

Artist Statement

Michael Theodore

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The painting entitled *Why Four?* and the piece of music entitled *Tang's Song* are works from a conceptual world-building project entitled *The Garden*. The project spans a number of mediums, including paintings, music and sound, interactive installations, moving images, texts, and fields of large mechanical frogs (forthcoming).

The Garden is a query into constructing things from fragments and pieces, and ultimately, a study concerning how one makes something from nothing at all. Of course, in order to make something from nothing, you first need: *nothing*. And nothing was pretty much all I had left when my shadow, Petra, deserted me. But I get ahead of myself...

I've called Petra my "shadow" ever since I was about 4 or 5, though there are other words one could use to describe her. Cases in point: she had translucent skin, a shroud-like wardrobe, an aura that softly refracted light, and speech as if from an astral realm. Her entrances and exits were spectral and fleeting. Catch my drift?

All through elementary school I played the piano for her and drew pictures of her. With a pen that had a little green frog on it, I made her presents by writing down all the new words I was learning each day. Some of these included: gargoyle, oatmeal, and antisestablishmentarianism. Once, when she was sitting on my head and reciting a poem, my father walked into the room, and seeing us there, asked:

"Who's sitting on your head?"

"A friend," I said.

In high school, with Petra's assistance, I'd write poems, and then sit on the edge of my bed and chant them aloud in a very precise way: / hope, / grief, / refuge, / light. The air around me would begin to hum. Not a normal hum, but rather a kind of percolation, like when you add water to tea leaves that have been sitting in their little paper bag all day. If you listened carefully, you would hear that this was music. Not a known music, but a new music.

We lived like this for decades—she and I—making art together. But then: the virus times. The chapter when we spent more time together than ever before or since and not just every day but all day long and all night long as well; every minute of every hour of every day of every week of every month of every year we spent together in this way right up until the end, the very end, when suddenly she was gone. Perhaps she was swept away somewhere, or maybe she'd just found a better, more interesting person to haunt, I didn't know, but for the first time ever she was really gone gone gone and I missed her: missed her like a limb torn away; missed her as if she were a piece of my own flesh, a vital organ. Like she was my heart gone...

When she left, everything hit the bricks. No stories, no drawings, no music—nothing. The only faculties I ever cared about all went on strike at the same time, factory workers picketing the entrance to my mind. Their signs, ironically, had no slogans, just blank cardboard testaments to my crippling drought. Once I'd realized what had happened, I paced the floor, bitterly, trying to stir the sediment of thought at the bottom of my consciousness, but it was no use; I could only manage to send the limp echoes of my footsteps up to the surface, where they mocked me with their monotonous cadence. I had become that man who rings a doorbell, then stands there, frozen, wiggling his fingers, waiting on a reply.

One morning, not wanting to get out of bed, I pondered the mechanics of what had happened to me. There was probably a door in my head that all my former capacities were hiding behind. But seriously, who the fuck knows where the door is? Maybe there is a basement where God keeps the door, somewhere between the circuit breakers and behind the old paint cans. How do you get down there? Do you tiptoe? Do you bang? What if he's deaf? What if he's with a lady friend and isn't taking callers? Do you dig a hole? What if you just keep going and going, and you end up in hell? What if there's no door, but just a wall, solid and impenetrable and full fuckin' stop? But wait, if a door is what is needed here, if a door is the solution, then maybe the key is...a door? I should make a door? A door should be made. Ok, these are my orders. Show me a man who doesn't need a door. I just need a door. Goddammit. Okay. A door it is. A door. But how do you actually make a door when you have nothing?

Time pushed on and I didn't figure out where the door was. Jane started coming out to the studio towards the end of each day. I'd be lying on the floor in a stupor, and she'd kneel down and put her ear to my chest. She was looking for a pulse. "It's definitely weaker," she said.

One of those nights we were doing the dishes. "This shit keeps up, I might go nutters," I told her. "Let's be real," she said. "You're nutters now, pajama pants."

"Did it ever dawn on you that saying the word pants is actually kind of a sexual thing?" I said. I began lowering my voice, "Pants are very sexy." Then I whispered: "Pants..."

"Don't evade," Jane said. She put down her plate and rubbed my arms.

"Fine. So?" I said.

"So, you have to take steps."

"Such as?"

"Like real steps. More than just listening to a podcast or doing yoga steps."

"You're basically saying I need a shrink, yes?"

"You just said it first."

It's hard to believe, but I'd never seen a shrink before as an adult, and I didn't know exactly what kind of business I was getting into. Was I fishing for a confidant, someone who wouldn't turn away in disgust when I started telling the tales? A sage old head-nodder? Someone to slap me

into being a man? If slapping was the whole gig, I could just self-slap for a while and save on fees.

So I turned to Google, poring through hundreds of websites and reviews, hoping to find a good fit. But all I found was bewilderment—dry, clinical language, glitzy pop-ups and pushy salespeople. One site even had porn ads on a sidebar! So I put the search on pause.

Then came an ordinary Thursday afternoon, and I had a dental appointment. This was in that drab monolithic building that had seemingly gathered up every healthcare provider in town. As I was walking in the lobby, I saw a sign for “expansive mental health services.” After seeing the dentist, I wandered over.

A woman in a brown suit answered the door. Her hair was the color of apricot ice cream, and she wore very small, round, gold-rimmed glasses. I described the kind of thing I was looking for. She went back to her computer, tapped some keys and said, “Dr. Mervin Blackwood is free and will be delighted to meet you.”

I was ready to follow her to the office when I paused.

“How do other people like Dr. Blackwood? Like, say, on...I don’t know...Yelp?”

She cleared her throat. “Do you have a minimum Yelp review score?” she said.

I started thinking about it. If therapists had averages that were too high, maybe they were just ass-kissers?

“4.3,” I said, not particularly confident.

She looked me over for a long moment. Crap, I thought: was 4.3 too high or too low?

“4.2,” I offered anew, thinking flexibly.

She sighed.

“Ok, well then, Dr. Blackwood is not a good match.” More tapping. “However, Dr. Isaac Bloom is free and will be delighted to see you.” She gestured for me to follow.

As we walked, she smiled over at me and said, “Dr. Bloom is very calm and round, like a ball.”

Turns out he wasn't exactly that. Actually, I have no idea what she was on about. Dr. Bloom was a thin man, with thin hair, thin lips, and a thin mustache. He wore a thin tie, thin shirt, and thin suit. He had thin books on thin tables.

He didn't stand but instead rotated himself to meet me. He did not shake my hand but clasped one arm around his other arm like a happy cast. "You have come to the right place. There is no better place than here. Truly. I have seen it all, and there is no place better." He smiled, rubbed his hands together, and looked around the room. "What can I do for you?"

I was a bit taken aback by how thin he was. I can't remember that I have ever met a thinner man. "Well, I was wondering if you could take me through your repertoire," I said, when I had recovered my breath. "I mean, what exactly is your field of expertise?"

"I have a variety of specialties," he said, "but at this point I would say my favorites are, in order: 1) The self, 2) Alienation, 3) The death drive, and 4) The end of the world."

"I feel you on number 4," I said. "The oceans rising, the forests dying. It's a gigantic shit show."

"Oh, I didn't mean that," he said. "I just meant the end of the world in the sense of the end of the Platonic world. Things are fragmenting, falling away. I'm sure you have noticed."

Moments later, I told him everything, just spilled my guts out.

Dr. Bloom's basic take was that I was too young to be having trouble. "These things usually kick in at fifty," he said. "Or fifty-five."

I told him that I had just turned fifty-five. "Oh," he said, "in that case."

So I told him the story a second time, and now he gave it a much closer listen.

When I'd finished, Dr. Bloom began giving me his strategic insights. "Look, I know you have a theory on your problem—I can see that you do—but there is no need for that kind of thinking right now. In fact, another kind of thinking comes into play here. And we can sit and chitchat, we can chatter all day, if you like—I charge by the hour—but if we did we would only solve your ordinary problems: the disquiet of not recognizing your own laughter in a recording, the fear that your heartbeat syncs with an unknown entity, where to really put your pecker and how, all that sort of dippy twaddle— but that isn't what you need. What you need is to deal with the non-ordinary problems." He paused for a moment with his brows cocked. "Non-ordinary," he said again, with emphasis. "And to do that, we would have to put you into a non-ordinary state. Here's where you're lucky: thanks to the recent ballot initiative of the voters of Colorado, we

now have the means to do just that right here in the clinic. Are you familiar with this kind of therapy?"

"Sure," I said, "I've read the Michael Pollan book. I think I saw a TV show about it, also."

"Marvelous!", said Dr. Bloom. "So, would you like to begin a session? Are you free for the next nine hours?"

Why not? My problems were dire. I probably did need something non-ordinary. I nodded my head.

Dr. Bloom pressed a button. A young woman wearing a nurse's uniform and sexy boots appeared. "Veronica," said Dr. Bloom, "this is Mr. Theodore. Mr. Theodore, this is Veronica." We shook hands. She led me into a small, white room with a couch. She asked me to lie down. She covered me with a white sheet and then some sort of dark blanket. After she administered the prep, my mouth tasted like starlight and pennies. She took my blood pressure, my blood oxygen level, and my body temperature. Then she left the room and pressed some more buttons. I heard a bell ring and some woofing noises, and Dr. Bloom entered the room followed by a young man wearing black fatigues. Both men wore surgical masks. "This is Mr. Kelly," said Dr. Bloom. "He will assist me in the session." "What's happening?" I asked, and cleared my throat. Dr. Bloom pressed a button on a box on the wall, an amber light came on, and he spoke into a microphone in his mask. "Dr. Bloom requesting item one." And then some more woofing sounds, a vegetable odor, and a bell ringing, and the young man, Mr. Kelly, picked up two large brown paper sacks and carried them over to the couch and spread them open. Each paper sack was packed solid with vegetables. He distributed the peppers, summer squash, and zucchini generously on the couch, on my legs and torso, and then he and Dr. Bloom draped a heavy, green, shiny vegetable net over the whole business; yellow squash snugly occupying the spaces between my fingers and toes. Then the young man and Dr. Bloom each took one corner of the blanket and covered me with it, after which they left the room, pausing to press some more buttons.

Lying there by myself for I don't know how long, the silence in the room had become so loud that I felt I was sinking into the couch and becoming part of the upholstery. I lost myself for some unknown time.

When I jolted awake again, I couldn't see anything. I felt around for the vegetables, but my fingers found, instead, a pulsating and tarry mess, like a great black slug—squirming and tumescing, tonguing and crawling all over me, probing me, smothering me—and as it stretched its great dark body wider and wider, it drew me deep into its shrouded expanse, sucking me, the several quarts of me, down into some vast no-place, some bottomless nada-land, down where I

was the only one of my kind. A teeming herd of stench rose up around me, and I was plunged down through the black, down through the major and minor axes of the world, down through the deep sea, down through the crust, down through the magma, down through the world's arterial system, down through the ten thousand waves. And then came a mounting constriction across my entire body. Vise. Grinding. Mortar and pestle. Each breath a spasm of blocked airpipe, a war against mounting suction. My thoughts were throttled, my cerebellum shorting out and shutting down, and I heard the frenzied, squealing, metal-on-metal stretching of each synaptic fiber as it was forced—moment by searing moment—out of play. My brain boiling off to slime. I, who have lost my face, my hands, my eyes, I, who am dismembered, pulped, buried down at the bottom of it all, down in the black of the blackest hole, can't even remember my name.

And just when surely there was nothing left to crush, a pulse began in my ears as if some faraway engine were kicking over, faint at first and indistinct but quickly gathering strength and volume until each pulse was the crashing roar of a shattering explosion. Finally, I thought, this must be the very last thing: annihilation by noise. With each concussive blast, I am compressed, expanded, compressed again. Never have I felt such hurt in my fucking life, a fishhook through the nuts, a hurt until the end of everything, and never would I be whole again. I am squeezed into nonentity, the absence of all that is light, squeezed out of time, time is gone and I am gone, the thrashes in my bones are the death throes, the screams that I cannot scream are the death throes, my skull is burst by the death throes, my soul is ripped apart by the death throes, *I am dying, Oh, God, I am going to die, I am dying, O starless fucking void...* I am dead...

But then death RAN AWAY. Out of the room. Out of the house. Out of my head. And in a massive tidal onrush, I was shot out of the choking darkness and into the light. I was coughing, heaving, and sputtering. I called out, blinking, trying to adjust my vision. After sitting a few moments, I could finally cry, the thick salty tears pouring down my face. I sat back up, snorting, and looked around.

I was in a fog, or a cloud, where things were blurry at the edges, and maybe not because of local optical conditions, but because they were untrue things. Objects floated by. A chair with one leg. An umbrella with the body of a decapitated dead man. An oversized inflatable octopus. A tiny set of playing cards. Also appearing were semi-jumbles of semi-thoughts. There were nested sets of complex rationalizable objects and predicates and prolegomena mixed in with the sticks, oranges, and algorithms. And then a cluster of beings, a mutant family of sorts, floated up from out of the fog.

In the center, there was a male ectoplasmic creature, clearly the father of the bunch. Perhaps it's not polite to spell out exactly what his head resembled, though the word "unit" comes to mind. To his right was a bird-girl with a lemon body. To his left was another flying being, a 3-legged, alien, itself with a small avian compadre who stays perched on one shoulder. Finally, there was a beet-colored child with a tight t-shirt, whose green hair the father continually stroked.

The father, whose name I learned was “Ping,” stuck up the four fingers of his hand. “We greet you, traveler,” he said. “We are the spirits of this realm, this quantity of space bounded by ingress all the way to egress. It is our solemn duty to contemplate the four forces which weave the fabric of the universe.” Ping was silent for a moment, and then narrowed a circular eye at his pointy fingers, before adding: “Four, yes. But why four?” At this question all the members of the family kicked their limbs into the air and begin vigorously shuffling about, calling back and forth to one another: “Why four? Why four? Why four?” Eventually they settled back down. “Yes,” Ping continued, slightly winded, “it is the eternal question. Of course. Because, you know—it is the ultimate question, really, the bottom line of it all—the ineluctable, the preemptive, the—”. After trailing off, Ping stared ahead, and his tone shifted. “Michael, we’ve been at this for a very long time and still have no real idea why there are exactly 4 forces.” He eyed me expectantly.

I hated letting him down. “I’m sorry, Ping, but I don’t know, either,” I said.

“Ah,” he said, “well perhaps you can still help us. Other travelers from your realm speak of a singular spirit, a spirit who may greatly aid our inquiry if properly solicited. A spirit instilled with the sum of all knowledge. One traveler claimed this spirit is causing everyone in your realm to become lazy. We seek its name.”

“That’s easy,” I said. I wrote the letters “GPT” on a bib that “Ding” the alien was wearing.

“Now, I have a question for *you*,” I said. “Please, anyone know Petra?”

Tang answered..

“Of course we do. We’ve been sitting here this whole time waiting for you to ask.” And just as might happen in an avant-garde opera, a throbbing drone in the key of G sounds throughout all of space and time, and Tang started singing over it:

“Petra is calling, Petra is calling for you, with her voice like a blazing star, like the throb of colossal emerald wings beating over the sea and under it, and across all major shopping outlets of Paramus, New Jersey. Petra, in her cloak of shadows, is calling for you, over husks of silver moons, over molten cities and the singing dead—especially the ones who insist all the time that they are not dead, they are just resting. Petra is calling in a little-known film entitled *The Laughing Policeman*, which is about her, who can stop her? Not even a policeman with a gun who is laughing. Petra is calling for you, from the immense white-marble cliff which she clings to like a huge, blind, soft-swinging sea-bird; Petra is calling for you in the dawn, she has a gravitational field so measureless that she upends matter, matter flies into her and becomes invisible, the trees and rocks are flying into her, the stars and planets are flying into her, and in her lair, her immense blinding white-marble lair, there stands a sleigh of lapis lazuli pulled by twelve black swans worked in rubies, each of whom is attended by a young woman naked except

for a single white flower, a blossom in her hair, and each of these young women has a small bird in her hand, a corvid, and under the seat of the sleigh there lie twelve strong-limbed men with iron muzzles and steel gloves, and this sleigh is pulled by the swans, the swans fly with her, she is inviting you aboard the sleigh with its twelve naked young women and beautiful birds, with its twelve strong-limbed men and its freight of invisible matter, and she will take you up, up, up past the orbit of the moon, there she will suddenly open her cloak, as with a magician's gesture, and you will see, basking in her gravitational field, all of the vast treasure which she has gathered at the cost of so much hardship, vast treasures which she has given no thought to for years and years, once these treasures were precious, once she thought about them constantly and could hardly bear to part with them, once she hurled the precious gem-studded staff of the Grand Vizier into a chasm rather than surrender it to the marauding armies of the South, and now she has simply abandoned all that, forgotten it, thrown it away and devoted her whole being to the calling, which is for you and you alone, standing there, on the edge of the cliff, in her grand white-marble ledge, her cloak open, her immense, gravitational field tearing at all matter in the vicinity, tearing such matter away and disgorging it as invisible, she calls and calls, with a voice like the wind in the mountains, come, she calls, come to me."

When Tang has finished singing, Ping said: "Look just up ahead. Do you see it?"

I followed his gaze. There, just steps away, stood the door. Great. Carved. Beautiful. Not just any door, but "the door." The surface of the thing shimmered, as if there were light trapped in it. I moved closer. The more I looked, the more I could see that it was made of a million little pictures: pictures within pictures within pictures.

Ping produced a golden key, inserted it, and pushed the door open. "Farewell and good luck, Michael," he said.

On the other side of the door was a vast garden. I found myself in the middle of a great quadrangle, lined on all sides by what looked like little waist-high walls, but which were actually low stone parapets, and these parapets were lined with tens of thousands of small and fragrant flowers, each one of them set in perfect rows—and upon these flower-parapets were perched a multitude of birds, flocking from every direction. The warm air was full of their song.

The birds in the inner circle flew with great authority! They would swoop down from their perches, extend their black shapes and dark red feathers over my face and my hands, jawing sweetly, and then shut their eyes, leaning back in a soft posture.

One of the birds alighted on my shoulder, another on my outstretched hand. I knew them as if they were my own; they greeted me, I think, with excited twitter. "Tell me," I asked, "am I dreaming now, or are you real birds?"

“We are real,” said one of them, “but you might be dreaming.”

“I have heard,” I said, “that when you are asleep you dream, as a rule, of the past. Is this true?” The bird who had addressed me drew back his black beak and laughed loudly— “Ha!”—then he leaned forward again and said, “It is not true. We, for instance, dream not of the past, but of the future.”

“Yes, we are dreamers of the future,” said another. “Right now we are dreaming the moment of your death.” I pinched my arm. A red-beaked bird alighted on my other shoulder.

“When you dream of my death,” I said, “what is it like?” “It is like this,” said the first black-beaked one, and with a flick of his head he sent a translucent ball down the row of flower-parapets, a gossamer ball that burst like a bubble against each little flower, releasing, down the line, a dream of my death.

Only when I saw the last bubble burst did I realize that in all the distraction, I had lost the plot.

“Wait!” I said, “Wait! I’m looking for Petra. Do you know where she is?” They raised their heads, looked from left to right, from right to left, and swung back and forth like pigeons. “Can you help me find her?” I said. They closed their eyes, opened them, nodded their heads up and down.

“Yes,” said the first black-beaked one, “I believe we can. Follow…”

As the birds flew slowly along and I walked behind them, an arbor of interlocked branches appeared before us, through which we passed into a corridor made by the drooping boughs of weeping willows. A dappled path lay all around, perfumed by blooming jasmine and roses, light coming through in thin rays.

Eventually, we came to a majestic clearing. It was the heart of the garden: a great pond of quivering water, rosy with the last light, lotuses and water lilies surging on its ripples and whirlpools. The pond was rimmed by white marble steps leading down to its surface, and in the middle was an island with a solitary, ornate pagoda. Within the structure sat Petra, a black silhouette against the dim, golden light, her hair caressed by the wind. From a distance she looked like she was lost in thought.

The birds led me to the perimeter of the pond, to the delicate stone bridge that arched to the island. I mounted the bridge, and as I did, the ripples of the water gave way to fleeting, distorted images of me, of the sky, and of the fast-approaching night.

“Petra?” I said, soft. She turned to face me.

“Why did you go?” I said.

Then, a long period of silent contemplation. Pressing our eyes together like we used to when we wanted to speak without speaking. Like twins.

A realization began pecking at me.

Of course she couldn’t remain up there—away from the garden—forever. Of course not. The longer she stayed, the more she’d begun to blot and smudge, to drift into grey, into char. I should have seen it—it had been happening for decades—but I was too caught up in my mechanical frogs and whatall. When I looked at her now, she was fresh, renewed.

“I understand,” I said. I really did.

Petra nodded. Then she gestured to a stack of papers sitting beside her. On one side there were drawings of images that I recognized from the door. On the other side was printed text. I picked up the pages and began reading. It started like this:

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(continued as above)

