

On the Desire to Meet a Unicorn

by Katie Grace McGowan

“I believe that the justification of art is the internal combustion it ignites in the hearts of men and not its shallow, externalized, public manifestations. The purpose of art is not the release of a momentary ejection of adrenalin but is, rather, the gradual, lifelong construction of a state of wonder and serenity.”
Glenn Gould, *Music and Mind*

When a child shares her desire to live in a cottage built of candy, it doesn't make her parents feel inferior for providing a suburban townhouse. But for adults, fantasies are often curdled by analytical thought. No castle in the sky is complete without a simmering moat of reality at its entrance. We are creatures fraught with guilt and fear of the broken routine.

On foot we cross our small town's highest overpass. He mentions his fear, which I share, of the desire to jump. Tears well as I consider how desperately I want to jump...off the overpass...off the perch of decorum to which I so tightly cling...into and onto him...to it...to in...or on; whatever other fatal surface I can reach. I turn away and change the subject, which is almost exclusively his focus-challenged charge.

So many spend time in this position—not the brink of suicide or anything so dramatic—but rather being aware of the desire for closeness to some sort of edge. These edges come in many forms, but share cellular material. We are aware of our own frailty and our proximity to death. Many make a lifetime of trying to hide it. Those who don't are the gentle ones, the dangerous ones who face their Thanatos head on. These are the people who allow their minds to escape into the vast tundra of destruction and fantasy, if even for little vacations.

One of the big tragedies of adulthood is when one accepts the notion of honorable suffering; when one submits to one's programming. For a good number, life involves enduring vast webs of social convention, usually paired with a search for distraction from the personal normal. Then, there are the lucky pirates who, at least appear to, exist outside this paradigm. These buccaneers understand *joie de vivre*, or at least offer hope that someone does. The rest of us seek a proxy to sate our adventure-lust.

Perhaps this is where and why art matters most. Art here is a sort of transcendental desire, not beauty. It is the desire for connection, for possibility, for transcendence. The influence Antoni Gaudí, René Magritte, Jean Cocteau, and scores of other artists hold over us is no coincidence. These are the starry-eyed sprites who take on the very core of desperation. In this way Sarah Payer's work strikes a chord—it sounds the uncanny delight of hearing the noontime church bells disrupted. As mundane household objects unite and take over a space, the viewer is given *entrée* into a world far more liberated than her own. The suggestion of infinite possibility is ignited from its long dormant hiding place in the back of her thick skull.

Many of our kind work to find joy in a monogamist mindset; we fight urges and tow lines far too heavy for mere mortals. At times we struggle to find novelty in a world crushing us with its relentless routines. But then there are those who seem to so easily embrace pleasure, those who disavow the Protestant mindset with the flick of a wand. They take the needed steps to live outside the paradigm of suffering that surrounds so many of our gray proletariat lives.

Pee Wee Herman (a grown man who lives in a Playhouse with anthropomorphic furniture), Sun Ra (an afrofuturist jazz sage and Arkestra leader), and Kiss (a hard rock band notable for the members' makeup and flamboyant costuming) actually have a lot in common. People are drawn to these characters because they flirt with the escape about which the rest dream. This same impulse that earns fans for these artists attracts us to the insane, to the scene of the car crash, and too close to the fire.

Mermaids, spacemen or yeti—our hungry imaginations summon exotic creatures to facilitate our adventures (lest we ourselves appear mad). These beings promise to escort us out of our melancholy thoughts and restless bodies. Whether taking a bathtub out to the open sea, ducking into a world of fairies or tasting the flesh of a new lover, disruption is the fuel of life. We long for difference, for an enchanting creature to lead us by the hand to a place of otherness.

Looking back on one's life, one does not long for the people who felt most comfortable, most common; but rather the exceptional, the amazing, the absurd. The same goes for experiences. I do not remember the hundreds of days I spent glued to a desk in grammar school, but I do remember when the class ant farm broke open in second grade causing absolute anarchy for a solid thirty seconds. THE ANTS ARE FREE, I remember thinking, everything will change.

As a child I spent long hours waiting for my mother at the public library. She was working on her doctoral dissertation; I was looking for a way out of my dusty languor. Around Chapter 5 (of some sixty thousand) I grew tired of the children's books and began to explore the art section. Here I became familiar with all the big names that a suburban U.S. library has to offer. Beyond the Monet and Norman Rockwell books, I found two subjects of real interest: Marlene Dietrich and Hieronymus Bosch. At the time I saw no connection between them: one was a sexy, gender-fucked beauty; the other a painter who represented Hell in a way that made me understand the phrase, a fear of God. Now I realize both have memberships to a club that would never have members or membership cards—the club that realizes the mundane, we the mundane, can indeed offer something more challenging than dinner and drinks at 20.00. And, we know it.

We landlubbers stand reticent at the shoreline, hearts and minds overflowing with desire. Sarah Pager slowly appears on the horizon, eventually getting close enough to expose the fin she wears in lieu of legs. As if choreographed by some greater being, we walk hand in hand out to sea; following blindly the vague promise of diversion dangled before our withered dreams. -KGMcG

Katie Grace McGowan is a media artist and writer currently based in Croatia.
www.katiegracemcgowan.com

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