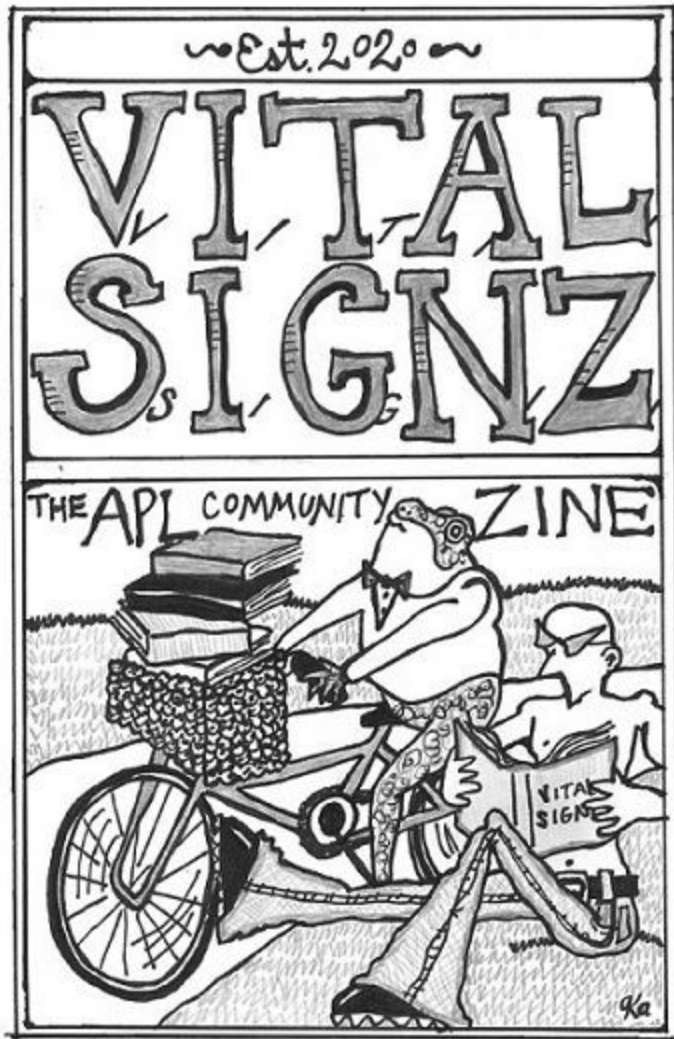


**Vital SignZ: The APL Community Zine - Issue 1**  
December 2020



1.

What is Vital SignZ?

Welcome to **Vital SignZ: The APL Community Zine**. Vital SignZ is a collaborative zine made by and for users of the Austin Public Library. “Vital” because art is essential to life. “Signs” because we make art as signs of our existence and humanity. In short, art is both vital and a sign of life. The final capital Z stands for “zine.” Vital SignZ showcases the literary, visual, audio and cinematic artwork of our library’s creative community. Everyone is creative, and everyone is invited to bring Vital SignZ to life and keep it pulsing.

Fast Facts

- Dedicated to our creative forebearers at Dallas Public Library’s [DalLibZine](#).
- Aesthetic: lowercase catholic/ “Highlights for grownups”
- Motto: “We make art in order that we may not perish of the truth.” (Apologies to Nietzsche and Schopenhauer.)

The Vital SignZ Zine Team

Bryce Wilson  
Sam Treviño  
Katherine O’Brien  
Sheila Hubertus  
Jace Furches  
Jennifer Connor  
Chris Chiarchiaro  
Kristine Butler  
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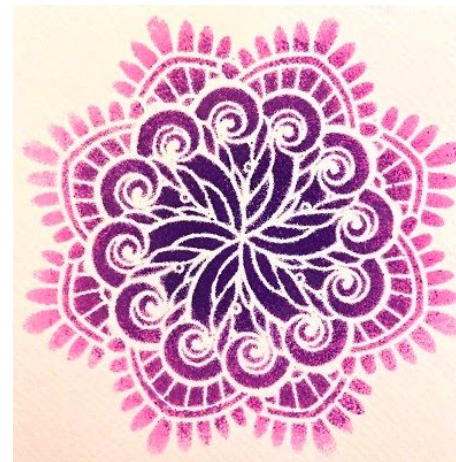
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3.

Intro

This is our very first issue, so thank you so much for joining us. Each issue will have a section based around a theme and one for general content. The theme this time is **Rebirth/ Renaissance/ Recovery (R&R&R)**. Throughout the zine, you can click on the images to view them at their original file size or access the creator's website or portfolio. Astute readerZ will notice an abundance of material from the same contributors. Since it's still a newborn, this baby is heavy on submissions from library staff. For future issues, we are eager to receive more submissions from the public, so please don't hesitate to put on your creativity hats, express yourselves and share your work with us here: [Vital SignZ Submission Form](#)

Part 1 - Theme Section: **Rebirth/ Renaissance/ Recovery**



*Experiment #14b by Vija G. Mendelson  
Acrylic paint on watercolor paper, April 2020*

Creative nonfiction*Get That Off Your Chest* by Katherine O'Brien

## I.

You meet your friend Brenda at a wine bar. Brenda had breast cancer two years ago. You bring along the thick binder the surgeon's office gave to you. The one with your diagnosis all in medical jargon so thoughtfully slipped among the pages of Breast Cancer 101. Your friend quickly flips open the binder translating your diagnosis, the esoteric words like spoken hieroglyphics. Brenda had one lump; you have two. You got her beat. The one lump is just like hers was, the other lump is the same kind you had before. "What did you do last time?" she asks. You haven't thought about it in eleven years.

When you had your first mammogram you got called back to the doctor. They may have said lump or something vague like, "require more imaging," you don't remember. You do remember thinking, "It's probably a cyst. Mom had some." You lie back on an examining table and an instrument is inserted into a small incision in the side of your breast. You don't know what the instrument is because you look at the ceiling, the wall art, wondering, "How much longer this is going to take?" The instrument is triggered and it feels like a paper hole punch or a stapler in your breast.

"How are you doing?"

"Fine."

"Why wouldn't I be?" you think.

A week later you get a voicemail from your doctor, an abject apology for the results having taken so long. Then she leaves her home phone number. As you dial the number you slowly realize, doctors don't leave their home number unless it's bad news. Bad news. You have breast cancer. Good news. It was caught early. "It's very slow growing. We call it granny cancer because that's usually who gets it. Except you're not a granny."

A voice you've never heard shouts in your head, "FIX IT!" Usually the voice in your head hisses things like, "How could be so stupid?" or "Why the hell would anyone like you, loser!" The usual voice sounds shrill and shrewish. The new voice commands authority. You only hear it once, barking out the order, "FIX IT!" The voice propels you forward like a bowling ball for the weeks to come.

You get your cancer treatment, a lumpectomy and radiation, done quickly in three months. Oncologist Dr. Doom-and-Gloom wants you to do chemo so your chances of recurrence will go down a whopping 5 percent. "No thank you!" you say and switch doctors. Menopause is only a decade away. No need to rush it.

Once your treatments are done you don't think about cancer again; except once a year when you get your mammogram. Get it done. Get an all clear. Forget about it until next year.

## II.

Eleven years go by. It's mammogram time and you're told to get a biopsy. You always knew this might happen. You've never considered yourself lucky. Still you find yourself hoping it's just a rerun of before. You lie back on an examining table and

6.

again an instrument is inserted into the side of your breast. You're not paying attention. You look anywhere but at the doctor. No one wants to be stared at while they're working.

"I'm trying to get a good sample of this other one." she says poking the inside of your breast while gazing at a black and white screen.

Your mind snaps to, "Other one?" Was it on the phone or at the doctor's office that you hear the results? Oh right, bad news never waits. It was a phone call. That must be a fun way to end a work day. Hey doctor, "Here's the list of people you need to call and tell them they have cancer." You hear the phrase you didn't last time, HER+. You still don't know what it is, but you do know it means chemo and there's no avoiding this time. You are given a choice of drug treatments. One course of treatments major side effect is constipation, the other course—diarrhea. Pick your poison.

Days later at the wine bar with Brenda you ask her what course of chemo she used. She starts talking about the various drugs as if she's reciting Physician's Desk Reference. You can't focus on what she's saying and wonder if you should order another glass of wine. Suddenly, you realize she's done all the research that you can't bring yourself to do. That's not like you. For major decisions, you've always done your homework like a good little girl. You know you should do your research but you also know that your psychological health is important so stop shoulding all over yourself. "I'll just have what she had, doctor."

You read Christopher Hitchens *Mortality*, relishing his writing, his erudition and humor. He called it, "Tumor Town."

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Yes, somehow you've wandered out of "Wellville" and got lost "Tumor Town." It has a foreign language all its own, one you won't find on a language app. It's a confusing state of place you can't see, but you sense there are others lost in the same town as you. Sometimes you see their signal, baldness, but others are still invisible to you. You look like fraud, and the Wellville people know it.

They talk to you in that saccharin way; all positivity and solicitousness. You prefer the brutal honesty of Townies. Townies keep it real.

You meet other doctors for other purposes. One doctor does surgery, another doctor does this type of treatment, that doctor does that type of treatment. You wander the rabbit warrens that all hospitals seem to be and drive to doctor's offices wondering why they're all in different locations and can't they all be in one building because this is Tumor Town and you have enough to deal with, damn it.

### III.

When Brenda had her cancer she did scalp cooling. You'd never heard of it but if anyone was going to figure out a way to keep her hair during chemo it would be Brenda. You find out there's several brands but the one she used are gel filled caps that kept like any cold pack you have in your freezer for strains, bumps and bruises. While getting chemo treatments the caps have to be changed about twice an hour, and you can't do it yourself so you need a helper. People lose their hair from chemotherapy because it's one of the most rapidly reproducing cells in the body...only outpaced by the tumor. • [Keep reading.](#)

8.



*Peace by chris\_clear\_33*

9.



*Mini Serial SAL #1 (Hugs) by Jennifer Connor  
cotton fabric, thread, zippers, vinyl  
March-May 2020*

“I joined an eight week sew-along in March not knowing that this would be a beloved respite from the daily confusion and stress of the pandemic. Each of these pouches is a pattern from Giuseppe Ribaud, a fabulous quilter and mini-pattern maker based in NYC. Each week a large online Instagram

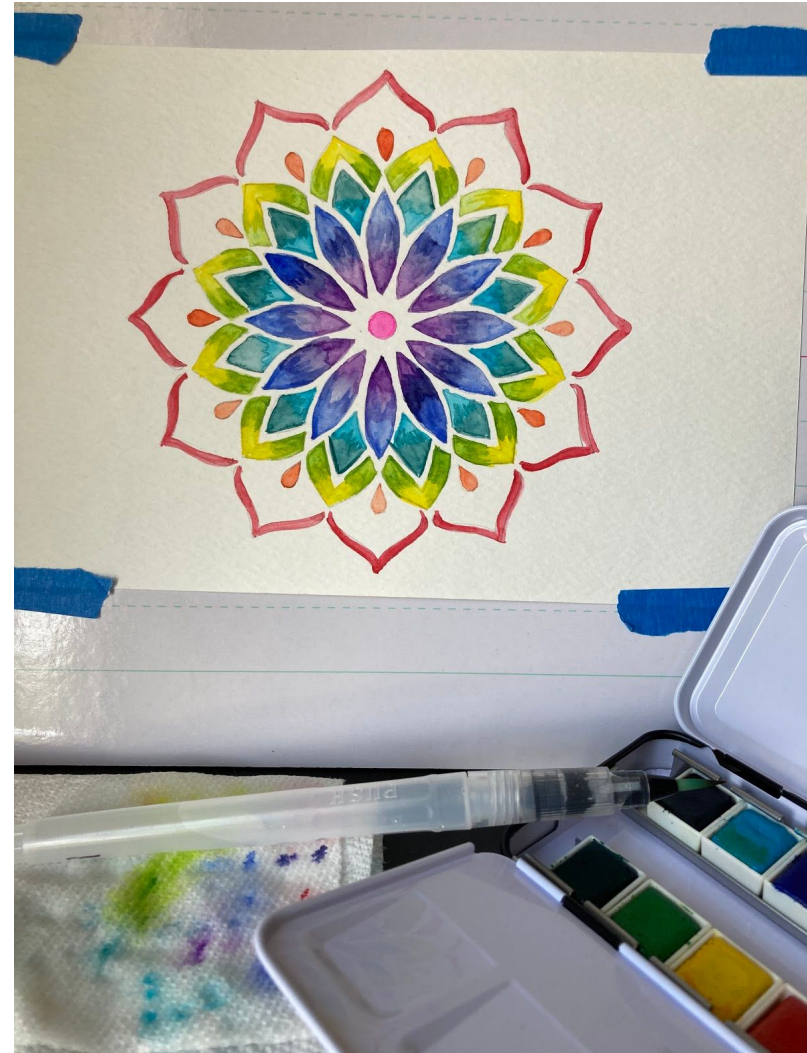
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community created each of the patterns...we followed each other...we cheered each other on...we answered questions of advice...we held each other up. When the sew-along was done I decided to make mine into little zip pouches and set up a fundraiser to donate to the ACLU. I'm happy to say each of these pouches are in their new homes and a nice chunk of change is with the ACLU."



*Mini Serial SAL #2 by Jennifer Connor*

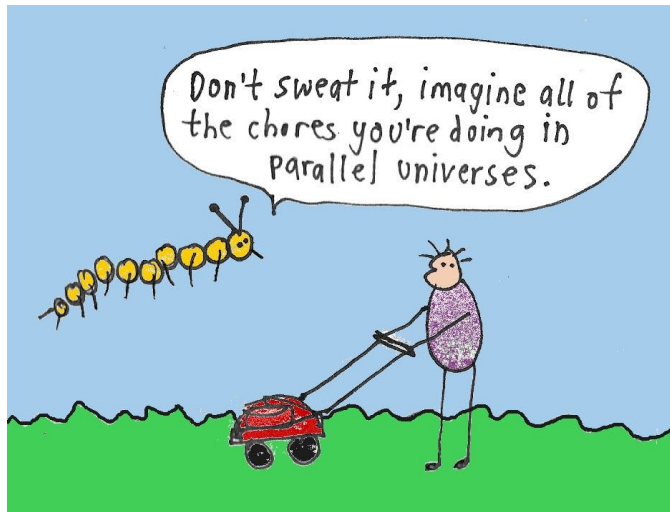
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*Pandemic Watercoloring, Week 1 by Vija G. Mendelson  
Watercolor on paper, August 2020*



*World Salad by Palfloat (series of 4)  
October 2020*



Part 2 - General Section: No Wrong Answers



*All Objects by Katrin Abel*

Dear ReaderZ: This is one of the (currently) 96 “Tenets of Insignificism.” Write and/or illustrate your own guiding tenets in life and send them to us! [Submit to us now.](#)



*Davenport Discards, August 2020 by Katrin Abel*

Dear ReaderZ: What do you see on your neighborhood strolls or bike rides? Photograph it, draw it, make a diorama. Send it to us! [Submit to us now.](#)



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*Davenport Discards, July 2020 by Katrin Abel*

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*An Escargatoire of Snails by Katherine O'Brien*

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*Mark, Oliver Wong's Roommate by Amalia Litsa  
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*Ocean in Acrylic by Sheila Hubertus*

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### Essay

#### *Other People's Authors* by Bryce Wilson

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of favorite authors. The authors that a reader keeps around for a lifetime and the authors a reader keeps for a few years, a particular portion of their life. I have read Stephen King since my age could be represented with a single digit; I remain a cheerful "Constant

Reader.” I imagine I will be reading him up to my death and if some kind soul wants to shove a copy of *The Stand* into my urn, I’m sure I will be as grateful as I am capable. Opening a new Sarah Vowell gives me the warm feeling of receiving a message from a high school crush. Shirley Jackson inspires the same admiring despair at my own talents at thirty five that reading *Hill House* for the first time at twelve did. When I read David Mitchell for the first time at sixteen I knew I had found a friend for life and I regularly revisit his books with pleasure. Yet Alex Garland, who I felt just as strong an affinity for and who had a more or less identical background, I haven’t reread in a decade (in all fairness Alex Garland himself hasn’t apparently been in the mood to read an Alex Garland book since 2004 [Got’Em]). Sometimes it’s an external thing; I have no doubt that Hunter Thompson’s suicide soured the enjoyment I got from his work and recent years have given us no shortage of artists whose deeds and views make their books difficult to read for some. Sometimes it’s more ineffable. I read Phillip K. Dick constantly in college and the period just after and then sometime around twenty five it was like an inaudible timer went off and I don’t think I’ve read one of his books since.

I wonder which kind of author Martin Amis will end up being. Truth to tell I’ve been wondering since I started *really* reading him at the beginning of my thirties. On one hand, it’s surprising that I would become enamored with Martin Amis at this time. He is hardly in fashion, being about as white, male, and upper class as authors get and a dependable punching bag

in the British press for two solid decades. (Though in fairness, there are signs that this unfashionability is waning, the thirtieth anniversary of *London Fields* brought two high profile reconsiderations by female critics in *The Guardian* and [The Ringer](#), respectively, and some voices, like Zadie Smith, never disavowed him).

In addition I don’t share much in common with Amis’ characters. They tend to be European, (and the stories where he does try and write in an American voice, as in his too clever by half detective pastiche *Night Train*, tend to be weaker efforts) upper class or at least nouveau riche, or from the other end of the spectrum, IE sociopathic criminals. Either way one does not *want* to identify with Amis’ characters, at his best his writing thrums with a jet black misanthropy, a kind of weaponized contempt. The reader might shake their head in sympathy at their desperation, or laugh in recognition at their caustic wit, but almost to the person The Amis protagonist, if not the entire lexicon of Amis’ characters, are people who have gone horribly, disastrously wrong on their path in life.

On the other hand, should you look beneath the surface of received wisdom and notions of likeability, you’ll find an author who far from being out of touch still speaks powerfully and incisively to the world we inhabit today. No one writes with more seething wit about the vulgarity and hypocrisy of the rich and powerful. No one conjures the constant anxiety of looming apocalypse that our species has been dealing with for the last century or so with more vivid, sweaty fear: the

certainty of our environmental collapse, the nightmarish reality of our badly tended nuclear arsenals. No one hones the metaphysical edge to our existential fear, the inevitability of losing our illusions, the way that every day for the last little while has felt like the dreaded Horrorday featured in *London Fields*. Indeed rather than behind the times Amis has shown himself to be solidly in front of them. Thirty five years before daily think pieces about Toxic Masculinity and entitlement were showing up in on our feeds, Amis had given the phenomenon as thorough a dissection as has been offered in *Money*. In which the protagonist is handed cash and opportunity at every juncture despite clearly being an aggressive, drunken, ugly, borderline incompetent, willfully ignorant, buffoon. The fact that he has done all this while often remaining hilariously funny and always turning out reams of keenly honed prose is something of a miracle. *London Fields* is shockingly prescient for a novel over thirty years old, capturing the feeling of impending ecological, economic, and political collapse, and somehow finding an amalgam for social media obsession with a parable about a desire for darts super stardom.

Scorn is not usually an attractive trait but it has always been one of Amis' great weapons. His blades are as familiar, specialized, and well tended as a veteran chef's knives: the venomous understatement, the withering reversal and mimic, the judo like redirection of his opponent's own force.

## How can anyone try to build something in a world that seems so fixed on tearing itself apart?

[Keep reading.](#)



**KEEPING BUSY WITH PANDEMIC CRAFTING  
IN HONOR OF PRIDE MONTH!**

*Papercraft by Vija G. Mendelson*

Dear ReaderZ: Do you sew? Knit? Crochet? Underwater basket weave? If your creation has too many dimensions to fit into the zine, take a picture of it or write about it, and share it that way. [Submit to us now.](#)

Flash nonfiction*Rope Swing* by *Katrin Abel*

I'm riding out the virus from my temporary "park office" picnic table alongside the hike and bike trail and within view of the creek. Trail users stream past me by the dozen, seeking the choicest makeshift swim spots, the springs having shut down to Stop the Spread. Two young girls approach on a single cruiser bike.

"Hi...ma'am?"

I don't look up. Teenagers tend not to address me if they can avoid it, and it's embarrassing to respond in error.

"Ma'am? Sorry. Can we leave our bike here?"

I glance in their direction. They are beseeching, perhaps 13 or 14 years old, barely clothed, maneuvering the heavy cruiser, skinny and wobbly like bikinied fawns. I tell them to go ahead, but I'm leaving soon and can't stand sentry.

"That's okay. We just want to jump off the bridge. We'll be right back." They continue to struggle, fumble with the kickstand, sink into the mud, tangle in the weeds until my inaction shames me. I get up to reposition the bike sturdily onto the concrete pad of the picnic table and inform them that they are standing in position ivy. They shriek good-naturedly, thank me and run off. I return to the laptop to justify my existence on my telework activities reporting form, forgetting

about them, absorbed in the remainder of the day's tasks. They return a little after six.

"Hi, ma'am! Sorry! We lost track of the time. Thanks for staying!" I smile vaguely and don't correct their misapprehension. They are dripping wet, chattering and laughing at their chatters.

As I help them retrieve their bike and inquire about their bridge-jumping, a slurred voice emerges too close. "Hey girls, want to see a cool rope swing?" I know of no rope swing in the area. The offer emanates from a grown, swaying man, barely shy of thirty. He is ruddy and pockmarked, an incipient beer belly bulging over the elastic of his shorts. He eyeballs the girls and keeps trying to entice them, hyping the sundry glories of the suspect swing.

"Uhhh, that's okay; we already jumped off the bridge," demurs the taller girl, the one who had been piloting the bike.

"Yeah, we're good," agrees the shorter one through more chatters and nervous giggles. "Sorry!"

The swaying man persists, the girls titter and hide behind each other, I glare but don't otherwise intervene. To him I don't even register except as an obstacle. He sways away eventually, shouting, "You girls are beautiful!" over his shoulder from a healthy distance.

The taller girl speaks. "Callie, you shouldn't say you're sorry when someone starts talking to you like that. You don't have anything to apologize for."

“Sorry!” yelps Callie, then clasps her hand over her own mouth as her friend admonishes her again. “I mean, ‘not sorry.’ I’m not sorry!” I snort and try to nod sagely.

The girls and I stand for a moment in silence around the bike. “That guy’s gross,” I say authoritatively to the space between them, just to have it on record.

“Yeah, he was gross,” Callie affirms.

Now settled into my assigned role, I tell them to be careful on their ride home. They hop onto the banana seat and teeter away. I wonder if they lied to their moms in order to escape to the creek during quarantine, each claiming to be headed to the other’s house to finish their pre-algebra homework and fantasize about what it would be like to attend high school, if high school even started back up in the fall.

I imagine the ruddy drunk lamenting his failure to procure those fawns or bragging to his derelict pals that he would have succeeded if not for the interference of that wizened old crone. I see him as a mugshot-to-be. I see myself as Joyce Carol Oates on the beach. I see the girls as any number of her protagonists, too green, too soft, too vulnerable. I cannot see the virus, but it’s out here, too, among us.



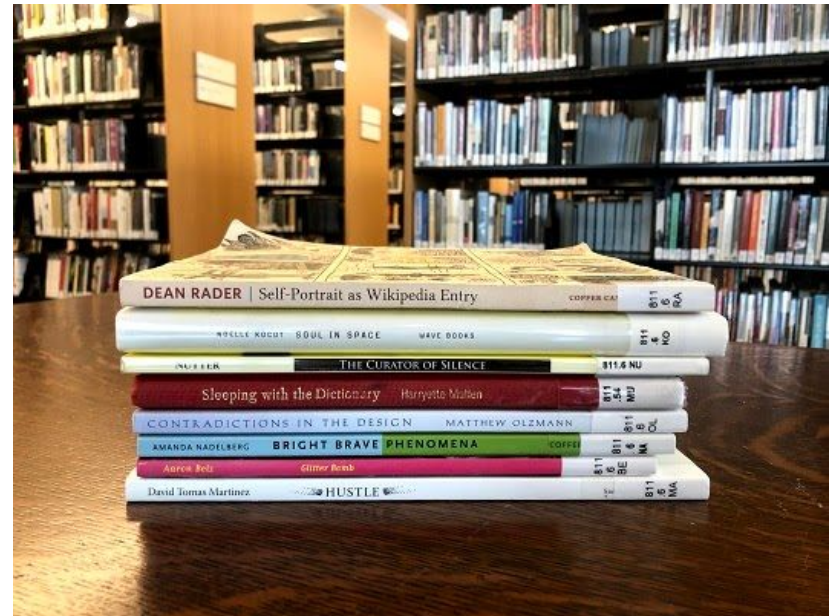
*Sky After a Thunderstorm by Sheila Hubertus*

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*Sorted Books - Eavesdropping by Vija G. Mendelson*

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*Sorted Books - Self-Portrait by Vija G. Mendelson*

Dear ReaderZ: Make your own “Sorted Books” concrete poetry and send it to us! [Submit to us now.](#)

Poetry*Too Close* by Katherine O'Brien

At the light, me, a car,  
 a van in front of me.  
 The green goes, then the van.  
 Tires screaming - t-bone truck  
 van keels, skids stops  
 silence

\*\*\*

Flash nonfiction*Virus Journals, Day 56: Littering is UnLAWFUL.*

By Katrin Abel

Near Deep Eddy a kayaking dad asks two young children to keep an eye on a third child, a placid baby in a stroller. They tickle the baby and coo at her obediently. When the baby begins to fuss, they retrieve a toy for her from the stroller pocket, but it fails to capture her interest. The baby drops the toy to the ground, prompting the boy to observe, "The baby littered; she's going to jail." His older sister corrects him. "No, Wyatt, the baby's not going to jail. She littered; she's going to Hell."

*We Move Forward* by Katrin Abel

2020



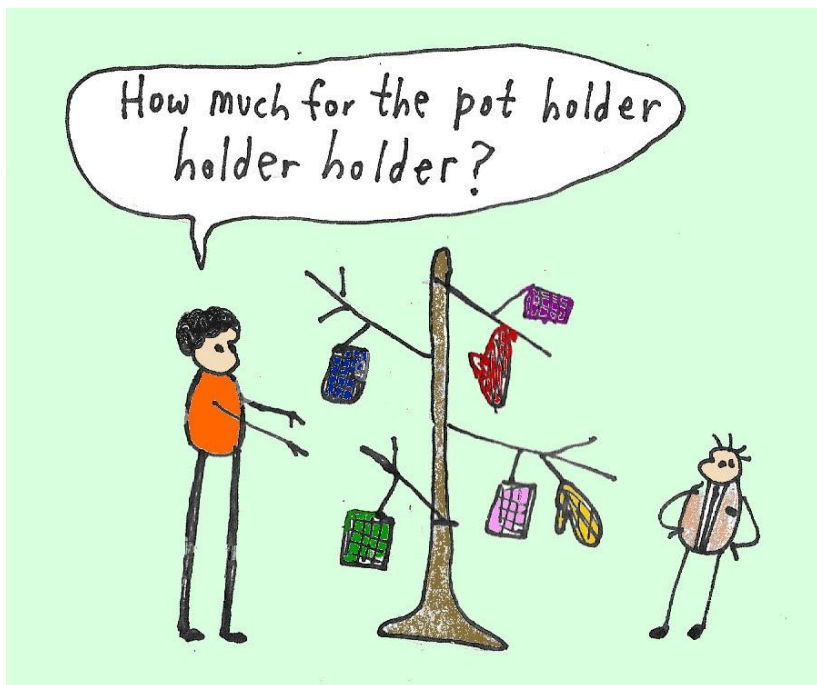


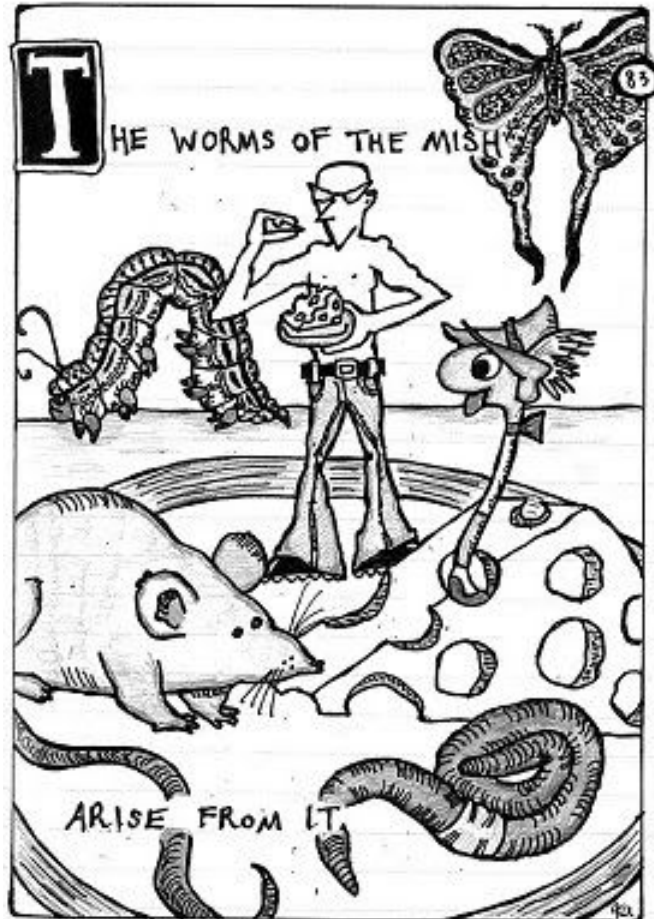
*The World Lies by Katrin Abel  
2020*



*World Salad by Palfloat (series of 4)  
October 2020*







*The Worms of the Mish by Katrin Abel  
2020*

### BiblioVisions™ - A Thought Experiment

#### *The Inconvenience Store*

Dear ReaderZ: What if you had to get all of your sustenance for the rest of your life from a single convenience store that only sold one food item and one beverage? What would you want them to be? Udaya says, “nachos n beer.” Rachel prefers, “Dr. Pepper with ice and.....Bagel dogs???” Share your menu choices here: [Submit to us now.](#)

#### Outro - What else can I submit to the zine?

Dear ReaderZ: Thank you so much for joining us for Issue One. Will you be contributing to Issue Two? Noodling over what other sorts of work you could submit? The wonders of creation on the preceding pages represent only the tip of the iceberg. Recipes, puzzles, mazes, jumbles, crosswords, mad-libs, Exquisite Corpses, choose-your-own-adventures, charts both pie and non, infographics, homemade Magic Eye pictures? Yes. What about crafting instructions or photos of the crafts themselves? Lanyards, God’s eyes, dream catchers, “loom hand” headbands, shrinky dinks, melting crayons all over wax paper in the oven? Also yes. There’s almost nothing you can’t make and share with us. (Honestly, it would be harder to come up with something we **didn’t** want to see.) Whatever your passion, let your artistic juices flow, and bottle up the slimy contents for the next issue of Vital SignZ.

# SUBMIT

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Meet the Contributors

**Bryce Wilson** has worked in the book mines lo' these past three years, toiling to bring forth the purest veins of book ore.

**Palfloat** is a 47 year old dishwasher that appreciates all of the animals.

**Katherine O'Brien** reports, "Loulou, all my friends are dogs. Cheers, darling!"

**Vija G. Mendelson** reads \*lots\* of books, finds joy playing with color, and loves to travel.

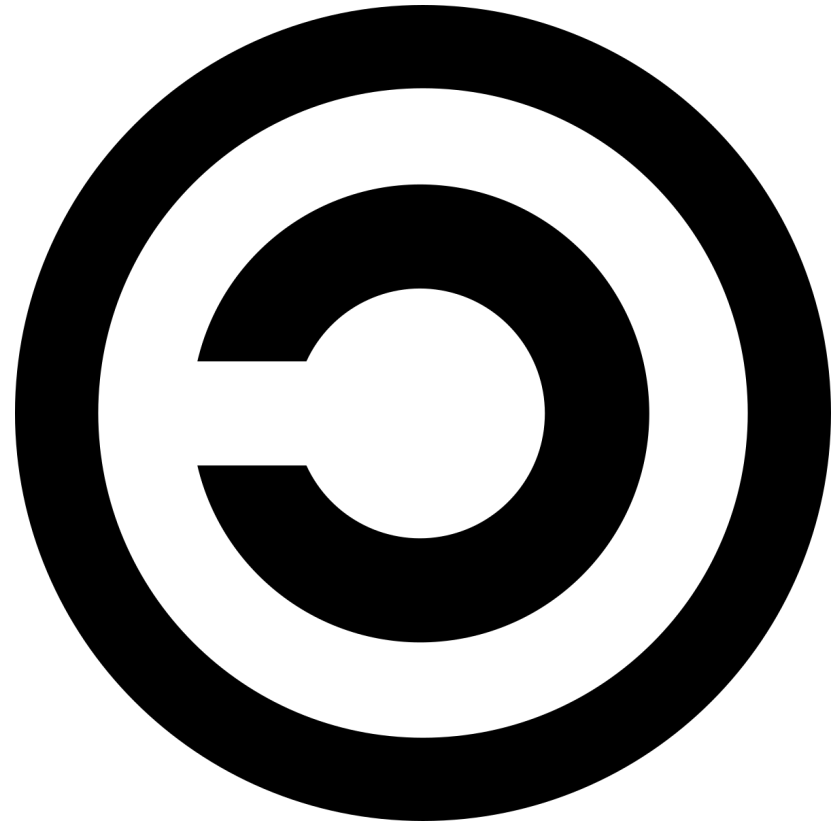
**Amalia "Litsa" Litsa** loves cycling and co-owns Dear Diary Coffeehouse.

**Sheila Hubertus** owns four copies of Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice* and is an avid consumer of breakfast food.

**Jennifer Connor** is crafty.

**chris\_clear\_33** is an artist and educator with high regard for smart and strong women.

**Katrin Abel** rides a bicycle and reveres the toad.



2020