

ZACHARY MOHLER

Typewriter and Bottle, 2021

Pen and marker drawing with acrylic on paper, 12 x 18 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

CHRISTOPHER URBAN

Café Sequoia

That first day Catherine elected to read poolside back at the hotel, which was associated in brand name to a new but already popular vineyard, while I decided to head over to this little café I'd spotted on the roadside just down the way. The café sat on the outer edge of a highway overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Its structure wasn't much larger in diameter than the average trunk size of the famous redwoods that grew in these coastal forests. There was no indoor seating. It was more like a fancy food stand than a proper restaurant, and to effectively serve its customers in the cramped space, an elegantly synchronized dance was required of the employees at all times. While I waited for my coffee, I observed with admiration the barista operating the sophisticated espresso machine, the cook preparing light meals, mostly sandwiches, and the bartender expertly mixing drinks from a curated menu that changed throughout the day.

I took a seat at a patio table with an umbrella. Laid out in front of me on top of the table were several literary journals—all of them featuring bright, colorful jackets. I felt like I'd just dealt myself a showdown hand of poker, the way I had them fanned out like that. I'd subscribed to a few of these magazines in the past but had let my subscriptions lapse. I'd brought the pile along with me on vacation because my goal was to make it through each one, thoroughly and carefully, with an eye toward imitation, and then, eventually, write a representative piece of fiction for each corresponding magazine. After that, I'd send my efforts off in the mail electronically and wait—and wait. That was the goal, anyway, forged from the mind of a true amateur writer. I took a long sip of my coffee and submitted myself to reading the contents of these journals.

But by the time I'd finished drinking that first cup of coffee, I'd yet to read a single short story. I was stuck examining the table of contents, contributor bios, and the insular advertisements for other lit mags, two of which sat before me in my to-read pile. About midmorning, I switched from coffee to an Aperol spritz, partly to help me ease into the first of those many unread journals and partly to allow me to fuel the illusion I was then harboring that inspiration would strike soon enough and I'd finally have something of my own to show the world of contemporary arts and letters.

The first story I read that morning was very short; it belonged to that perplexing genre that mostly resembles

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poetry, called flash fiction. Yet this particular story was more or less straightforwardly told, except for its twist ending. It was about a teenage boy—or at least the teller of the story wanted the reader to think that—a boy who was nervous for his first day of high school, but by the end of the story we find out that these first-day anxieties of the narrator actually belonged not to a teenaged student but to an older teacher, who, despite or perhaps because of his veteran teaching experience, was childishly dreading the return of classes, especially that impending “first day,” which I believe was even the title of this insipid story.

At this point, I closed the journal under review, set it aside, and prepared to move on to the next one. What was the point of trying to write for a publication I didn’t admire? These stories were too clean and sentimental for my taste. Plus, I didn’t care to read stories that withheld vital information only to unveil something significant at the last possible moment, that pulled the rug out from under the unsuspected reader at the very end. What this meant in practical terms, in regard to my own writing project, was that I’d

now have one fewer story to complete than I had originally intended to pen in the various styles, depending on each journal’s sensibilities. On that optimistic note, I tilted my head back to drain the last of my remaining spritz.

I picked up the next journal, cautiously confident that I’d be able to glean something about its style and unique personality, which I could then, with any luck, translate back into my own words, words that would form paragraphs and eventually a story. And yet, I regret to report that the very next story I read, which I will summarize only briefly here, for it does not merit a lengthier description, was no better in my opinion than what was contained in the other magazine I’d just cast aside. Three close friends, during the summer after senior year, take a road trip from their hometown in Lexington, Kentucky, down to the southernmost tip of Florida, listening to the new Chattering Monks album on the car stereo over and over again. They’re anxious about their uncertain futures, worried about what will and won’t happen to them as they start colleges at different but expensive private universities later that fall. On the penultimate day of the road trip, nobody wants to go home. These friends want to stay living the road life together forever, having an endless summer, retaining their youth and forgoing all the responsibilities of adulthood indefinitely. But, of course, at the end of their weeklong road trip, they all head back for home. I was disappointed that nothing drastic happened: nobody fell in love and decided impulsively to move to, I don’t know, South Beach, and begin a new relationship, or perhaps decide on a whim to form a rock band in Boca Raton and work part-time at the Vitamin Shoppe to support these artistic ambitions of theirs, like some of my friends and I had more or less done before we’d been sucked into the college vortex. Although a certain part of their lives had come to an end, so the first-person narrator elegiacally states in the story’s final paragraph, their friendships never will. This tale of lost adolescence, which I finished reading with utter indifference, left such a bad taste in my mouth, perhaps because I’d just turned thirty-four and no longer felt particularly young, that I immediately got up from my seat to order another drink.

Sitting at a sunny roadside café, in the middle of wine country, during the blistering month of July, when amateur fireworks could still be heard screeching across the sky just a day after Independence Day, was the most unseasonable

time to read a Christmas story, but that’s exactly what I did. Here it may come as a surprise to the reader to learn that, despite my disapproving attitude toward sentimentalities in general, I have a rather soft spot for fiction set around holiday times. It helped that it was engagingly told in simple, direct language and filled with lovely, cozy details about some woods in a foreign country never mentioned but for whatever reason I pictured in my mind an unnamed village near the Black Forest in southern Germany. It ends with a young woman preparing a small feast for her mother, who just pulled into the snowy drive and, sitting in the passenger side, with a bored look on his weary face—the narrator can’t believe it—it’s her father! He’d been so sick of late that his presence that day was extremely doubtful. And yet, there he was—he’d made it. It was a small Christmas miracle, and they would share in yet another festive dinner together, after all.

I wasn’t crying, but I was sweating profusely in the sun. Even with the protection of the table’s umbrella, I was feeling the Northern California heat. I had to wipe the drops of perspiration off my face when I stood up to switch places to an area that had just opened up in the extra shadows of the café’s awning, which had previously been occupied by an unhappy couple and their screaming baby, whom they defeatedly wheeled out to the tiny parking lot across the street in a bulldozer of a stroller.

With my mind refreshed in the shade, I read a story about a woman’s significant relationship to ladybugs and how they made her think of a friend she’d lost in childhood. Despite the consistent melancholy tone throughout, I remained unmoved by both the story’s imagery (which was unclear at times) and its sanguine ending (the happily-ever-after sort). Another story, “Mom is Wow Spelled Upside Down,” made me laugh at first because of the silly title but by the end I actually did tear up slightly, not because the story was all that great—it was *okay*, mostly just sad, set at an understaffed hospice just outside of Milwaukee. My brain replaced the feelings the narrator had toward her lost mother for my grandmother, whom I was very close to and who’d recently died. If I were a different kind of writer, a better writer, I thought, that would be the subject for my short story right there. I would write about her—my grandmother, I mean.

By now the sun had gone down and the café workers were cleaning up to go home. Nobody said a word to me

about leaving the premises because it was such a big outdoor area on the side of the road that it basically became public seating after hours. From what I could tell, however, only an old man in a canary-yellow sweater lingered around long enough to take advantage of the ocean views that evening and to see the light fading over the bright sea.

On the drive back to the hotel, I took stock of my day. I had read a bunch of short stories, the ones mentioned above and a few others that don’t even deserve to be twice told. I’d sipped coffee and downed a few too many Aperol spritzes and hardly ate a thing, just a bowl of greasy french fries and an undressed salad I’d barely touched. I’d taken notes on my readings, jotting down the rare use of an excellent word choice here and where a particular part of a story’s structure was done well. It all felt very productive. And yet my real work was yet to begin. I was no closer to coming up with a story of my own than I had been when I sat down at that cliff-top café with my stack of unread literary journals.

The next day, after Catherine and I visited some beaches too cold for swimming in and a few wineries whose architectural designs resembled contemporary art museums, I headed back to the same café alone and ordered an iced coffee just before closing. Why were we spending so much time apart if we were supposed to be on vacation? Well, my earlier statement wasn’t entirely accurate. I was on vacation, but technically speaking Catherine was working. She was a model, which doesn’t pay as well as people think, at least not until you get that big break. For now, she mostly made her income through sponsorships and endorsement deals as a social media influencer for high-end luxury brands and products (think therapeutic vitamins, ethically produced bikinis, or in this case, fine wines and blissful resorts). Today, Catherine was booked to be one of the main speakers at an influencers’ conference. After a short meet and greet breakfast catered by one of the trendier bakeries in town, she would give her inspirational song and dance. It was a PowerPoint presentation I’d seen many times, and even had helped copyedit, so I passed on the invitation to attend.

Instead I returned to my new favorite café, took out my notebook, and arbitrarily told myself that I had an hour to write a short story in a single sitting. Regardless of its contents or inevitably cliché-riddled sentences, no doubt dashed off hastily in my barely decipherable penmanship, I would have a completed draft by the time I left. I’m

talking beginning, middle, and, if it came about naturally enough, end. If I couldn't manage that much, well, then perhaps I'd never leave here again. I'd stay stuck as a statue at this café on the cliff until the end of time.

Just as I was thinking how out of touch my stubborn temperament was with the golden hour of that mellow day, something peculiar caught my eye in the distance. It was the same old man in the bright-yellow cardigan I had seen yesterday sitting on the long bench just out back of Café Sequoia. There was a boardwalk area behind the café that offered even better views, but the benches looked less comfortable than the chairs I'd been sitting on, so I'd yet to venture out there. The old man was drinking coffee in a to-go cup with a forlorn expression on his bespectacled face, gazing out upon the rolling green hills and sharp rocky cliffs, which gave way to a lovely ocean view, with water much stronger blue in color than the pale horizon it bled into. As soon as I saw him there, I smiled to myself, turned to my notebook, and produced a few fictional sentences off the top of my head.

In truth, the old man had an interesting face. That's what moved me to composition. It looked like it had been rescued from the annals of art history, that face, and by that I mean he seemed like one of those noblemen with big noses in the countless Renaissance paintings I'd seen at several museums where we lived in New York City. Think Ghirlandaio's *An Old Man and His Grandson*. Suddenly, I felt my phone buzzing in my pocket. No doubt it was Catherine texting me that it was time to come back and get cleaned up for dinner. I couldn't remember the name of the restaurant, or even the cuisine, only that it was the kind of place that required reservations booked about a month in advance (Catherine always seemed to know people, and so we got a table with minimum effort). I didn't bother to take my phone out to give even a halfway glance to the screen but instead maintained my train of thought and wrote down another descriptive sentence about the old man, much better than the previous one, which I'd already crossed out.

When the breeze blew hard enough that early evening, I could hear the sounds of laughter and the clinking of glasses from the winery up the road. These joyous sounds had annoyed me yesterday, but not now. No, now that I was writing again, I met them with delight, as if the cheerful crowd had gathered together on the hillside in my honor.

I gave it another minute, lingering in my daydreams, before I took out my phone and texted Catherine, "On my way."

Back at the hotel, I took a quick shower and got ready in no time. We had a lovely dinner at an Italian restaurant that evening. They served the bread right on the table—no plates or baskets, nothing—that's how authentic it was, like we were really in Italy! But we weren't so far away, just California. Still, the three-hour time change was enough to make us sleepy, and we didn't even bother with dessert that night, nor did we make love when we got back to the hotel as I had hoped we would. Instead, we both fell asleep around nine o'clock in the king-size bed facing each other on our sides. Catherine had to get up extra early to get the most out of her free all-day spa pass at a wellness center in the little downtown area about twenty minutes from here. Her time slot was incredibly early because she was scheduled to conduct a livestreamed interview (on East Coast time) with the proprietor, who was a leading figure in the small business world. Catherine could probably hook me up with a free pass, too, she said, as long as I agreed to appear in a few of the posts or photos. While I did have a lingering basketball-related injury in my shoulder that could no doubt benefit from a little massage therapy, I politely declined. "No thanks," I said, trying to conceal my distaste for the vanity of selfies and social media, but I wasn't entirely unsuccessful. My reluctance to be photographed, a rite of passage in today's relationships, had caused a bit of a tiff between us, not for the first time.

"You think you're freaking Thomas Pynchon or something." At least Catherine was smiling when she said it. She looked amazing in her purple summer dress, her dark hair pulled back in one thick braid, and a gold necklace with some kind of horseshoe-shaped pendant dangling below her throat.

"I wish!" I said.

After I dropped her off that morning at the spa, I didn't hesitate to return to Café Sequoia in the hopes that being in that same atmosphere would prove as fruitful to my imagination as it had during yesterday's writing session, when I'd actually composed a consecutive string of original (if only by default) sentences about the old man's life. Ah yes! With just a magical touch of the pen, I made him a retired maritime lawyer who'd recently lost his dog of fourteen years. To pass the time in his elderly days, he

was working on a heavily researched historical novel set during the Napoleonic Wars, concerning a fictitious British spy who doubles as an undercover assistant cook on a soon-to-be captured French battleship. But the old man was wasting too much time researching sailing vessels and playing online solitaire and not putting forth enough effort in writing the damn thing. Although I was worried the setup of my story might send me down a path every bit as mawkish as some of the more mediocre stories contained within the journals I'd read the other day, a perverse compulsion compelled me to continue with it.

As I pulled into the café's parking lot across the road, I was not surprised to see the old man already sitting at his sunny spot on the bench overlooking the sea. Despite the heat, he was still wearing that ugly canary-yellow cardigan that made me want to sweat just looking at it. In his hand he held a flimsy environmentally friendly paper cup; I could see the steam coming off the coffee in the distance. After I ordered a drink of my own, I headed toward the elevated bench-seating area that overlooked the vast bluish-green waters, where stacks of emerged rocks occasionally broke up the constant waves into foamy white explosions. The old man looked different to me in the morning sunlight. He didn't appear like a subject who'd escaped sitting for his portrait just long enough to enjoy some port or ale or whatever it was they drank centuries ago. No, he looked younger, contemporary even—of the here and now. He even reminded me of myself for some reason.

That morning we actually spoke. Not a long conversation exactly, but we did exchange a few brief words, commenting on the unmatched ocean views in front of us and the fine quality of coffee served here at Café Sequoia. I asked him if he'd tried the cold brew yet and he shook his head no in a disgusted manner.

"Coffee's meant to be a hot drink!" he said to me with scorn, like I was a child who didn't know any better.

I suggested, perhaps too defensively, that coffee could also be cold and quite refreshing on a hot day, like today.

After that, he didn't say another word to me. Was the distance between us growing because of a strong coffee preference? It sure felt like it. I was about to leave him alone for good when he suddenly turned and asked me for my name. So I gave it to him. Then he told me his. I shook his outstretched and arthritic hand a little more enthusiastically

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than I probably should have. His smile turned to a grimace and he disengaged from my grip at the first opportunity.

After a long time passed in silence, with the two of us minding our own business, he said in a low voice, almost sad in tone, "It's going to rain." I didn't say anything because I thought he was just talking to himself. There was nothing but clear blue skies overhead for as long as I could see, so I had no clue what he was talking about. But sure enough, as soon as I turned my back on the old man and headed up toward the café's main seating area, a series of dark storm clouds gathered up above us and appeared ready to burst at a moment's notice. It thundered so loudly and suddenly that I jumped and nearly spilled my coffee. I wasn't alone in my clumsiness. Others, too, had the same reaction and were now laughing nervously as they collected their belongings to move under the umbrellas or perhaps vacate the premises entirely. Immediately, the rain fell fast in heavy drops. Before I could even run to my car, I was soaked.

Just as I fired up the engine with the touch of a button (using the keyless starter), it occurred to me that Catherine had left one of her phones, the one she used more as a backup hard drive for storing photos than an actual phone, in the backseat of the rental car. I knew the passcode to the phone by heart and could therefore, in some capacity, gain access to her social media accounts, which had a combined

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audience of something like six hundred thousand followers. My line of thinking, insofar as I even was thinking then, was something like this: most of the time I was the person behind the scenes, taking the videos, snapping the photos, adjusting the light just so, holding the microphones steady, that kind of stuff, all without credit, all done for love—which was fine. But still. I mean, for instance, many of Catherine’s selfies weren’t even selfies, but were designed to look as such, as if she’d taken them herself, with each one showing just enough of her bare arm to allow for the pose to appear authentic. And yet it was I, her patient, docile boyfriend, who had taken these countless photos, which had garnered innumerable likes and hearts. When I said this was a vacation for me, I meant it: I refused to take any photos for her for the three days we were here. Suddenly I reached over to the passenger seat and grabbed the manila folder where I had safely stored my modest works in progress. I’d printed out some notes yesterday from a small, flat portable printer no bigger than a tablet (a gift Catherine had received from a tech company in exchange for covering the product in a “prominent post”; afterward she gave the little printer to me to encourage my writing). With those few printed-out sheets of loose paper in one hand, and Catherine’s backup smartphone in the other, I snapped a picture with the device’s camera, sans filter, of my writing.

The rain hadn’t let up yet, and its pounding of the windshield obscured the light inside the Subaru, making for a somewhat impressive, moody photograph of my nearly blank stack of papers that just read on the cover page “Café Sequoia” and below that, in a font size slightly smaller, my first and last name.

Without thinking, I clicked the little purplish-orange icon on the home screen and was surprised, though I shouldn’t have been, that the app opened up right away, even without the SIM card. What demon possessed me to do the daredevilish thing I did next I cannot say. In what capacity had I found the courage to descend to such depths of moral descriptive, I also cannot speak of, but within an instant I had shared on my girlfriend’s very public account the photo of my novel in progress, which at the moment amounted to a lousy three pieces of paper (including the title page). I captioned the photo with some witty comment, using a voice characteristic of her subtle charm: “Writer and I” with a heart. Then I completed the post by geotagging the location.

As soon as I clicked Submit, I started the car and sped back to the hotel as fast as I could, but as the heavy rain was still falling fast and because I was still shocked at what I’d just done (it felt like I’d committed a crime), I found myself somehow, despite the narrow one-lane roads, lost.

Eventually, after a series of wrong turns, I navigated my way back to the resort. Catherine was already back from her blissful day at the spa and had finished the book she’d packed with her (*One Thousand and One Nights*) and was now reading one of the better literary journals I had brought. Reclined on top of the bed, a puffy bright-green pillow propped behind her, she had a skeptical look on her face. At first, I took her expression to indicate that she wasn’t convinced by a certain line of dialogue spoken by a flat or uneven character, or perhaps a lazy detail had been evoked without the slightest bit of conviction in the short story she was reading, which had given her pause, but those things turned out not to be the case at all. Her look was aimed at me in my ridiculous condition.

“How’d you get so soaked?”

Without saying anything, I ran over to her to give her a hug and apologize for what I’d done. Apparently, she was oblivious to my infraction of her trust.

“No, please. I’m all clean!” She put her hands up in the air to fend me off. “Why don’t you go get your shower first?”

I couldn’t help but notice a fragrance of freshly synthetic lavender dominating the room. “You smell good,” I said.

“Get used to it,” and she nodded to the love seat in the corner, where a large gift basket of hand lotions, bath oils, and candles sat like an impromptu window display.

“I’m doing a partnered sweepstakes for the brand and this particular scent as soon as we get back home.”

During my shower, I thought about how tomorrow morning we’d pack our luggage into the rental car and set out for the trek back to the airport, where we would drop off the vehicle, take the tram to our terminal, and catch our afternoon flight back to New York City. But that never happened. By the time I’d finished getting cleaned up, Catherine was already gone. She left in a hurry, not even bothering to pack the carefully stacked lavender products that sat photogenically in the corner love seat underneath the open window. I looked out that window. The Subaru was still there, so she must have hired a car from the new rideshare company whose name I couldn’t remember, the one that gave her a certain amount of vouchers every month for free rides due to her lofty status as an influencer.

Later that afternoon, I found out through one of her “Stories”—not the kind you read, but the kind you view—that she’d broken up with me. I’d destroyed her trust and tarnished the relationship by hijacking her account and using her audience for my own egotistical, megalomaniacal literary purposes. Such an egregious act could have put her entire livelihood in jeopardy. She could have lost all her sponsorships. Instead, she just lost one: me. Like I said, she posted this sad woe-is-me breakup “Story” not long after she left the hotel, probably checked into another nearby resort, equally nice. That same afternoon, I packed up my suitcase, left the card key sitting on the unmade bed, and drove straight back to Café Sequoia, which was sadly closed for the day due to the heavy rain. I sat there quietly and waited for something to happen to me as the glowing sun began to set in the distance. I felt my phone vibrating in my pocket, trying to notify me of something important. Perhaps it was Catherine, finally willing to return my calls and open up the lines of communication. I could explain my bad actions, lapse of judgment, poor behavior, and all that. But instead of a call, I discovered the notification was for an email from a literary agent, subject line marked URGENT.

The agent was inquiring about my novel in progress, which he’d heard such good things about already. He couldn’t wait to read it, and would I be so kind as to send it along to him at this email address, preferably as a PDF attachment? I laughed, or I tried to, but the truth was after my initial glance at the email I didn’t feel like laughing or

smiling anymore. I no longer cared if my prank had proved correct in revealing how shallow the world truly was, literary or otherwise, and immediately deleted it.

I stood up from the damp wooden bench at the café, took out all the literary journals I had in my suitcase, and walked over to the edge of the cliff. The whole time I felt a deep sadness and uncertainty, like I was about to spread the ashes of a deceased person into the coastal winds, but in reality, I was merely planning on tossing all these magazines into the sea to lighten my load. Instead, I plopped them on the bench, thinking that perhaps someone, maybe even the old man, would extract something like pleasure from these pages that I could not.

It felt wonderfully freeing to unburden myself of those journals, like a weight had lifted off my shoulders—the weight of literature. I would have given anything to forget the events of the whole trip, the little café, and even Catherine herself if I could, but something happened that has rendered such erasure impossible. She, Catherine, hardly posts on any of her accounts anymore. That’s how busy she’s become. Her little story about our breakup, which to my understanding went viral, later became the seed to a much larger and lucrative project. She ended up penning a personal memoir for a gargantuan book deal that dished out insider-y info on the life of an influencer. Thanks in part to her massive and loyal platform, it became an instant bestseller, a universally praised masterpiece, “announcing a once-in-a-generation talent,” etc. The movie rights sold instantly, production for the film is reportedly well on its way.

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