

Mars



STORIES & POEMS

RAPHAEL MATTO

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ALSO BY RAPHAEL MATTO

100 Bad Poems
God and Other Monsters

Mars

Nantucket, Massachusetts

DESIGNED AND PRODUCED BY RAPHAEL MATTO LTD



TYPESET IN WHITMAN

When Kent Lew created Whitman in 2002 he was inspired by classic 20th-century text faces like Caledonia, Electra, and Joanna. “I think of the typeface as having an essentially American quality. I hesitate to bring that up nowadays, because of our society’s current nationalistic fervor.”

ELECTRA LT STD

Designed in 1935 by William Addison Dwiggins, Electra is a standard book typeface. “If you don’t get your type warm it will be just a smooth, commonplace, third-rate piece of good machine technique, no use at all for setting down warm human ideas, just a box full of rivets.”

AND JOANNA MT STD

Joanna was designed by Eric Gill in 1930-1931, based on type originally cut by Robert Granjon (1513–1589). Gill created the typeface for his printing firm Hague & Gill—which he formed to give his idle son-in-law an occupation—and named the typeface after his daughter.

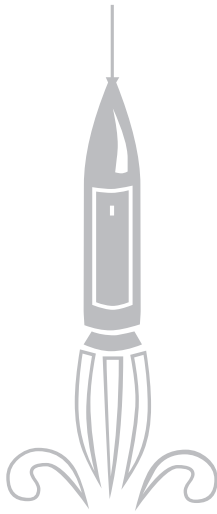
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A NOTE TO THE READER

All promotion for this book is by word-of-mouth—so if you like it please promote it on your social networks and... email me!

raphaelmatto@gmail.com

I'd love to hear what you think, especially if you have revision suggestions for either this book's content or design. You can also follow me on Twitter at:

@RaphaelMatto

... for news about "Mars" and future book announcements.

Thanks!

For The Readstrange Writers

M

A

R

S

So this is Mars, he said, undressing.

~ Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles*

Polished rocket

JIM POLISHED THE rocket with his underwear.
He was naked, except for heavy military sunglasses.

The silver hull fattened him in its reflection
while he watched a beautiful girl approach from the rocks.

A pistol lay in the sand a few paces off
with a fully charged battery.

Your machine flatters you, said the girl.
So this is Mars, Jim said, jumping down.

There were other movements behind the rocks—
shimmerings, heat venting.

That weapon will not hurt me, said the girl.
Jim picked up the pistol. Is that so?

He fired into her chest, and she screamed.
She stood there and looked at him, screaming.

Finally she fell backwards.
She did not look like a Martian.

Just a beautiful girl.

~ September, 2007

Obsolete

“I DON’T CARE what your mom thinks,” the computer said.

Wires were glowing in its throat and the fans were spinning; the computer was my height with curly red hair and a strong smile. I let it borrow a bathing suit and we threw off our shirts, crashing through the stream towards the reservoir. This new computer ran faster than my old one—I’d raced them in a clover field the week before.

Mother was bored when I told her.

“How can you want new stuff when the world is globally this-ing and that-ing? Go find a book.”

“Books are made from trees.”

“I’m sure computers are made from trees too.”

I thought about my old computer, barefoot in a blue dress, typing out a message on the trail behind us. There was a tab key in the grass—cracked, almost lost—the day I raced them.

“So? I’m not made to last,” it had shrugged. “Neither are you.”

~ January, 2011

The chalkboard

HE STOOD BACK from the chalkboard to allow us time to read over the equation. Several sat back after a moment, then more of us, nodding, until everyone in the lecture hall had relaxed, satisfied.

“Is everyone agreed then? Yes? Good.”

So that was it. We’d figured out everything.

He rang the bell and we shuffled out onto the lawn, holding our hands up to ward off the winter sun. Several of us passed around the equation on little paper cards so it could be distributed further afield.

“Our work as scientists and mathematicians is complete. Those of you who wish to learn, I don’t know, the piano, or cultivate some artistic skill, you are dismissed—you are now free to pursue those hobbies.”

He paused to let us reflect.

I felt... queer, all of a sudden. I looked to my left and was surprised to see my neighbor looking back at me.

“It should be known that any attempt to corrupt or destroy our findings here today will be considered a crime of the highest order—a moral crime—carrying a sentence of death.”

That was the end of his speech, so we went home.

I turned on the TV and tried to watch some reruns of an old show about explorers. It was strange to see them flying out into space in search of answers, now that I knew everything. I grew bored and stared out the window. Outside, the air was blowing through an old willow tree in the same way it had my whole life.

~ February, 2014

Monster

YOU'RE A MONSTER out at sea—
lost at sea—
and you're very bored.

You blast quantities of foam
from your nasty ass to watch
the rainbows.

If only there was a ship
to wallop, or a whale to hug, like a slippery
moaning teddy bear.

You would wreak havoc—
you practice wreaking havoc by
thrashing your tentacles

until a misty white house
made of jewels falls all around you.
You are a baby in a tub,

a teenager dressed with spikes
pounding on your bedroom door
like it's the bottom of the sea.

~ August, 2009

Blackbirds

Birds fall
from your hands,
their wings in my face.

~ April, 2014

The mountain's crown

THE GENERAL could not move the mountain.
He sent his army home and stood staring up at the tranquil obstruction.
They would lose the war.

He set out to climb to the summit. It took three days. After he arrived, slept, and contemplated the view, he shoveled the peak of the mountain into a sack; he took the sack down to his wife in their house along the river, ushered her into their fields and pointed out the distant mountain. She was puzzled, but clapped a hand over her mouth when she looked in the sack. *Bad luck!* she hissed and spat at his feet.

~ January, 2013

Home

TAKE ME HOME, the martian said.
we sat in the car—
I couldn't talk I was so mad.

There was a clear moral line;
the martian just turned on the radio
and stared out the window.

I approached from the north,
drove down the hills at dusk
towards a valley filled with lights.

She was shivering,
a ghostly blue.
I offered her my coat from the backseat.

It was our last trip together—that,
I'm not sure what you call it—
summer.

~ June, 2009

No fossil record

PHIL LOOKED SHAKY as he pushed open the pod door and climbed down into the loading bay's RETURNS ZONE. We'd sent monkeys and dogs back in time, but Phil was the first person.

Everyone in Control left their monitors to watch as Phil made his way through quarantine—scrubbing his hands, taking off his clothes, then closing his eyes for the UV scan and decontamination flash. He stopped in front of the iodine pills and turned to stare at us through the thick glass window.

“Phil looks a little funny,” someone said.

“Hey guys. Check it out.”

The computer log had finished downloading from the pod and media was cycling on the editor's monitor. Reluctantly, we turned away from Phil. He would be another thirty minutes in quarantine anyway.

The editor scanned through photos—there was the limestone outcropping we'd mapped when the monkeys brought back the second pod, and familiar *Dryopteris Erythrosora* and other plant species from the Miocene; images of North Africa as it was five million years ago. We switched to the video feed: Phil talking into the camera. Phil taking samples. Phil walking into the jungle. At this point the editor slowed things down—it was the first visual data gathered any distance from the landing site, and there were a lot of plants we didn't recognize.

“Looks like we missed a few,” one of the paleontologists mumbled.

Phil pushed further into the jungle and began following a worn path, which he took impressions from—some kind of hoof-print. The path wove along a ridge, and Phil paused frequently to collect specimens of the unfamiliar plants; the botanists in our group were audibly pleased. Finally, Phil stepped out into a clearing and, after a strange pause, lifted the camera and panned down into a valley.

Probably, a structure came into view. A house. Houses, a town. A city.

Sprawling. A civilization.

There was fire. Wooden wheels—something that looked like a cart rolled along a dirt street. Bipedals shuffled between mud and thatch-roofed buildings.

Three million years before any record of Homo Habilis.

Neither Phil or the camera moved.

“Fast forward,” someone said.

The editor jogged forward and soon more scenes flashed at us: Phil walking down the valley and into streets, then faces—drooping, worried faces—flashed by, something not quite right about them. Then in a blink the camera was inside one of the buildings and the editor switched back to speed.

Phil was asking an old woman questions in Greek, Vandalic, Latin, pointing at his arm and bending it at the elbow. The woman sat like an immobilized lump in her chair, surrounded by wooden bowls full of fruit. She shook her head and held up her own arm, bending and twisting it in alarming ways. She said something Phil didn’t understand. We could hear the frustration in his voice as he asked his questions again.

“Where’s our linguist? Is Brad here?”

A small man stepped forward. “Yes, I’m here, sorry. Uh, she’s speaking some kind of Proto-Sapien, of course, although it *sounds* proto-Persian. I think she’s saying something about her bones. Her bones hurt, or, no... they’re missing. All her bones are gone. I know that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Yes it does. Look at her arm!” someone said.

And then everyone was talking at once.

“Are you saying our ancestors had no skeletons?”

“That’s why there’s no fossil record!”

“That’s ridiculous—how could somebody walk on two legs without a skeleton?”

“Maybe their bones disintegrate when they get old.”

“These people are obviously not our ancestors. Some other race. Something must have wiped them out. Along with all those weird plants.”

“What, like a meteor?”

“Oh man, why does there always have to be a meteor?”

Brad spoke up above the chatter. “Listen! It’s not normal for them,” he said. “That’s what the old woman is telling Phil—that she’s sick. They’re all sick. Phil just isn’t understanding. See how she’s gesturing to her nose and mouth and waving him away? The virus must be airborne.”

There was silence in the room.

The project manager cleared his throat. “And so contagious it erased them

all from paleontological history.” He turned to the head of quarantine. “David, do we scan for diseases that dissolve bone?”

“No, we’ve never had a reason to,” David said.

“Never had a reason to what?” Phil asked as he limped queerly towards us, toweling off his hair.

~ March, 2013

Just made

YOU JUST MADE me out of snow,
stacked me up with blocks, scribbled hair
onto my head—I'm almost
balanced in a row on the table, but I fall
over, I keep knocking more and
more of myself over—

now I'm a wall of bricks, now I've got
wheels and I'm fast, now I shine
on your neck. Now I've got thousands
of parts—I calculate, I almost think
I could take a step forward
without you.

~ August, 2013

The President

A LITTLE GIRL CAUGHT HIM on the 6 o'clock news. She pulled off his mask. It was The President of the United States of America.

The President was taken to jail and shoved into a cell. He squatted in a corner and very slowly his sweater lifted off his shoulders, then ripped as two damp wings unfolded onto the concrete floor. The President told us that he was leaving—that we should have never voted for him—and slipped through the metal bars. Then he began killing reporters and prison guards and innocent bystanders and after a while we realized he was going to kill all of us. His wings were terrible, they covered us until we couldn't see anything and then our thinking stopped. The President destroyed our cities and flew into the sky to find God—and when he found Him, the President of the United States of America pulled at God's face until a chunk of it dislodged, and he pulled at the corner of His mouth until it broke away, and there was only empty space behind it. God was patient, but finally He screamed. He screamed a flood of people—they fell from the holes in his face and the President caught them in his wings and they were gone, and the poem was suddenly very quiet. Nothing was happening in the poem anymore. The readers read the lines as they moved down the page, and they kept reading until they understood that—really—nothing else was going to happen—that there was nothing left for them. That whatever had been there before was gone.

~ February, 2014

Orchard

THE WIND blows apples
and we enjoy pie by candle light,
—a muffled thudding on the black hills.

Mom says it sounds like a tired
and confused man has lost his way.

I lie in bed listening to the foot falls
become heavy. Too heavy,
I think, to be apples. Or a single man.
My parents are not cautious and should lock
the open door downstairs.

I watch one apple fall,
stretch from red to rubbery black—
becoming a boot
that fills with toes and flesh;
I hear a heel pound the dirt.

Each pair of fallen apples leaves
one whole man standing in our fields
staring in through my open window.

~ August, 2005

Superpower

WE WERE coming up with superpowers for superheros when Joey said “Stop.” He had thought of the ultimate superpower. We were all like “whatever” but Joey was serious so we waited for him to finish a really long dramatic pause.

Then he said the ultimate superpower was the ability to have sex with your enemy’s mom or wife or sister or daughter or brother or father or son (because his superhero was bisexual) no matter where they were, even if they were already dead.

I stared down at the gloves I was drawing—they could open doors to a dimension where it was impossible to remember evil deeds. What sort of strange adventures would Joey’s superhero fail to recall, if I ever met him on a bus in that dimension, and asked?

~ August, 2009

Curiosity

MONSTER WAS TIRED of following the rover. He'd watch it trundle around like a retarded seal, get stuck, free itself—to the almost audible cheers of NASA engineers back on Earth. Sometimes it zapped stuff with a hokey little laser. He felt like kicking it.

Instead, Monster sat down in the red clay and tried crying; he heaved his chest in and out chanting “Boo hoo, boo hoo.” It didn't help much, so he lay back and looked up at the stars instead. It had been weeks since Beast left for Saturn. After their BIG FIGHT he had said, “We need a break—so do what I say for once. Wait here.”

There wasn't much to eat on Mars, but the rover had some kind of biosensor. Monster would watch where it was going, then bound ahead and gobble up the algae or slurp up the water, or whatever it was, then brush away his footprints with the back of his paw. Curiosity would arrive a few hours later, rotate in confusion, then head off towards some other promising coordinate.

Besides minor life forms and weird rocks, there really wasn't anything for the rover to discover, just Beast's “art project.” Beast and Monster had assembled it from items they brought from Earth: trees, whales, some headstones from an abandoned graveyard they'd found out in Nebraska, fireworks, polar bears, and some oil to light it all on fire. They'd heaved their supplies up through Earth's atmosphere in the general direction of Mars, hoping the gravitational pull of the red planet would cradle their haul. It didn't really work out that way. Several whales were still out there, solemnly somersaulting towards Pluto. One had impacted like a meteor on Jupiter's moon, Thebe.

“What's the point?” Monster asked one day.

“What do you mean?”

“Your art project, what's the point?”

“Oh. It's like this: their little robot flies all the way to a new world to find aliens and life and shit, but then there's just this heap of dead whales and

polar bears on fire—to remind them of what they did to the last place.”

Monster didn't think it was such a brilliant idea. “It's kind of, uh... obvious?”

That's when Beast lost his shit and swam up into space to cool off.

Monster told himself to be more supportive next time.

~ October, 2012

Starfish

We swim out
to the starfish
pile

of stars.

Baffled, wind
and some kids
build castles

of king sand.

~ July, 2007

Julie

THE WOMAN was inside the head
of the man
robot

A real man a flesh and blood man approached on horseback

The woman
had spent a lot of money on the man
robot she punched
in some code and he drew his sword

The other man the flesh and blood man
dismounted

and stared at the robot

Julia?
His sword hung loose at his side
What's this all about?

The woman's name was not Julia
It was Julie. *How could he not remember!*
She punched in more code the robot lurched forward

Woah woah woah can't we talk about this?

The huge sword was already dropping
The man fainted left drew his sword beheaded the robot

then picked up the head by its wiry hair

Its eyes flashed at him

Listen, Julia, I had a really good time I think you're great I'm just not ready

Julie got up from her seat and left the control room

slamming the robot's eyes behind her

~ May, 2014

Baby shower

“Mom. Dad. Lisa and I have decided to replicate,” Tom said.

Mrs. Dewitt put a hand to her throat. “It’s a little soon, don’t you think?”

“Mrs. Dewitt, Mr. Dewitt, I’ve only known your son for a few months, but we’re madly in love. It’s true. I know it.”

“Actually, there’s someone we want you to meet,” Tom said, walking to the front door; he waved at the car. There was movement and the car rocked back and forth. They all waited. “Sorry, he hasn’t figured out the door handle yet—I *thought you showed him that, Lisa.*” Tom ran across the front yard in his socks and they all watched him coax another man out of the car, then lead him up the path and into the foyer. “This is Bob,” Tom said, slapping his arm around the other man’s shoulder, “Fresh from the replicator!”

Bob stared at the Dewitts with glassy eyes, then turned and nuzzled his face into Tom’s armpit.

Mrs. Dewitt broke the silence. “He’s wearing your nice blue blazer, Tom—I gave that to you for Christmas!”

Lisa stepped in. “He needed to look nice today, Mrs. Dewitt—to meet his grandparents.” She turned to Tom, whispering, “*You didn’t tell me that was a gift from your mother!*”

“Grandparents!”

“You’re grandparents now,” Tom said, grinning. “Tada! He looks just like you, Dad—see the way I combed his hair, like you showed *me.*”

Mrs. Dewitt shook her head. “Lisa, how will you take care of... what’s his name again? Bob? How will you take care of Bob while you’re in school?”

“Oh, I dropped out of school. I’ll have to stay home with him until next fall—that’s when preschool starts. He’ll be talking by then.” As Lisa explained all this, she led Bob to the couch, unbuttoned her blouse and lifted out a breast; the man cooed delightedly, lay his head across her lap and began nursing. “Lucky he’s not a biter,” Lisa said, smiling up at them.

~ February, 2014

The touch tank

WE RUN THROUGH the museum (not allowed)
and shove our way to the edge of the tank—
a guy next to us is holding a star *in his hand*
turning it over, watching it gasp and glitter;
You grin at me like we're in for evil amounts
of fun—we reach our BIG hands up UP
into the tank, each grabbing one end of the same
rainbow. And we tug it apart—it splits right
down the seams, bursts open—a *mess!* We get
green and red—laughing—everywhere. It starts to
rain, hard, so we turn our palms up, pop
our hands open like umbrellas—happy, dry,
underneath!—rain pooling in our lifelines,
running down, pouring from between our fingers—
it splashes all around us. The tank clears up
and: there's the moon, wow—
we paddle at the sky until the moon
flips over and bobs and starts drifting our way
and you grab it. You grab it and heave it down
out of the tank and scratch at its craters. And
you want to smash it on the floor to see
what's inside. But I tell you not to do that. I
make you put it back. That's when you stomp
off—you leave me there all alone
with my hands in the sky.

~ March, 2014

Penny

I TRAPPED YOUR SPIRIT in a penny and
dropped it into the ocean—it
was impulsive, yes. Yes, yes, yes.

~ February, 2014

Second August

THE WIND CHIMES were silent in Second August
and it was hot, on Mars.

He could almost see distant cicadas
waving in flags of desert heat.

The robot was wearing black shoes
with poorly tied laces, when she came back

hair tangled with rust. She needed a wash.
He gathered fire fish from the river gasses

and poured them on her shoulders from a bucket.
Her neck steamed and she leaned forward

sighing. He thought of dismantling her left shoulder
for parts. He had taught her to repair parts

of his own brain that had failed. Instead
they cut each other's hair on the sloping dunes

and switched on the half-charged mechanical cat
who shook off years of sand and dust with a sneeze.

~ August, 2008

How to make sure Jesus doesn't come back

DROWN HIM in cow's blood
in a wooden box.

Drive nails into the lid—
not his hands—
and bury the box in sand.

Use this method, and his father's magic
cannot reach him.

~ November, 2013

A lecture

I ALWAYS GIVE my lecture with a gun next to me on the podium. It gets their attention—I keep my hand on it and rap on the wood for emphasis.

Not that a gun would do me any good, of course. It's about respect. And trust. When I'm waving the gun around, pointing it at them, or at my multi-media presentation, I could be one of them. The gun could be one of them—a spirit holding me like I was the gun, urging me outside into the cold.

I make my appeal: “We all want the same thing, right? To go back to the way things were?”

I hear murmurs of agreement.

“Then we need to cooperate,” I tell them, “just for a little while.” When I'm finished I ask if there are any questions, and I can *almost* see one of them—the evil spirit in the front row—raise her hand and point it at me.

~ August, 2012

The god we buried in the graveyard

IT WAS JACK'S idea. He said his mom never bothered his dad anymore—after she was buried. That god, it was getting really big. And it ate my cat. So we tricked it—we buried it, too. Sometimes I hear it in my head, growling like a Doberman Pinscher. And sometimes I wonder why it can't get out. Maybe it *can* get out. Maybe it thinks we're still playing and it's just hiding.

~ *January, 2013*

Revenge

IF WE WERE little again
I'd chase you around the sand box
and throw rocks at you and look up
your skirt. If you made it to the tree
house, I'd push you out the window,
sneak a mouse into your lunch box
and stab your doll with my jackknife.
Even if you beat me up on the dusty
playground in front of everybody, even if
your nose bled and you walked like a boy
and you were a badass little hippy girl
with rolled up sleeves and bare feet
and you swung your tiny fist
all the way around right into my face
and kicked when I was down—I would
still wipe mud on your dress and
get you out first in dodgeball because
I'd know how hard I'd fall for you
when I grew up.

~ May, 2008

Mars trinity

A CHURCH LIMPS into a crater on
three hinged flying
buttresses and huddles in
a dark corner.

On the dusky ridge to the south,
a pack of companies stutters
closer. One of them lifts its tubed
neck and howls through a
pair of revolving doors.



Dawn now, the church unfolds,
arches—freezes—
thrashes its steeple and bells
crash—Alarm—!

A company prowls into
the crater, holding out its carpeted
hands to show they are empty; stocks
squeal, smashed by a network of wheels.



Far away, governments stride on stiff
marble columns, their many legs tapping
like canes, unsure under the weight of
so many bodies. Leaders crawl their
skin, fins of electric current.

~ September, 2009

The cat's home is the cat

I HAVE A GOOD MECHANIC. He looked at the engine, put a hand on the carburetor—pulled himself close, closer, finally into the engine.

He shimmied past the crankshaft and started swimming—he swam deep, past the battery, piston and piston rings, around and around the timing belt out of sight behind the block.

The engine started to purr. Far away, I heard my mechanic yell, “You have a problem!”

My dentist had to pry my jaw wide to fit his boot, then his shoulders down and into that dark place. “I’ll just be a little while,” he said as he lifted up a fang and locked it behind him.

But it was you. You who went wading into solid matter—bones—you who climbed my skeleton, tiny, my vine forest of veins, then swam the pumping rapids, breath breath red blue—through a body made of filling chambers. And when you found the problem you said, “I’ve found a cat.”

“Pull him out by the neck!” I said. “I’ll eat four barking dogs! Lower them by their leashes down my throat!”

Now, when I breathe, I see birds fluttering—and I can finally smell the hidden smells.

I will be your bear-filled cave. I will be your broken clock. I will weave my fingers into a rope and tie myself around you.

~ June, 2008

Poem gun

AT THE READING a bullet floated toward you
like a stranger's finger
and touched the sweat behind your ear.

It pressed aside atoms of your skull
to make way for its atoms
and nested as a silver song in your head.

The world began to change, for you.

All I did was strike a tuning fork
against the bullet as it passed—
and drank from my shattering glass.

~ July, 2007

Tiny red man

I THOUGHT that balloon
was a tiny red man
crawling in the ally on his belly

I am terrified for a blink
when he pops, and then think

oh.

~ *January, 2007*

The Monkey War of 2390

OUR SPIES LEARNED THAT RUSSIANS were selling munitions to the monkeys, in return for golden bananas (that GM wonder perfected over centuries by monkey scientists).

We had no choice. We had to nuke the monkeys.

The monkeys knew it was coming; we could tell from our satellite images: many of them—whole towns or very large families—had set off on rafts, paddling away from their small tropical island.

But we only got a close look at them when the bombs fell... and the cameras on our bombs told a different story.

An uneasy silence settled over our Command Room. Then came the rustling, shouting—people panicking, helpless at their desks. Finally one of the generals screamed:

“Those aren’t monkeys!”

Evolution must have twisted a key on that small island. Fleshy pink and brown faces gaped up into the bombcams, while small hairy—and some hairless—bipeds clung to them, crying. Children. Humans?

Officials scrambled to disengage, but it was too late—the video feed patiently explained our mistake to us.



Ultimately, the moral trauma of that war led to our defeat in the Dog War of 2479; when it came down to it, we just couldn’t pull the trigger. The irony, of course, is that the dogs were never going to become human.

No, they were becoming something else entirely.

~ February, 2013

Supermarket cat

Supermarket cat
you're so ugly
and amazing,
pushing your little cart down the aisle
with your kittens mewling in the basket—
you've cut out all the coupons for dry food
and litter, I know how expensive all that stuff is.

~ May, 2014

Hypochondriac

Jack knew *something* was wrong. He tried to explain the feeling to his doctor: like a rusty bullet in his gut, like someone had punched him hard an hour ago. His doctor would listen, leave the room, and return with a script for peppermint capsules, or a referral to an acupuncturist. Jack grudgingly followed these instructions, although he suspected his doctor wasn't applying the full force of his intelligence to the case.

Jack did feel better after these visits, temporarily—in fact he felt completely healthy; the pains in his gut vanished whether or not he filled his prescriptions and Jack invariably wondered if perhaps he wasn't sick at all. Or maybe the doctor's visits *themselves* were the cure. But Jack found that hard to believe. Was his body really that fickle? Like a child craving attention in its old age? The pain in Jack's gut was so intense—it seemed improbable that its only source was his mind. Even so, after some research, Jack took the liberty of diagnosing himself as a hypochondriac.

He knew better than to tell his wife, Jeanne. What if, after all these years, he revealed this *psychological* condition? But he did tell his son, Jeff, who had studied medicine briefly in college.

“That's not what a hypochondriac is, Dad. Hypochondriacs think they have some disease they don't actually have. But they *do* have Hypochondria. You're not telling me you have cancer—you're just telling me you have hypochondria, which, by definition—if you were really a hypochondriac—you wouldn't have. It's a Catch 22. You have to be worried about something besides hypochondria to be a hypochondriac.”

This confused Jack and he wasn't sure his son's argument was sound. “But if the examinations themselves cure me, doesn't that mean they're a placebo? Which would mean my pain is psychosomatic, right?”

“Psychosomatic? Have you been surfing the internet? Now that is something hypochondriacs do—it's a dangerous trend among the delusionally ill and can

be hazardous to your health.”

“Hazardous to my health? Hazardous to my health!” Jack’s temper receded when he saw the fear in Jeff’s eyes. He hadn’t meant to scold the boy.

But if it wasn’t hypochondria, then what was wrong with him?

As winter approached, the severity and frequency of the pains increased—now it felt like someone was digging into his side with a shovel—and found himself at the doctor’s office almost every week. When the doctor finally rejected his request for *another* follow-up appointment, Jack felt lost. He started driving to the clinic during his lunch hour just to sit in the waiting room. When that became too embarrassing, he watched from his car in the parking lot. But it wasn’t a substitute—and the pain became unbearable. Jack needed *real* doctor’s appointments.

He made appointments with several doctors in neighboring towns. It would be expensive to see so many different doctors because his insurance wouldn’t cover it, but he was desperate—and it worked. Jack left each appointment exhausted with relief.

And one of the doctors did find something—Dr. Bregman. A calcium deposit had formed on his thumb. Bregman seemed concerned and wanted to remove it by performing a procedure called arthroscopy. It was a costly surgery, perhaps unnecessary. But it meant more time at the doctor’s office, so Jack agreed.

And Jack’s pain vanished—it was so completely gone that Jack canceled his other appointments. He began to believe that his horrible nightmare was finally over.

But two months later the pain returned. Jack met with Dr. Bregman and asked him to look for other calcium deposits.

“You’re clear,” the doctor said, smiling.

Jack was devastated.

“Jack? Is something wrong?”

Jack shook his head for a while. “If I tell you something in confidence—”

“Yes, we are required by law to keep it confidential.”

“I would like another surgery.”

“I knew you had something on your mind. Yes, it’s common for men your age, there’s no need to feel embarrassed. A child late in life can be an unwanted complication.”

Jack was puzzled, but recovered quickly. “Yes. Yes, that’s what I want. A... uh, vasectomy. I’d like it done as soon as possible.”

And, like magic, the pain was gone. Jack did feel a twinge of regret. Jeanne

wasn't beyond her child bearing years and he should have consulted her, but Jack shrugged it off as a necessary evil.

There was no going back after that—five months later when the pain returned, Jack had a plan.

“It’s like a dull pain near my navel that gets sharper as it moves to my right side.”

“Well, I hate to say it, but it sounds like you have appendicitis.”

Jack muffled his excitement. He’d memorized the symptoms the night before. “Appendicitis? Really? Although, now that I think about it, my father has his appendix removed.”

“That’s not surprising—it’s a hereditary disease.”

“Is it? When can we schedule the surgery?”

~ *March, 2014*

The highest roller coaster

EVENTUALLY THE AMUSEMENT park owners were forced to face the facts. Gravity was not sufficient at such high altitudes to press roller coaster cars down onto the tracks or, for that matter, passengers to their seats.

The engineers of Splash Park's tour de force—untastefully christened "The Challenger"—believed they had taken all factors into consideration. They *hadn't* foreseen, however, certain riders' insistence on remaining suited in the spandex "space duds" obtained at rival Laser Tag Arena... which effectively lubricated passengers as they ascended, slipping rapidly through the troposphere and, unfortunately, out of the one-size-fits-all restraining harnesses.

The first child to reach escape velocity in this manner was never found—loud speakers on the park grounds repeatedly asked Billy to report to the front gates, where his father waited with his little brother, impatiently balancing an extra melting soft serve twist.

For a while, Coast Guard satellites kept an eye out, despite diagrams on the nightly news that convincingly demonstrated the boy's trajectory likely placed him far outside the known solar system.

~ May, 2013

Alan

HE WAS MY favorite teacher and taught a class called “The Aesthetics of Science Fiction.” He and his wife invited three students to Christmas Dinner once a year.

It was an extremely cold walk, but their old house was warm and the snow on our hats and boots melted and pooled on the floorboards. They served us hot apple cider, and then cocoa with marshmallows. Allen’s wife wore a red and white checkered apron and there was a model of the World’s Fair in a custom-made wood and glass case in the Hobby Room. His wife taught English too—at a community college one town over. They had a son who worked on movies in Hollywood.

Fix or six years later, I met Alan and his wife at their favorite diner in Manhattan. They were radiant, retired, interested in my life in New York. I had come to love them both.

Then Alan e-mailed one day to say his wife had died of cancer. It was too awful. Maybe if they hadn’t been so happy it would have been okay. I wanted to tell him to be strong, to keep living. His wife must have said something like that to him just before she died. But I couldn’t do it. Because I didn’t believe it was possible. Because I was in love myself.

~ August, 2012

Steven

HE HAD WON the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. I was a student in his office trying to understand why I hadn't won the school's fiction prize.

"Are you sure the judge read my story?"

"I can double-check, but I'm sure he did."

"My story was good. Better than last year." I had won the same prize the previous year.

"I didn't read it, so I can't comment."

"Can you call the judge and make sure he read my story? I haven't been able to sleep." My reaction to losing was immature, but I couldn't help pressing the matter. I expected Steven to start acting uncomfortable.

Instead he leaned forward, "You seem upset," he said. "Because you want to be a writer? Is that it? Here's all I can offer you right now." He paused, squinting at me. "Real writers are crazy. It's crazy what we do. Spending so much time at our desks, away from the world—up in our heads. Why would anyone do that?"

I nodded dutifully. He was going to shuffle me out with this pat advice: writers were special—martyrs—and it wasn't an easy burden to bear.

"No. You're not getting it." He stared at me until *I* started to feel uncomfortable. "Really crazy. Crazy!" He smiled at me. "Stop worrying about it. You're a real writer." He patted my leg helpfully. "I can tell."

~ September, 2012

Barry

MY UNDERGRADUATE poetry teacher, Barry, proposed a dinner party. Gabe offered to host; he was a line cook at a restaurant downtown. There were a few students already at Gabe's apartment when I arrived exactly on time with a bottle of wine; I gravitated towards the couch in the living room and settled in. Someone said dinner was going to be pork and cooked peaches. By the time Barry turned up, we were all chatting about workshop, laughing—except for Gabe, who was cooking in the kitchen.

Barry stood in the doorway until he had our attention. "What are you doing?" He said, frowning at us. "Just waiting to be fed? Someone get in there and keep him company!" I'd never seen him angry before.

We all ran into the kitchen, knocking knives and a cutting board onto the floor, pressing up against each other until there was no room to move. The peaches smelled wonderful. Gabe was smiling, red-faced—there were sweat stains on his shirt.

"Well? Someone wash the dishes!" Barry roared.

Colleen jumped into action.

Barry turned to the rest of us, "Don't ever leave your host alone in the kitchen. You are not children anymore."

~ September, 2009

Lorrie

SHE SAID, “I loved the first twenty years of teaching and hated the second twenty.” We were at her cabin in Vermont. There was a lake and loons and high grass, and a noisy boat which we watched speed left to right, right to left. There were more than a hundred photos of students on the refrigerator. I was one of them. Her husband left our lunch of sliced meats and walked out to the dock to stare at his rowboat. “I hated it. Trying to convince students that they should be writers when it’s all I wanted to do.” After a while two friends of hers, psychiatrists, walked up the path. They were young and lived at the other end of the lake—we had watched them swim over to us.

~ *September, 2012*

Bob

I RAN INTO MY ex-wife's father, Bob, that summer. It was a coincidence—he was leaving, I was arriving—both of us visiting the same friend at a remote lake house. My second wife was with me.

A cloud of dust bloomed between our braking cars. When it cleared, I saw that Bob had thrown open his door and was striding towards me, shouting. Someone in his car reached across the seat to slam his door shut. I had known Bob for eight years. He pulled me out of the car and hugged me like I was a lost son.

We settled into acting confused to see each other. I was truly confused. We were in the middle of the woods. I introduced him to my new wife who passed her hand to him like a queen. He introduced me to the two white-haired women in his car. They were giggling and waved at me through the window but wouldn't roll it down.

I had borrowed my mother's car, which Bob noticed. He asked about her cancer. I forgot she ever had cancer.

"It's like it never happened."

Bob said he was in a rush but offered to take me to lunch—he was staying in town. We traded numbers and he vanished in another cloud of dust. That's when I noticed the mosquitoes everywhere, on me, biting me.

The next day we met at a cafe where I ordered the kind of fruit drink I never order. He had a cup of coffee and seemed relaxed and happy to see me. I wondered what he'd tell his daughter—my ex-wife.

"So?" He said. "How's life?"

"Well, I'm back in school now. It's expensive but I can afford it. I'm also putting my wife through her masters program at Columbia—*that's* expensive."

He laughed. "I don't need to know about your financial situation." He looked past me, out the window. "Fine. What else?"

~ September, 2009

Dark matter

YES, THERE IS dark matter here on Earth.

We fill our tires with it. There's a little in number 2 pencils, in telephone wires—there's some under the doormat (that's why I can't hear you from the garden). The librarian is mostly dark matter; she tends the wide patch of it hanging over the gas station (you can see birds fly into it). There's dark matter in the pills certain cardiologists prescribe, in my cousin's yellow lunchbox, the girls bathroom, and our dusty math books—Simon stamps it off his boots. There's dark matter in the reflection of my co-worker's wedding ring

which has us both taking careful steps back.

~ July, 2008

Dirt

Someday men
will walk to the moon
on dirt—like the dirt
between our silver lakes, between

where I stand now
and where that bright circle opens
its door for me—on the horizon.

Someday men will walk
on leaves—past Mars—to other red
and orange, and yellow
leafpiles

whirling piles full of
leaves, ringed with
dirt, like the paths of black
dirt circling

our lakes—cold underfoot,
sparkling with emptiness.

~ May, 2016

Pillow fight

I DROVE AWAY FROM my home in the pouring rain. My wife and I had agreed to separate that morning. Everything I owned was in the trunk and piled on the seats. It was almost midnight. The windshield wipers weren't fast enough and I could barely see the road, so I leaned forward over the steering wheel. I saw geese—in v formation just above the trees—their underbellies illuminated by street lights. One of them inflated like a balloon and, wheeling, buffeted, threw its wings open, slamming them hard on my windshield—a moment later its body was wrenched back into the sky.

I felt for cracks on the glass and my fingers came away covered in small feathers. Warm goose down coated the *inside* of the windshield, and then began spraying from the vents like there had been a pillow fight.

~ August, 2013

A good person

Sometimes I think
you're a good person
to talk to

because

you don't understand
anything

~ April, 2014

Ghost

I FELT HIM NEXT TO ME one morning, lying on my ex-wife's side of the bed, stirring when the light changed. When I groped in the air, my fingertips brushed the invisible bumps of his face, his soft almost warm heart, motionless as packed dirt when I cupped it in my hand—*when I thought* I cupped it, not sure he was really there.

I straddled him, looking down, and watched dusty sunlight fall through him. I felt furious, all of a sudden—he'd claimed that space as if she wasn't coming back—that faint depression of his head on her pillow. I closed my eyes, searching for the bottom of his jaw, then worked my fingers down, concentrating, widening and adjusting my grip until I felt the full shape of his neck in both of my hands. And I started to squeeze. He was there—I wasn't imagining it.

Was this the line I'd worried about crossing? I'd fallen into a sort of gray tedium fringed with disturbing ideas. But I couldn't kill a ghost. Could I? Was I? I clenched my muscles and pressed down harder, blood pounding into my hands. Minutes passed with us locked together until—I had to stop, I broke away, covered in sweat. He lay as still as before. I threw the sheets aside and got up, took a shower, put on my blue suit, my best tie, and headed to the office without breakfast.

Each morning after that it was the same. I woke up, got on top of him, and focused on the task. I worked on him at night too, if I couldn't sleep. The muscles in my shoulders and arms became sore and thick. I was getting stronger.

Then one day, when I woke up, he was gone.

The sheets were smooth, like he'd made his side of the bed.

~ April, 2014

Noah's graveyard

NONE OF THEM made it.
He can't understand why.

But he's got a shovel
and their bodies.

A hot day, silent skies.

He starts with a bear, drags him by an arm
down the plank.

The last one, weeks later, is his dog.

~ July, 2012

Milos

MILO WAS SITTING on the couch with me—I had made another cat out of my hands and the two cats were making fuzzy cat love when a noise in the hallway outside my apartment interrupted the three of us.

Milo hopped off my lap, trotted to the door and began rubbing his flank against the molding like he does when I get home after work. So it dawned on me: Milo thought I was about to arrive home. He thought I was about to open and step through the door, then feed him, even though I was already sitting on the couch.

Why did Milo think I could arrive home *again*? The only explanation, I decided, was that Milo had seen it happen *before*.

Okay, I thought: if I do regularly return home after I'm already home, why wouldn't I have noticed?

I turned to the internet.

The answer wasn't on the internet.

Oh, wait, yes it was:

Accumulations of patterns in time create a cat's physical environment. Cats have no conception of Past or Future.

So—I began to wonder—when Milo looks around the apartment, is it full of me? Me in the kitchen making cat food, me rummaging in the closet for a coat, me brushing my teeth, taking a shower, relaxing and listening to the radio? All at the same time? And if that was true, which one was the real me? Were they all really me? I looked at Milo and he seemed to nod:

Yes—they are all you.

Poor little cat brain!—I laughed—that doesn't know how to simplify its body in time. Poor kitty. But at least Milo didn't feel alone—he thought he lived with six of me.

Or—I caught myself suddenly—I thought I lived with only one Milo.

~ February, 2014

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~ May, 2013

Mailman

IN THE FIELD, enormous
cartons of milk graze, cardboard
mouths chewing, loose.

The mailman will run
headlong into the front door and burst
into unaddressed letters.

How will you arrive?
As a knocking mass of household
products, stuck together with dollar bills?

~ *September, 2006*

How to get over her

WHEN SHE LEFT me I went through a grieving process—similar to when my grandfather died. I knew what “losing a loved one” felt like and this felt the same. In fact, it felt so much like she had died, I wondered how my feelings might change if I brought her back to life.

Before I brought her back to life, I knew, she would have to die—really die. How long could I wait for that to happen? She was thirty-seven years old and healthy; she’d likely live to eighty, at least—but I knew I’d want to bring her back to life even then. With any luck, she would die sooner. So I began the preparations.

The day came. When she was in her late fifties there was a complicated car accident right in the middle of the city. I went to her funeral. I saw how upset the other people were—she’d had a lot of friends—crying and holding each other. But I’d been grieving longer than they had. They had no idea—her husband, her children.

I dug her up a few days after the funeral and we drove to my office where I’d been storing supplies. The operation was straightforward and within a few hours I could feel a warmth on her skin, and then a faint heartbeat. She was badly dehydrated so I kept her unconscious for a day or so, restoring her fluids. And I started to feel some relief; after all those years the terrible burden was lifting because I finally realized—as she opened her eyes to look at me—that there was nothing I could do. She would never love me again. I had the power to bring her back to life, but that was it.

I went for a long walk in the rain—that’s how I got over her.

~ February, 2014

The waterfall

Water lowers itself over
the falls, pulling up

a fringed skirt
to step among the rocks.

No noisy splashing
today—the river's birthday.

~ *March, 2013*

The red cave

This cave is my home.

On warm mornings
I pull back the scrap aluminum door.

A migration of fire, vast bands,
and the wind's red dress of dust

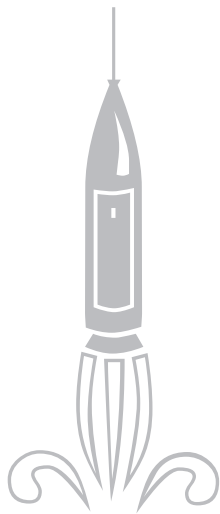
sweeps the desert. I've switched off
my mechanical cat;

he looks asleep in the corner—
a poor, half charged thing.

I read from a children's Bible,
strange stories, so far away.

The sky: pure, a library of light,
and Earth quiet on her shelf.

~ October, 2007



About the author

Raphael Matto was born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1979 and completed an MFA in Writing at Vermont College of Fine Arts in 2014. He aspires to be an English Literature or Creative Writing teacher.