

Shepherding Butterflies  
to the Land of the Dead

Nicolas Hornyak



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a  
brother nico  
exclusive

THE POET YOUR PARENTS  
WARNED YOU ABOUT

I've decided that I'm the poet  
your parents warned you about.  
No takebacks. Whatever the damage,  
you're in luck, I'm fifty-fifty on fixing it or  
walking away with all your deep-sea questions.  
You don't get a say in whatever deeds I uncover,  
be it your guilty comforts or your tribulations.  
Only you have the power to survive me  
or finish this before it's too late.  
I will give you the chance  
to stay behind or  
take it.

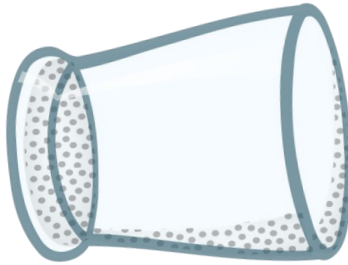


## THE BOY OF OLD

I have trouble with people who tell me to focus,  
trespassing my well-lit home in those moments  
when I embrace certain joy, seize the weird, and  
that psychedelic beast refuses to be contained.  
The boy of old remembers twirling thread like fate,  
demands his domain, penance for the affront, he  
knows a stage with no applause and slays it anyway.  
You can sucker punch a loser more than once  
but his ears dwell throughout town and he knows  
every dirty secret which could bring you down.

## SORE TEQUILA BOY

Tequila soreness is a special kind of pain. It hurts like you were mining between the sheets with your chisels and pickaxes all night long, until you found hard rock and the gems beneath it—the morning hangover that says you felt amazing last night and tempts another dig, but the world didn't stop turning, nor did it chuck you a thousand miles towards rising suns—so you stand and thank the mines for their love and comfort in the dark, you find your tools and mantles and shards and consider sipping whiskey next time. But you'll always be a tequila boy.



## VOLCANOES

Black boys control the volcanoes,  
geysers and canyons down the center  
chest from apple to naval, and deep  
in the grooves of railroad nails and  
that blistering Americana, we bootleg  
onto dark sands, off forbidden coasts,  
that same old feeling we chased since  
seventeen came and went, and we did  
the best of deeds, yeah, worst of deeds  
came later. You can curl toes the way  
they curl stones on ice, and yet you will  
never surrender the way anyone wants  
you to surrender, because if they need  
a piece of you, some shred of dignity  
or treasure, then how dare you let that  
control fall away like beaded necklaces,  
staring at the ceiling with fluttering eyes  
pretending to be vestal, even though  
you love to nibble up his long fingers  
as he holds you firmly by the withers.

## SHEPHERDING BUTTERFLIES TO THE LAND OF THE DEAD

Boy monarch spreads his wings out,  
splayed out on his back, legs curled in  
to the taste of what you give, and then  
he is a painted lady, camouflaged to  
the pursuit of hunters, human still.

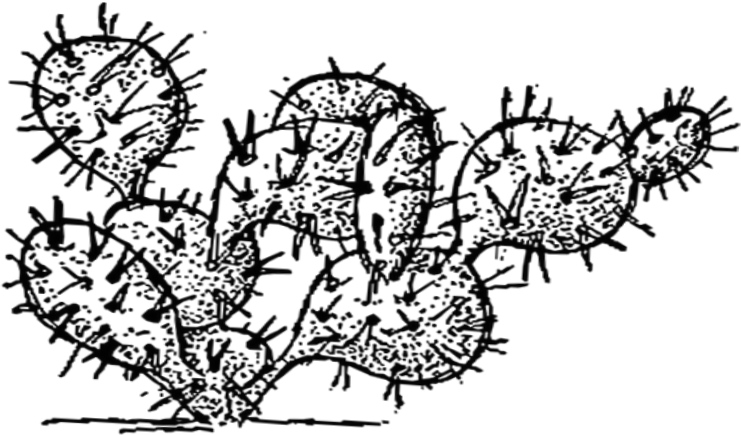
Humans are still his number one predator.  
No matter how much they try to take  
from him, life ends on his terms, aside,  
ungiven, broken and divisive. Reverence  
is a pair of cupped hands hiding the truth.

Sometimes, we forget that to pin a fae  
is to lock black holes in place, but they  
need to move, to join with other punctures  
and merge the bridge. To walk the dead  
is to walk the electromagnetic rainbow.



## IN A WORLD SUCH AS THIS

Compassion is worth having  
because humans love the taste  
and they will slurp it up until you're  
too dry and you crack like the desert barrens.



## LIBERTY

Once upon a time, there was a lady,  
a lady who lived by the sea, a woman  
whose crown could've sparked revolutions  
if she was a century and change older.

But this is the city. She didn't take  
a torch to these skyscrapers, she won't  
open her mouth and unleash sound cannons  
from her sickly tongue. She's better than that.

I think she holds a book. It's ancient  
history, a keystone tablet, hope, hope  
that on this go-round, we get it right, so that  
maybe independence comes today.



## GOLDEN DOOR

Our country makes a lot more sense when you think about endings and how they're inevitable. Finality scares people into living like this is a sitcom, pretending that the same problems require witty insults when it could be a matter of subtitles or coming soon to own on DVD or see you next week, thanks for watching.

If you're suddenly scared, you know we can't handle the way stories end. So the longer this burns, the longer the light, the hope, the longer nothing dares go out. But this is still the torch in the tomb, and nobody breathes free when they're locked inside this golden door.

## THE VALUABLE ONE

It's sounds so easy to leave people  
behind, to set sail, break the waves,  
go, go, and start anew in a new land.

It is easy to pretend you left nothing  
worth keeping, no one, to tell yourself  
that really, you're the valuable one.

It's nice to be treated like salvage, that  
your driftwood is beautiful, so that any  
fair country will gladly see that fairness.

It's sad the lamps die beside every door,  
that chances aren't offered by the society.  
They certainly won't be offered by another.



## LOST BOY

He's out there. I know it in  
between the moments where  
I imagine marriage and death  
beyond my own divides. I've  
kissed boys and women and men  
and all of them wish the sword  
upon my neck. I don't pray  
against that. Instead we  
walk to work and laugh  
with ourselves, imitating  
struts like the music in our ears  
tells the truth of the universe  
you caught for me in a planetarium  
once. We could do this, we could,  
but you're a wisp of cigarettes  
I caught on the wind and fell against.  
You're a prayer that hasn't found me  
and, if the soul knows how to scream,  
you never will, not this time, and life  
is a dance of your own, alone.

## HE KNEW

the family dog  
started dying  
about three months  
before the vet saw  
his cold body wrapped  
in the little bed.

you could tell  
there was something  
in his eyes that told  
the truth of the union  
but dogs don't know  
the language of people.

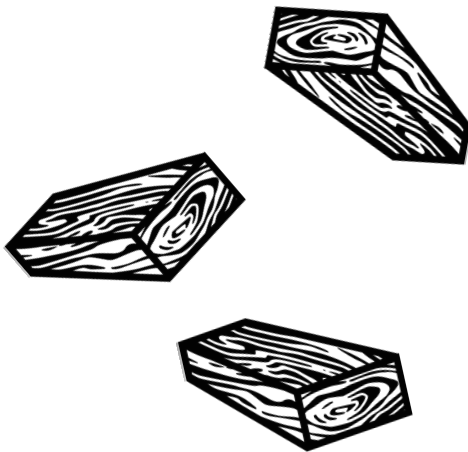
it was late in life  
for both doggy years  
and dollhouses, so  
he skipped the roof  
and gunned straight  
for the foundation.

by the end of it  
the family dog  
was only a dog.  
the family was  
doomed; all it  
took was time.

## WOOD

the pads of his fingers  
can feel the throbbing wood  
on his floor, aware that time  
has begun to tick, that one  
more caster must be cast out  
before the home can be free

but this boy? he refuses  
to give up. running is never  
an option. he does not die.  
they survive if they can't thrive.  
no stolen land will have him,  
so he's making do with what  
he's got and cackling all the way.



## PINEAPPLE BURNS BETTER

This sticky pineapple burns better on my lips  
and hands than boyish kisses, that bliss  
you slipped through my lips without asking,  
because hesitation is my third middle name.

It sticks. My wrists are sap and sapped,  
limp like I wanna keep giving up on  
girls, but a switch of jacaranda will  
always chase boys like me away.

It stings. Any tongue can be tenderized,  
but not every muscle will be ready  
for a jailbreak, and when we run back  
hand in hand, someone beats them down—

—beats them back—beats them off—beats them in—  
so that boys can't be saved in this beaten world...





## SAX

I heard the saxophone playing  
under the argon light, disrupting

silence and conversations we're  
no longer supposed to have, and

that's when the tropical storm fell  
out of the sky, fog of rain rolling

through ceilings and caverns and  
alternate dimensions I tucked into

myself when I found no sanctuary  
in the holes of my bedsheets; so I

am swallowed up, a swallow in the  
snake, unbroken and consumed—

a ride into the unlit, lost to the city,  
synthetic reed, begging for worse,

placing claws on the tone holes,  
ribs and scales broken asunder

and all I do is scream it hoarse:  
take them down, take them down.

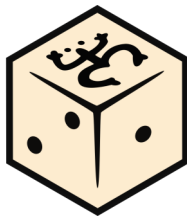
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I scribbled this on your back while you lost your sense of touch, and gravity took me in the meantime, cleaving me apart like a shirt you put on backwards once before ripping it. That's the dance we do, like lovers snatched by the talons of an eagle or celestials trapped in another's orbit. I catch this in the middle, and I am blood or gas. You can never tell me apart from the volcano. You do not catch this.





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