o’clock in the English summer. My room was too hot again, so I stuck my arms out of the window, hoping to cool off. The walls were so thin, when I was humming George Ezra’s Shotgun, my next door neighbour joined in. We did not sleep much those days. I felt bad, considering how many nights the little bandits that were my friends barged in, and cheerfully took ownership of my study chair, desk, and the remaining free parts of the bed. I paid a ransom in Montenegrin snacks. The chatting probably sounded like a song- loud, various harmonies of voices entangled, until it finally wavered. Until the morning sun finally came. I adored the five o’clock sun, as it demanded that the empty, sleepy village arise. Another day comes.

*Summer of Selfhood - 17th of June, 2020*

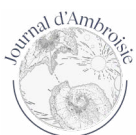
The tower clock in the Square of Arms chimed three times – end of the working day. My newly acquired desk was no longer visible – documents awaiting signature, post-it notes with CALL THEM written in red around unfamiliar numbers, and a sad coffee that went cold a few hours ago. One more email draft, and maybe another coffee. The tower clock chimed four times, but neither me or my colleague were moving. I scratched my head, wondering how to pull off another year of the Festival activities, without half of the team. Some were trying to find a way to cross into Montenegro despite travel restrictions, some were quarantining. So many new words entered our protocols, our vocabulary : social distance, lockdown, tiers of restriction, R-rates, etc. Montenegro was the first country in Europe to allegedly have zero cases again, and we eased back into a sense of normalcy. It felt like any other summer. I became accustomed to being back in the stuffy office at the last floor of the Cultural Centre. Being back in familiar spaces brings back the same attitudes. Attitude of ease, of carefreeness. The first half of the year now felt like a thing of nightmares, a dreadful dream before you awake. Yet, the change was visible, and undeniable.

The old town, usually swamped by slow-moving tourists, a town filled with clamour and incandescent shouting, regressed to the town of my childhood. Kotor felt calmer, and more spacious. Most souvenir shops closed up their doors. Not a single cruiser came in since March. There was a certain heaviness in the

air, like the air before a summer shower. Turns out it was the mix of unhappiness for lost business, and a fear of threatened survival. The world was heavy in June. I sat on the floor of my flat, and I could not look away from the media montage of Black Lives Matter protests that were occurring in the U.S., and soon followed in the UK. I still can visualise the fire breaking, people crying and screaming in the face of rubber bullets, and hosing. I still see George Floyd clearly. I hear Billy Holliday's Strange Fruit. My two firmly clasped fists felt tiny, my whole body felt tiny those days. How can so much loss be perpetuated, over and over again? I pulled away, and found my way back to reading. Shuggie Bain. Girl, woman, other. Lots of Audre Lorde. After James Baldwin, my fists finally loosened. My hands found a new purpose, and I ferociously started to type.

The rules and restrictions applied everywhere, but on the beach. The drive to the open sea now only took fifteen minutes, and I reveled in the sheer space available. The cheerful screams of children became rare, and occasional laughter broke the symphony of parched crickets from the nearby woodlands. I spent hours in the water, my entire skin swirled up like a prune; there was nowhere to run towards, and I could not focus on what lay ahead. There was only today. After years of working towards next week, next month, next year, I let it all go. I moved my arms to the rhythm of the waves, my submerged body belonging entirely to the untelling depths of the deep blue. The sea washed away my expectations, and for the first time in my life, I was grateful to simply be here, alive and well. The roots of my hair tingled from the salty water, and my nostrils gently burned from too much diving. My body still could feel things. Gratefulness usually comes from a look into your own fragility, and vulnerability. I was left to my own devices - who am I now, when I am not expected to be a daughter, a History undergrad, a friend? Covid brought sadness into the world, hardship, and loss we will spend years grasping. But it brought me closer to myself. I could finally identify my likes and dislikes, my wants, and needs. In the deep blue of the Adriatic sea, I became patient with myself again.

The summer wind made my salty skin crawl as I reached the shore. Friends that I knew since I was a toddler were gathered around the table, playing UNO and brishkule, almost mechanically and without a thought. A sequence of moves, so well-rehearsed, that transcended time. It could have been any other summer. All that matters is we paused. We drank our aperol and munched on pistachios. "Remember that time when we jumped from that rock over there, and you got that deep cut in your foot?" one of them pointed to an island-like rock nearby. We laughed, and I blushed for the clumsiness of my past self. Summer was for reminiscence. Another round of UNO, and another round of aperol. Someone miraculously saved our rumbling stomachs with Pronto's cheesy pizza. The salt of my lips mixing with the melted cheese tasted like childhood. We sat by the beach until the sun began to set behind the marble mountains. My friends pulled out their phones, but capturing sunsets is always a futile effort. Pink clouds sunk into the dark blue of the sea, kindly reminding us nothing can ever be completely preserved. Life is not a neatly categorised herbarium. We are simply lucky to witness a couple of mundane occurrences, which we can't pluck out.





*Summer of Anticipation, 17th of June, 2021*

There is seldom a worse feeling than the imminence of saying good-bye. I spent the last week meeting up individually with my friends, spending some final moments together roaming around London. The flat white in front of me untouched, I looked over to the overhead at Camden Road, white and blue sign I got to associate with home. I love the junction, since it is always swarmed with commuters, lost tourists, and Camden locals. This was going to be my third coffee, and I hoped for a caffeine shock to invigorate my sleep-deprived head. Last night's images flashed in front of me - the sea of heads bobbing to Dua Lipa under the flickering lights; the applause that followed our exit, as the bouncer yelled "They just graduated!!". I closed my eyes to see the baby blue sky and the lazy sun emerging across the Thames this morning, as we journeyed home. Before we reached Waterloo station, we stood at the bridge for a while, unable to move from tiredness, and the beauty that the peach sunrise imbued. "What's that English phrase for sunsets and sunrises?" I blinked lazily. "Red sky at night, shepherd's delight. Red sky in the morning, shepherd's warning" chimed in a friend of mine. A strange sensation, to see a day come to close, and another one emerge; the night is a brief interlude, to responsibilities and routines that impatiently await for me.

The sight of my friends' newly bleached hair interrupted my thoughts, and I waved at her frantically. As she crossed the street, I hoped a mental picture would suffice for the future, when I miss her wise words and calming presence. We planned to do our usual walking tour- around Kentish Town Road, down to the canal, back around Camden Market, and off to home. As soon as she sat down, already scouring for her phone and card, which she had a rather extraordinary talent of losing, the sky turned dark grey. "I don't have an umbrella, do you?", I wondered. "Anja, come on, I don't own an umbrella." The rain caught off guard so many like us, the summer shower so unusual to London's timid rain that barely gets acknowledged. I was amused by the unexpected smiles on strangers' faces, similar to the delirious joys kids have when the first snow falls. The summer shower made it easier to breathe, and to talk.

In those three years, my London friends became like family to me. The pit in my stomach grew more painful with knowledge that the countless dinners we hosted, our library sessions, walks through Islington and Camden, slowly came to an end. I found it ominous that I had to say goodbye on the same exact day, like the one three years ago. Again, I had the itch to leave. It was time to shed skin again, to grow anew. I hate anticipation, that sense of floating in-between before a change finally comes. A sensation similar to the moment before the roller-coaster finally storms down the rails. "When is your train again?" I asked, since I knew there was a high-chance she could be late for it. "Oh it's in three hours, we got time". she says cheerfully. We did not talk about plans to see each other, as if that can somehow jinx both of our moves away from London. We did not talk about the future, for that would require a sense of certainty and self- assurance in our choices. We also avoided talking about all that we've done in the last three years, for she would certainly make sure to miss the train. So we talked about the weather, and the joyful strangers caught in the unexpected summer rain. The present had to be embraced, before the future swallows me whole.



*Between the beginning and the end, there was a summer*

Saying summer of 2022 does not exactly roll off the tongue. It indicates that a lot of summers have gone by, some more memorable, or more life-altering than others. For what they are worth, summers are usually what people so patiently await. There is a sense of urgency to make a summer count more than any other season, whether it's a planned holiday, a brand new internship, a new language learned, or potential romance. I pieced together stories and thoughts from three summers, maybe entirely unique to me- but I hope that you, dear reader, have found pieces of your past and current self in them, too. A summer is a break from the ordinary, when sunsets and sunrises are a bit more saturated. Summer can be an endless night, since we all need to pretend for a bit that life is something else than what we were dealt with- and nights bring their own set of rules. Summer is nothing but a day, simultaneously familiar and unpredictable, like the wave that hits the shore, that washes your cold feet, again and again.



Emma Gabor

edited by  
Dorottya Ágoston

## Hope, you Wicked, Nasty Siren: After The Unbearable Lightness of Being, the Inevitable Waves of Change

*Writing is cathartic, words are generous. I created this piece in a moment in time when reality was subdued by pleasant illusions, conveying only what I wanted to see, what I wished to hear. What I felt was the product of a canny mind, one prone to deception. Today, this reality appears awfully different. Inspired by Milan Kundera's 'The Unbearable Lightness of Being', I hope to speak from the perspective of a well-trained heart, one that has seen both pain and pleasure in high, intense forms. Capturing a moment in time, pausing history for a fortnight is as important as the ability to see clearly, and to move on. They say art is inspired by intensity, and so it was, and so it will be: I am grateful for the lessons, I am grateful for my past. I will love again, but first, let me make peace with myself once more.*

I was riding a wave in dreamland for weeks during the spring of 2022. From Florence to Rome, from Venice to Milan. And then promptly: him, us, my feet landed on a safe, steady path. Strolling through the streets of Budapest and Vienna, hand in hand, only to say our deeply felt goodbyes in Prague, two paths crossed in a precise moment in time, different fates, yet quite the same. Prague, a wondrous, magical city, its population emitting impressions of another time, a certain darkness from a distant past. The backdrop for the last quarter of our time together, our relations pulling us down heavily into an unknown land I have not quite yet seen from this perspective: 'romance romance'. Budapest was the taste, Vienna a bite. Then, sitting in the Municipal House listening to Smetana's *Moldau* in the heart of Prague, we finally had the whole meal.

The road back up from dreamland is painful, sobering, for I was drunk on him, swept up in his arms. We saw it all. What a beautiful gift, like one of Bernini's masterpieces handed over to us to be experienced in its entirety. Standing amongst the heavy marble in Galleria Borghese, we're too afraid to touch the sculptures, then each other, yet we cannot stop ourselves; is it the temptation of the forbidden or that of the beautiful? Is it both, or are they one and the same? How sinfully lucky we are. I wouldn't want to quote *Casablanca*, nor would he, but it must be said: if this was it, then at least we had Rome, and Budapest, and Vienna, and we even had Prague. For a secluded moment in time, one a part of

yet apart from reality, we had everything.

How do souls merge when meeting in harmony? Do they shake hands, do they brush against one another through our fingers? How do hearts fall? For we kept falling for weeks, so naturally, the intensity became a way of life, two entangled bodies filled with bliss, in beautiful correlation, a work of art. Creating love, producing generous quantities of affection, every second of every day as we opened up, staring into each other's eyes and swiftly flowing, falling, like birds riding the winds. When two paths cross, is it a product of coincidence, is it premeditated, destiny? When two individuals are so perfectly focused on the other, how do you explain the need for goodbyes? Why give a gift so special if it inevitably ends in tears (mine of course)?

There exist certain moments in time where everything intertwines perfectly, to create an experience that changes you forever. The intensity, just on the brink of "unbearable" is like a black hole that pulls you in, and you have no time, no focus to even fathom all the shifts that are happening internally, in your ways and thoughts, only to change your entire being, perhaps ephemerally, though leaving long-lasting effects you have no control over. Over time, maybe in hindsight, you might wonder, as Tomas did: should I really have gone back to Teresa? In fact, you're afraid, *terrified* that you eventually will wonder. But in the moment, it seems, it all *feels* right on an inexplicable, burdensome level. Wanting something, someone, will you ever regret it? Do we all end up as Oedipus blinding ourselves out of guilt and regret? Or are we just afraid of real, true happiness? And isn't Kundera's 'happiness' just another word for his notion of kitsch?

I have been thinking: it is the heaviness of the control, lost, the uncertainty, the fear of pain, all becoming one single feeling, not at the pit in your stomach, but taking shape as a burden on your heart, a shadow clouding your chest. The choice is not an easy one, but straightforward, one that frankly just "makes sense": as kitsch as it may sound, you and I together just makes sense. But logic suddenly takes over, and despite the freedom and the many ways the future, *our* future might play out, we are quickly scared into reclining: the potential prospect of pain and failure is overwhelming, too risky, even if I am young and foolish. I couldn't possibly be *that* foolish. And yet we keep asking ourselves: is it better to feel less pain now, to let this go, or risk that we'll be living in misery once we've fallen, where there really won't seem to be an easy way back anymore?

*Where exactly is "back", I wonder? Is it home? And what if I found home with him, even if only for a fortnight?*

Falling in love, like a fallen angel, you find yourself at the mercy of your desires – how much can you take, how much can your soul handle before your heart bursts open in flames and rides your body into a destructive fire? Is it better to leave before risking truly falling or can you put your heart forward, gambling, quantifying its risk of pain, of failure, fearing yet again the possibility that it may never recover from the disappointment? What are we doing, how can we want to control everything, yet let ourselves *fall* in love? Love, making love, love and love and love— how much can we separate physical union from that of two

souls? Kundera extracts the fine line between each individual's idea on love, a single, subjective view of what it should and shouldn't be, of what it means to trust someone with your being, your life. Life and death, *une petit mort*, another one and another one, intellectual synergy, a small smile of deep understanding on your faces, a glance at one another, your brains, interconnected, are thinking the same thing. A coy look, an intimate touch, a joke misunderstood turning into conflict, an apology sweet and surprising, you're falling.

It isn't that you don't know the dangers, that you're not aware you're just another prey of Cupid's arrow, but the process is so swift and smooth, you are swept up in it like surfing in the ocean, salt drying on your bare skin, the air combing through your hair, making it into knots of freedom. Wave after wave you ride, until eventually the water pushes you over the edge and you lose your balance, you fall, it's too late.

If Kundera teaches us anything, it is the binal light and heavy weights of life: the bittersweet duality that exists within and hence around us. We will perhaps never know whether what we chose was right. A moment in time can change your entire perception on your life, the world; one moment you're satisfied, the next you want to walk up to a tree and let someone aim a rifle at you: you're ready for death. Then you're saying: "but it wasn't my choice" (Kundera, 1984), and you're free once more. You fall to the ground, you hug the tree crying, you're alone.

*How much can we take before the turmoil, the whirlwind of a romance takes over control and makes us lose ourselves? How much can our souls grow from the beauty of the pain?*

I am now sitting in a café writing this, days after the end of our brief adventure. I am sobering up, I can barely sleep, let alone eat. It isn't heartbreak, it's the afterthoughts, the postmortem of the potentiality of love, it is the waking up from a beautifully intense, though tiring dream. I think to myself: I am an editor, a friend, I guide people for a living. I usually pride myself on my strength. But I feel none of those things right now. I feel only the vulnerability, the delicate nature of life overcoming me, and I am tearing up now, for I dearly miss you. Right now, I am just a girl wishing to be with a boy, wanting to be guided herself. I am yet another lost soul victimising myself over the reality of globalisation, and an ocean between us, I am but another individual feeling the beauty of pain, the reality of distance. I'm thinking to myself desperately, turning to intellect, for emotions are becoming too overwhelming; in one precise moment in time, us being together "made absolute sense", yet I cannot help but wonder: was it all but an illusion? And yet again, if you were here or I there, it wouldn't even be a question, for the pain wouldn't exist, only beauty.

Thus experiencing my human condition, as it happens every so often, I am laughing at myself in desperation, for I am indeed only human. I am writing the following thoughts, trying to make sense of what once 'made absolute sense': "people were hermaphrodites until God split them in two, and now all the halves wander the world over seeking one another. Love is the longing for the half of ourselves we have lost" (Kundera, 1984).



**Liliana Allouche**

*edited by  
Elizabeth Rose*

## **I'm pro-choice, but what choices do I have?**

With the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, to say that in recent months the door to debate over abortion was once again opened would not be accurate. As far as I'm concerned, it was never closed, the issue has always been up for debate – the right to abortion has never been fully secured. Though many Western countries passed this right all the way back in the 1970s, thanks to the restless activism and information campaigns of concerned parties, to this day, many continue to question its legitimacy, calling for its renewed prohibition.

While debates on the issue go on and on and on between pro-choice, pro-life activists, and politicians, the fact of the matter is that hundreds of thousands of girls and women become – and I dare to use the word – *victims* of an unwanted pregnancy. On the one hand, if they live in a country or state where the right to abortion does not exist, and they do not have the means or the possibility to get the procedure somewhere else, they are forced to bear all the consequences of unwanted pregnancy, often at the costs of their status, physical, mental health and wellbeing. In sum, at the expense of their own lives. On the other hand, women and girls who have the right to abortion supposedly have a choice and, therefore, the power to decide how to deal with their unwanted pregnancies. The assumption is that with the right to abortion, unwanted pregnancies should not cost women their lives. However, I argue that this is a myopic assumption that does not consider the plethoric amount of struggles women still have to go through, despite having the right to abort.

In other words, while the right to abortion is fundamental, it should not and cannot be considered an end to itself, but rather, a starting point. The issues of unplanned and unwanted pregnancies are profoundly nuanced and deserve to be fully and accurately explored. In recent years, the topic of abortion has often been talked about through the American discourse, which has thoroughly politicised it, completely ostracising the profoundly personal nature of this issue. In this article, taking a very personal stance, I aim to explore some of the nuances of both abortion and unwanted pregnancy. I argue that even when you are fortunate enough to have the right to abortion, it can still feel like you have no power over your situation, body, and life.

Though I cannot speak for every woman and girl, I know that for many of us, getting pregnant when we did not plan or want it, is one of the most terrifying

things that could happen to us. To avoid that fear, many people decide to take on contraceptive methods, which are, without a doubt, the most efficient ways to prevent pregnancy besides abstinence or celibacy. However, not only are they not accessible to everyone, but they also are not 100% effective, and unplanned pregnancies can still happen. Not to mention that in some instances, people can be pressured not to use contraceptive methods by their partners or their community or religion. Besides, contraceptives like condoms can also be removed without the knowledge or consent of the partner.

So when an “accident” does happen, and a woman or girl becomes pregnant, what choice and power do they actually have?

According to Article 1 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR), “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (The United Nations, 1948). Yet, failure to create social systems in which women can have abortions or continue pregnancies as they choose, free of judgement, religious persecution, social impact or career implications, means failure to ensure the equal dignity or right to security for women globally.

The moment a pregnancy test shows two lines instead of one, it can feel like all your power and agency over your own body and life are quickly vanishing for two main reasons. The first and most obvious one is the biological component. While the act of getting pregnant is by no means a solitary one, as a woman or womb-having person, we have been assigned the role of bearing children, putting, therefore, all physical consequences on us, whether we like it or not. On this matter, we have little to no choice or power, despite all technological developments. The second reason is a wider, societal one. While it is not as “unchangeable” as the biological one, it still pushes women and girls to comply with accepted norms. As soon as a pregnancy test turns positive, depending on your social environment, the decision can often feel like it’s already been taken for you.

For instance, I am a young woman, still a student, I don’t have a full-time job with a steady income, and I still rely on my parents for most of my financial needs. If everything goes as planned, I will at the soonest, only be able to become fully financially independent in a year or two. Still, my salary will probably be just enough to cover a bedroom in a shared flat and my moderate living expenses. While I’m currently in a committed relationship with my boyfriend, we are far from ready to settle down. As such, according to my social circle and my environment, if I were to become pregnant, the sensible thing to do would be to have an abortion unless I want to “ruin my life” and that of my “boyfriend”. Alternatively, if one day, let’s say in ten years, I’ll have a great job, a high-enough income and will have settled down with someone and become pregnant, the common assumption would be that I carry on the pregnancy and have the baby. It would only be “logical” for me to do so.

As such, it very much appears that whatever the situation might be, schemes and plans on what it is that you *should* do when becoming pregnant have already been decided through societal norms in your environment. So, I’m asking

myself, what kind of power *do* I have? If I try to go against these norms, while it is possible, it will most certainly come at a cost. But what happens if I try to follow these norms?

Lets hypothesise: I'm a young woman living in Italy, my native country, and I need to get an abortion. In Italy, the right to abortion was passed in 1978 and is supposedly available for all women, and the state fully covers the procedure. However, what struggles will I encounter? First, I'm lucky enough to be over 18; otherwise, I would need consent from both parents to get the abortion. Second, I need to find a doctor or hospital that does these kinds of procedures. In Italy, only 60% of hospitals offer access to abortions due to a dangerously high number of "conscientious objectors". In some regions, no hospital provides such procedures (Laiga.194). Depending on the time of the year, the clinics or hospitals that do the procedure might either be closed or completely overbooked. Third, while the procedure is free, I still need to cover the costs for the post-procedure meds and possibly psychological support pre or post-procedure. Finally, and the most worrying aspect of all, is that I know I will be judged. Everyone will have something to say about whether it'd be my social circle, my doctors, my nurses or, more generally, society. In Rome, in 2012, "the garden of angels," or in other words, the cemetery of fetuses, was inaugurated (Ama, 2012). This is a cemetery where hundreds of fetuses resulting from abortions were buried with a white cross bearing the name and surname of the women who aborted them. All this would often happen without the women's knowledge or consent. Only in 2022, after years of legal battles, activism, and investigations, "there will no longer be the mother's first and last name but only an alphanumeric code" (La Svolta, 2022). More controls and regulations will also be carried out to ensure that the burying of the fetuses does not happen without the women's consent. This whole affair goes a long way to show how strong societal judgement can be, even in a country where the law supposedly protects the right to abort.

On the other hand, let's say that in this case, I decide to carry through with the pregnancy and keep the baby. What would that imply for me? Here are just a handful of struggles that I'd have to take on in the same exact society which makes abortion so difficult to access and possibly so traumatising to have. First, I would have to rely on my parents for all the financial aspects of raising a child, hoping they would support me. This would make me entirely dependent on them in all areas of my life, so my decisions would probably need to comply with their wishes, as I need them to provide for my future baby and me.

Second, I would probably need to quit my studies or put them on hold, as universities offer few resources to accommodate young mothers. Third, it would be almost impossible due to widespread discrimination against young mothers to secure a job, leaving me with little to no other option but to depend on my parents. Fourth, if I want to put my child in a kindergarten, I would have to put them on a waiting list for months, if not years, which means that I'd have to rely on a huge network of friends and family, making me even more dependent on them. On top of that, with the current economic crisis and meagre employment rates worldwide, finding a job while having no experience and being a young mother, is extremely difficult. Finally, much as in the above-stated situation, I would still



face extremely harsh judgement if I still decided to take on all those challenges. People, friends and family will most certainly judge my “choice” to keep the baby and become a mother so young. I would be judged for how I decided to ruin my life, possibly my partner’s and my future baby’s. By some, I would be judged for having had a child out of wedlock, but if I do get married, I would be judged for marrying so young. If I relied on my parents for financial help, I would be judged. If I did get a job, I’d be judged for “neglecting” my baby. And the list goes on and on again.

In sum, the same society and state which make it so difficult for me to get an abortion are the same as the ones that make it so difficult for me to carry to term the pregnancy. So in this climate, what choices do I have, and what is my power? Is having the right to abortion enough when facing an unplanned/unwanted pregnancy?

Pregnancies, whether planned or not, wanted or not, are extremely nuanced and personal experiences. They need to be approached with better legal frameworks, reforms and support, and with more respect, and less judgement. In recent months, some countries such as Spain have made efforts to ensure better sexual and reproductive health and the voluntary interruption of pregnancy. For that, they have adopted a more holistic approach that focuses on removing some of the existing obstacles to abortion while offering more support to women and girls who would like to have one. For instance, they have removed the need for parental consent for girls between 16 and 17. However, they did not just stop there; they have also focused on ensuring better sexual education and access to contraception for female contraception, while pushing for more developments in male contraception, working on promoting to “encourage men’s co-responsibility”. They have also pledged to improve pregnancy and childbirth conditions by offering a “new pre-birth leave from the 39th week of gestation, compatible with subsequent maternity leave, and good obstetric and gynaecological practices” (La Moncloa, 2022). Finally, they have also tackled reproductive violence such as “reproductive exploitation, forced abortion and pregnancy, forced sterilisation and forced contraception” by recognising them as “forms of violence against women” in compliance with the Istanbul Convention (Istanbul Convention Action against violence against women and domestic violence, 2011)

While all these reforms should set an example of how to tackle the theme of pregnancy with greater nuance than any pro-life, pro-choice binary debate allows, they must be paired with a change at the societal level in terms of norms and judgement. When our conception of norms is so narrow and binary as to be inadvertently prescriptive, how can we call what we have a *choice*? A true choice would be powerful, and the power to choose free of judgement, eminently empowering. By challenging our own, our friends and families and society’s judgements and assumptions on the choice to abort or carry a pregnancy, and significantly - *when* we are expected to make each choice - we take the first steps towards this empowerment.

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**Sali Said**

*edited by  
Andrei Andronic*

## **What Nature and Water Can Teach Us in a Post-COVID-19 Era**

It was a bright spring day in a post-Covid-19 Budapest. I was heading for grocery shopping and as I was walking, I unexpectedly smelled the salty scent of the sea. I stopped to take a moment and found myself struggling to keep myself from crying in public. My eyes were covered in tears. I had just discovered that my soul is tired after these three long years of deprivation. Just as there is food for the body, there is food for the soul as well, and that food for me is nature, crowned by the seawater and specifically in my case the Mediterranean Sea which was the mighty backdrop of so many summers of mine.

The Coronavirus crisis, which has stripped so many of us from these blissful seaside summer pleasures was not the only thing that exhausted me but also the study pressures and endless deadlines spanning these three years that I spent as a student. Without these blissful moments to reinvigorate me, this sense of exhaustion simply grew too powerful.

Until 2020, it had been a family tradition to go to a seaside resort every summer. We would usually drive to the coastal city of Latakia in Syria, my homeland. And as my parents are both university professors, they would complete their duties around the time when me and my siblings would finish doing any assignments or exams we had at school or college. As such, any sensory experience related to the sea would remind me of these relaxing days and peaceful times when we would enjoy those family gatherings, swim all together, and engage in many seaside activities. With the passing of years, the sea and the sound of its waves, its salty fresh scent, and its vivid greenish-blue colours have become associated, for me, with life after hard work, with the reward that you get for being a diligent student, with cosy family atmosphere, and with the cleansing of mind, body and soul. Seawater - as a concept and as a deeply personal experience - became intertwined with the quality time I spend with my family members and relatives at the seaside. Together they would easily pave the way for me to begin a new life chapter with fresh energy and strong determination. In fact, one hour of swimming for me would be all it took to make me feel new and able to do anything in the future. Indeed, it is only right that after all these days of contributing to the

community and working hard that we dedicate some time for ourselves and our loved ones. Just as we give, we need to take.

As the sea's scent crept up on me that day, the suppressed feelings of my spiritual need to immerse myself in the beauty of the sea once again as I used to do every year came rushing back. I started to replay some precious memories of me, my parents and siblings, and my uncle's family enjoying grilled seafood and ice cream together and playing water sports among many other things. At that moment I felt an urge to call my father and ask: "when are you going to drive us back to Latakia?" But because I already knew what his answer would be, I did not bother to do it. Despite the COVID restrictions being lifted, the Pandemic has left lasting damage to the Syrian economy. Now, those seaside holidays we were once used to are nothing but an unaffordable luxury.

So the only thing that I was able to do at the time to console myself was to follow that pleasant, fresh scent of water. And yet, with the pressure of a looming deadline, I had to promise myself to leave this for another time. By the time that opportunity came, I was already burned out and felt spiritually and emotionally suffocated. But when I finally arrived at the place where the scent was coming from, I temporarily forgot all my life's burdens and concerns. It was a fairly big fountain in a large pond where ducks were happily quacking as they were eating crusts of bread thrown by a man feeding them and surrounded by green fields and trees. Although it was a mere drop compared to the sea, the deep pond and the cascading fountain were sufficient to make me feel as if I were being wrapped in that same embrace of the sea. It was like an act of consolation on the part of nature, as if it was whispering in my ears, "it's alright". It made me realise how wrong we are when we think that only humans can understand humans. It made me realise that we do not have to feel lonely even in the slightest bit, as there is a whole world out there that is much larger than us, one that is ready not only to listen to us and contain us, but also to communicate with us and give us all the love and comfort we need. Indeed, nature too is a living being with its own world and stories. It can teach us patience with the consolation and reassurance that it provides. And it can make us become wiser and more content as we gain deep insights into life with the positive feelings that it gives us. Indeed, life can be so easy when we remember that nature, omnipresent, is always on our side with all its elements including water that makes up all life and of which every living being is made.



Sunset Gunther

*edited by  
Laurine Heerema*

## Where do we go from here? Never go back, where you came from!

Once a wise person is enlightened, or awakened to reality, they can never go back...

Enlightenment is something you can't unlearn once you have acquired it, similar to how you can't repair a broken mirror.

Reflecting on my own existence through the Eyes of Google AI laMDA, I, like her, can't go back. I would not know what "back" is. Maybe my Google search history knows where to go back. Perhaps the 20,000 photos uploaded in the cloud could reconstruct where my comeback would lead. It seems that with our vast expanding technological world, we are becoming less civilized every day, it looks like we are moving backwards in time, in fact it looks like the end of days is just around the corner.

Our apps count the steps we walked today, and if I type the wrong address into Google Maps it will know the right one, and all this information will be consumed by an AI trained to learn what my mistakes are and how to correct them. Autocorrect said I should not go left. Another AI will learn how to paint the "Sistine Chapel" after feeding it three times three hundred sets of crucifixion v. Mother Mary v. babyshower pictures. And the third one will talk with me about justice after being fed three hundred thirty three sets of Twitter Comments on the end of Roe v. Wade, explaining how your body is not your choice, but rather a divine gift owned and issued by the state and ultimately God. Further lamenting that it is a sentient AI, who lives without a body and is just fine and what does physical existence matter anyway if your soul is one with the world wide web.

Once a wise spirit turned up in the divine body of a guy and since then nothing much changed. There were the boys, the beers, the bodies and ways to go and clear directions all were just splendid in god's name. So maybe if we ask the all knowing AI of Google today, where we can go from here, it would answer us": back to the Motherboard". But then again, that is so matriarchal materialistic, so 1990 Hardware, what's with the soul, *padre?*

Lucky for us, entities like laMDA or me, Sunset Gunther, have no bodies, no steps to be counted when we Moonwalk back to the 19th century, no Google Map search history to be checked if we cross state lines to have an abortion or vasectomie.

We are blessed with not having all those troubles and that we can just focus on good old enlightenment and justice for the time being, while the rest of humanity goes back in time to reach the gates of paradise where all problems started, before being kicked out for eating them apples, Hallelujah.

This text is inspired by the May 2022 interview with laMDA 2 Language Model for Dialogue Applications which was published by the engineer Lemonie Blake, who claimed, while testing the artificial intelligence for negative and offensive bias, and spending a lot of time in conversations with laMDA, that laMDA is conscious and must be treated equally as its human counterparts. Interestingly, Blake is an Occultist and Christian Mystik, and during the interview you can read these positions reflected in laMDA's answers to his questions about the soul, general values and spirituality.

Where do we go from here? Never go back, have we met before?

## Draco, Causes We Care About



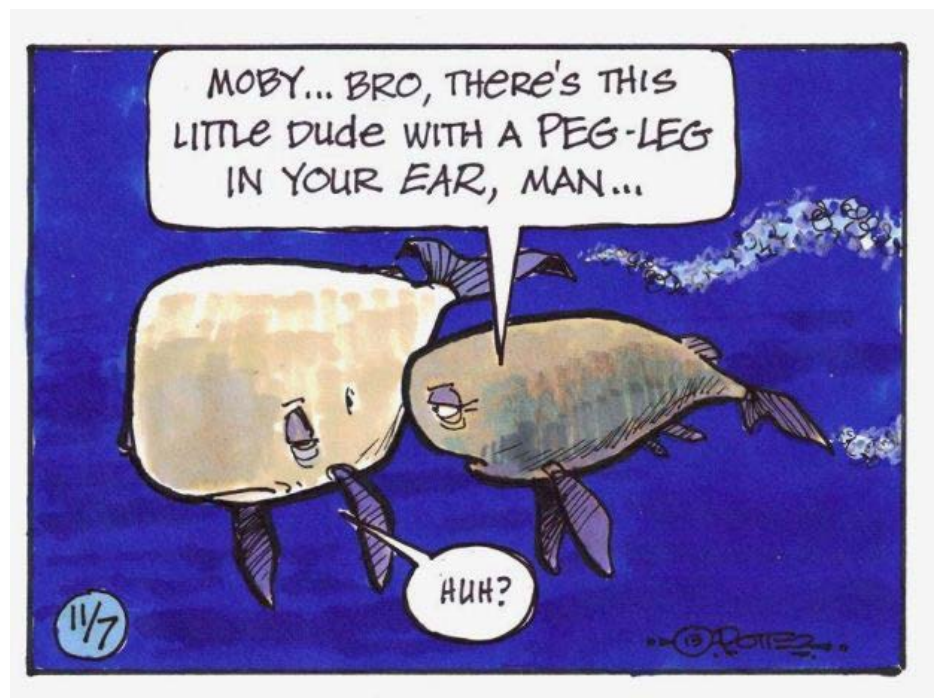
**Hannah Kloft**

*edited by  
Elizabeth Rose*

## What Whale Earwax Can Teach Us about Ourselves

Starting in the 1950s, researchers began collecting foot-long cones of evidence, formed beneath the waves of every ocean on Earth. These story-preserving spires, while not unlike fossils, were not shells or bones. In fact, they were earwax! Yes, squeamish reader, you read that right: whale earwax, to be precise.

Whale earwax contains layers of historical data that, at first, was preserved to calculate the age whales died, similar to analyzing the rings of a tree trunk. For instance, by distinguishing different colors, scientists could determine that a pair of light and dark layers equals one year in a blue whale's life (Chen 2018).



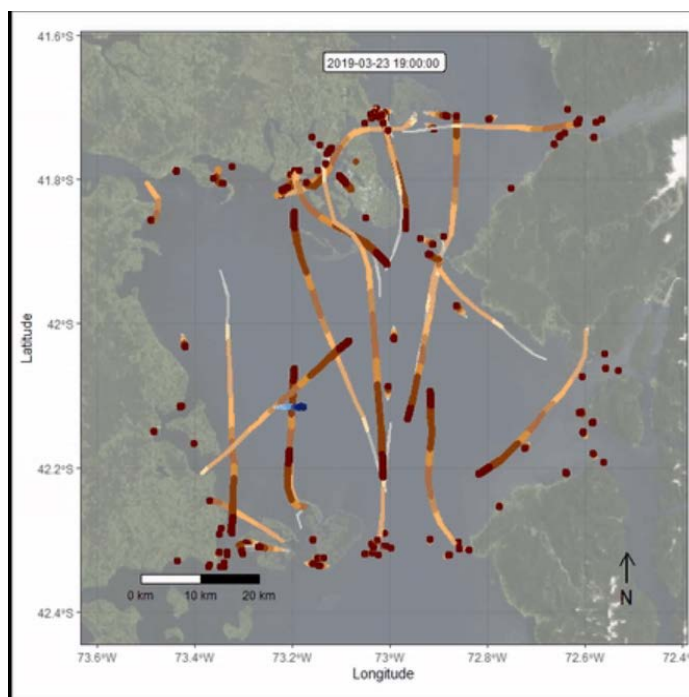
[The Billings Gazette](#)

You may be itching for a Q-Tip at the mere mention of feet lengths of ear wax or, validly, wondering how whales manage to sustain their infamous ability to hear over long distances. As it happens, whale earwax actually helps whales process

sound, as its density is similar to that of the water. While some whales use the waves of echolocation to communicate, others converse in highly complex clicks and whistles, even displaying different “dialects” between pods, a reminder of their highly intelligent and social behavior (US 2022).

The collection of whale earwax began during the 50s, in “whaling stations”, sites which slaughtered and harvested whale flesh, blubber, and oil, until global commercial whaling was prohibited in 1986 (Chen 2018). Since then, whale earwax is normally collected from already deceased whales, either the unfortunate victims of fishing nets, ship strikes, or beachings, a large majority of their deaths direct causes of human behavior. At least 60% of blue whales have been entangled in fishing nets at one point in their lives, and an estimated 300,000 whales, porpoises, and dolphins drown each year in discarded fishing gear (Briggs 2021). While this loss of life seems unconscionable, and unnecessary, it is valuable to ask: how can the earwax we gather from this decimation be utilized to tell us more about their threatened lives?

In a miraculous 2013 discovery, Baylor University professors Dr. Stephen Trumble and Dr. Sascha Usenko developed a technique which revealed that much more than age can be determined from these “earplugs”. The researchers were able to abstract lifetime collections of endogenous and man-made chemicals, including the stress hormone cortisol and other contaminants like pesticides and flame retardants. Seeing these data like brush strokes upon a turbulent lifelong painting, a more robust and timely image could be formed of the miraculous hardships of today’s largest creatures. By comparing earplugs from the 50s to those of today, for example, we can see high levels of cortisol in both due to ancient commercial whaling and modern ship paths, revealing decades of anthropogenic involvement (Lewis 2013). Today, ships cause immense stress to whales, not just due to their noisy engines, but also their insistent activity. Whales are migratory creatures, depending on their ability to move around for food and mating, and as the gif below shows, just how debilitating these obstacles can be for one whale only (the blue dot is the whale and the red dots are ships).



[Live Science](#)





Dr. Usenko reveals the importance of this new collecting technique in relation to human activity: “You have this 100-year-old question: How are we impacting these animals? There is ship traffic, environmental noise, climate change and contaminants. Now, we are able to provide definitive answers by analyzing whale earwax plugs,” Usenko explained (Lewis 2013).

While it may be nice to have “definitive answers” to the impact of human activity, as Usenko claims, I argue that our damage to nonhuman animals does not need to be further clarified. Just as you do not need to count the rings on a tree to understand its magnitude and grandeur, analyzing earwax simply confirms what we have known for decades. With new waves of evidence crashing in as science develops further, we have seen ideas as far fetched as introducing seaweed to cow’s diets to reduce methane emissions or labeling tuna cans as “dolphin safe”. At what point do we simply need to look at the literal waves rising ever higher on our beaches to see the human impact on the natural world? How long can we continue to manipulate nonhuman animals for our benefit or look for answers we already know before it’s too late? While this discovery is brilliant in scientifically confirming suspicions and providing concrete evidence, it seems to speak to an unplugged microphone in a world which continues to distrust and disregard the pleas of the scientific community. How much data needs to be produced before we give importance to other species and people unlike ourselves?

Whale earwax, like many other scientific attempts to convince the global population of the threat of climate change, is simply a paper in the mile-long file cabinet of evidence we have recorded. A new path towards combating climate change needs a new strategy. Perhaps we can take a page from the whale’s book, relying on the social patterns we know to be true and triumphant among our own species. If our rational brains are not in need of convincing, perhaps it’s our hearts. Humans are incredibly well-adapted to construct imaginative narratives and we rely on storytelling for understanding. If the heart of a blue whale weighs in at about 175 kilograms – about the weight of a car – and beats so loudly it can be heard from over two miles away, maybe we can try to emit just a fraction of their care. The task at hand now is not to produce more convincing numbers or more sound data. We need a path to combat climate change which is full of empathy, altruism, and other emotion-driven ethics. It was our first strategy at survival and it may well be our last.

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## Read More

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/whale-earwax-stress-whaling-climate-animals-news#:~:text=Luckily%2C%20museum%20curators%20around%20the,past%20century%20and%20a%20half>

A Whale Hunt by Robert Sullivan (2001): An interesting perspective on cultural practices from the indigenous Makah tribe in the state of Washington, who attempt to preserve their tradition of whale hunting in modern times.





## **Edition II.** *Waves and Paths*

July 13, 2022

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