



Backstories

Jonathan Penton

Argotist Ebooks

Cover by William Blake, circa 1816
Milton in his Old Age
a.k.a. *Illustration to Milton's L'Allegro and Il Penseroso*
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Argotist Ebooks

Backstories

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Monologues

Backstory

We had time to run.

I want to be clear: we knew they were coming
and had plenty of time to get away.

I wanted to run, and said so, very plainly.

But I saw my father's face, and I knew
there was no running from him.

By the time the mob made it to our house, father and I were standing in the street.

He, barrel-still, in his leathers,

old aluminum baseball bat, wrapped in razor wire.

Now, you've seen that on TV since, but they'd never seen
anything like that before, I'd never seen that before.

He held it over his shoulder, perfectly ready, perfectly still.

I was behind him. I'm sure I wasn't still

I wasn't standing brave, though I wasn't *afraid*, exactly, either—
we were well past that.

I was holding a fertilizer can filled with gasoline.

I was holding a fertilizer can of gasoline

and forever and ever I watched, while the mob stopped, then quieted

in the middle of the street

and that *thing*, that thing of people-things, and my father

stood and stared at each other

until he felt they understood, the first part, at least.

When they understood, we started to move.

We walked straight toward them.

Straight down their middle.

The first couple of people parted, ever so slightly, to give my father room.

The first few people knew they wouldn't survive a fight, so they parted

and my father walked between them.

Maybe they still thought that they'd surround us, kill us that way.

But the first ranks parted, and I got through, and hit 'em with the gasoline.

At that point they should've panicked and run,

but this is the truest truth:

nobody runs from my father.

My father doesn't run, and no one can run from my father.

They just have to let him pass.

They saw gasoline hitting their friends

their wives and husbands

their parents and children

my father and me.

And they understood the second part:

My father would light us up.

Every man and girl there understood
my father would immolate the crowd
he would immolate himself
he would watch his daughter burn alive.
They knew he knew it. They knew he knew they knew.
They saw that *I* knew it, and by now
holy godfuck I was afraid, I thought about running
I thought about just *stopping*, just stopping pumping the gasoline
all over the *thing* and my father and myself, I could probably get away
they wouldn't chase me now
but *my father would have lit me up*
and maybe that fact made me fine with that,
made it so I always would be fine with that.
And we walked all the way through the crowd
they parted all the way down
we kept walking
knowing exactly where to go
and they stayed where they were, afraid to leave the spot
where a little girl calmly worked to kill them all.
They knew how lucky they were.
They would always know how lucky they were to be alive.
My father and I, we weren't lucky.
We were something entirely unlike luck.

Evolution of a Plagiarist

Take a daughter, any daughter, let's say her father's famous
Let's say he's a cartoonist known for his counterculture style
Take the daughter, and her drawings, now let's say that she's an artist
Covering a variety of topics and a multitude of themes
But when you make the coffee table book that shows what she'll be known for you are focused
on the drawings of her famed cartoonist dad
Let's say some of them are naked (and he's known for being naked)
and many more refer to the fetishes of which he brags
and so she becomes Electra, and her mother Clytemnestra
so now archetypes are released where two women used to stand.

Now take the story, take the poem, drag the poem from the story
Take the narrative you're building, though the narration's been done
Take the way that you must process everything she tries to tell you
Speaking loudly with her eyes and ears although her mouth is closed
Underneath the violet headboard
neath the noise, the void, the meaning
and the silences you know by now you'll never understand

Take the pictures of her lifestyle. Take the images you filter.
Keep your own eyes open going with her to the clubs and to the bars
Watch her hairstyle, watch her movements, watch the tactics as she compliments the woman while
she strokes the folds 'tween the man's thighs

Make the facts fit the backstory that the coffee table gave you
Press her down like a dead fairy into that book you'll write
Take your knowledge, take your learning, take each experience that's left you
Stupid as you were on the day that you were born
when the doctors pulled your ankles from that open solar plexus
someone's daughter spread beneath you sliced like Portnoy like a fugu
like a reference to McDuff where a woman used to be
Take your little crumbs of knowledge so opposed to understanding
and acknowledge the narrator will always make it about him.

This poem is a piece of fiction inspired by an afternoon's examination of Evolution of a Crazy Artist by Sophie Crumb.

Transformation

Do not listen when she tells you she has been your kind.

You, of minor destiny and tender thighs do not allow her anything.

You, of anonymous glory imaginary sanctity understand her frailty
prevent her weakness from destroying you both. It is up to you
to see the girth of her defense
her awesome peaks and primal crags
 she could compress into any spot,
 any part of you that gave her room—
 and O, how she could fill you, over and over again,
 every piece of you, every shape that is yours to claim.

It is your job irrelevant creature pathetic object of no history worth sharing
to leave her to her epic
to send her
miserable and wanting
to the ecstatic cries of the mortals who crave her without comprehension.

She is everything. You are the only thing.
Be merciful. Forget your own pleasure.
Let her be nothing without you.

Pavement

Like most of us, the woman at the top of the stairs grew limited as she aged, and she was now very old indeed—

—older than the lions at the front of the library

—older than the books the lions were sworn to protect

—as old, perhaps, as the language the books were written in, but that could not be said for certain. Languages do not age on calendars, and it is perilous to compare the age of one language to another.

The library was not the place to go. The subways had a growing appeal. Their inhabitants seemed authentic, even *aged*, despite their ability to thrive in this bizarre environment. They could give her a space to interact with humans, for though they were made by mortals, they were not truly of any human realm. No one living in the tunnels could be said to be a citizen, and she had never bowed her knee to anyone.

Yet standing at the top of the subway stairs, she stopped, unwilling to continue, annoying the fast-moving pedestrians behind her. It was too *enclosed* down there. Would she never again fly her chicken-footed home by moonlight? She had reason to believe she could no longer change.

after Michelle Greenblatt

Oh mornin' cracklin
Children dancing
In summer camps to 90s beats
Oh Texas swing
Oh German squeezebox
Oh rallies for our virgins lost

Oh King of Cookouts, lord of Hennessey,
bless us with the magic of your fantastic Cadillac
Oh Queen of Daiquiris, dressed in emerald,
your ass a shelf on which two beer cans can stand
Oh Master of Festivals, older than Paul,
prince of the power of the mysteries in the air
Oh Mistress of Burials

And we who see no difference between vengeance and escape
We who have challenged Ozymandias to a footrace
We who seek the feminine in necklaces of pearls
We who seek the masculine in Christmas-ornament beards

Oh float that honors Han Solo's passing
Oh float that mocks a lynching victim
Oh theatre marathon for Amy and Charles Schumer
Oh six-hundredth ride for bicyclists' respect

We whose hotel skyscrapers reach from cliff to swamp
We who feel unsettled if we aren't building on the sand

Oh *fais do do*
Oh second line
Oh gentle command in the cry room
May our every wound become radiant in your Dionysian heat

Dialogues

Odin Questions the Maiden-Mother-Crone

a re-imagining of Christine Hume's "Incubatory"

Are you comfortable? The question startles him as it leaves him. He does not understand how he imagined her to be otherwise.

I am radiant. I am all ecstasies made flesh. I am the raw conglomeration of all phenomena and all physical states of being.

Can you open your eyes?

Never.

Do you wish that you could see me? There are lines around her mouth that he finds implausible.

Can you hear my lullabies?

It is for this purpose eternity was concreted. The Flux requires the support of such humming, whether you take the form of nuclear war or Gogol Bordello lyrics.

What do you hear of our talk?

I hear the gratitude of Ragnarok. Our talk is in my arm when I pick up a flagon. It is the love that allows me to smash it into the stone. I hear cessation, the ultimate triumph of all creation. I hear both your roaming eyes.

Why do you kick at words?

Your words live in me, and all living things take hostility as an invitation. I grant them the opportunity of betrayal. I don't know how I became worthy of them.

Why do you punch and undulate?

You imagine this.

He does not believe her, although he knows that they eye still in his face has expanded, corruptive, consumptive.

Can you bear the sound of my voice? The lines around her mouth grow more improbable, begin to crackle in the teeth and ripple with the inflammation that is her cheekbones.

I have no intention of surviving this encounter.

Why are you lonely? Are you lonely? Cowardice finally catches him. It senses in the seeing that all his analyses have been correct, but all of his questions were wrong.

This is the fundament. This is the spring, the mouth, and the opening, and without loneliness, these questions are motionless, and without Flux, we cannot define I AM. This is doubt and conviction both.

How many senses grow from my fingers?

I numbered them, once, you know. Before I was AM, I was Woman, and counted them all. Every whorl, every pore, every hair on your knuckles. I could give you this number. I have extensive files.

Where is the nutrient in it?

In your doubt. Your limitations failed to expand me, at first. Your weaknesses embarrassed me. Then I stopped consuming them, and simply allowed myself to be filled with them. I have grokked your every failure. Your offal grows wet inside me.

Will you raise your own kind?

I would prefer to die.

What will leaving be like?

He is stalling and he knows it. Her improbable cracks spread across his other eye. Dear reader, you have always known what happens next.

The Man from Room V Addresses El Dorado

I am told that you are whatever your occupant wishes you to be, so long as they are willing to wish themselves alone.

I am told desire burns more purely than thought. I am told you listen only to the subconscious, thus I expected to find you void, as empty of artifice as my sleep. You have shown me that I misunderstood myself. My every breath will show my gratitude.

My senses are scrambled. What use are my eyes, to measure such ziggurats? Your clocks, your intersections, your endless elevators make ludicrous that which I knew as time. I know purpose; some say it wears my face. I know truth. Some call it my weapon—a belt of bladed wisdoms ending those who seek to harm me.

Before I found you, I thought beauty was beyond me. But you contain mountains within temples, prisms of polished phosphoriii, geothermal history in a burnished band. You reveal to me that for my species to advance, we need nothing but the merging of beauty and truth. And scattered in your superluminal self, you have given me all the tools I need.

I have made only slight rearrangements. That which is precious might melt; that which might melt can be persuaded to explode. I am ready to fall within you and into you. Though you are more than tungsten and diamond my love will make you burn.

The Hounds of Tindalos Visit the Lady of Shalott

What is the surface of you?

We don't know what your question is. We do not imagine why.

What shape are your clouds?

It depends on the shape of your corners. Sometimes, we come cirrus, whipping through your world, your waterways, the roads man builds and the roads built within him. Other times, we come fallstreak, a thousand prisms of your species' failures, without exploration or intrigue. When man summons us, we are nimbus, majestic beyond the mayfly gods that would protect you from the ancestors you've slain.

What is the warmth of your blood?

You ask if we still take pleasure in our hatred.

Is pleasure too much to ask?

*All questions are too much to ask.
All seers see their own mischance.
All questions seek pleasure at last,
the glee before the rot.*

So have you seen me wave my hand
When before my mirror I stand?

*We only see futures and past
And you, having them not.*

The Father of Gilgamesh and the Lady of Shallot

I am told that every woman is a mystery
a passionate man can only crave to explore
I am told they long for such study
I can only determine that you long no more.

I have heard such study is my greatest pursuit
that commitment to such is more valorous than war.
But I find it trifling, the answers unrewarding
though at our first meeting, you answer nevermore.

Great ladies, seeking their own place in history,
have chosen me to speak for them. Thus I enter into lore
as beauty's champion, all things flawlessly masculine
my reputation hiding how deeply I am bored
to you, nothing holds interest any more.

I am engorged with answers. Women throw their clues at me
without grace compassion
without concern for muse or mystery which they profess to serve
in some endless nest of rules in which they could never score
while you lie sacrosanct
your thoughts flowing out your hair into river without memory
your ready lips concealing as a babbling fool's rapport.

Baba Yaga Studies Humbert Humbert

Do you like what you see?

I know you lie to me.

*Am I the first, then? You will
not evade so easily. Tell me,
little cousin, do you like
what you see?*

Great cousin, what in your arms
do you think I would seek? What wisdom
do you bring that you would analyze
me? The shtet, the stantsiya, the passion
of Dr. Phil? I have no secrets.
I have spoken for myself. You have no need
to toy with me.

*You bore me, little cousin,
and that's a dangerous pastime.*

You threaten a life without meaning
to learn what you already know: all men
like what I now see. But you are
no girl, and do not believe you seem
like one to me.

William Butler Yeats on Alistair Crowley

I wanted to believe in the truth of it:
the power of the ancient arts
a celestial sphere not only limitless, but reachable
I chose to believe God gave us the tools to exalt ourselves
if we climbed the Tree of Life properly, we would become worthy
through no one's power but our own
to see Him, to sit with Him, to call Him partner.

I did not believe in justice. I could no more believe in a just god than I could in the divine rights
of the Tudors. But I could be persuaded of the sanctity of order.
I could believe, all evidence to the contrary, that my life had meaning.
From there, I could convince myself yours does, as well.

Simple human incompetence destroyed my faith.
I saw great mages, far better spiritualists than you will ever be, dissolve, neither iron nor mercury,
into self-irrelevancy. I saw mortals lay claim to wisdom, trap it as their mistress as one might
cage a chimera, practical magic become idle fantasy, spirituality a joke.

And you there waiting ready to be our punch line.
And you there ready whoremongering without gratitude.

I fell into bitterest delusion, the great lies of every myth. I saw your wickedness, and I gave *myself* the
name no human ever earns. You, laughing moron, dared to brand yourself depravity. I, most
depraved madman, declared myself righteousness. And if wisdom is the road of the fool,
righteousness leads to the emptiest evils of them all.

So tell me, excitable son, itinerant father, mother that could never be, tell me what you now see.
If I spy the oppression in my name, the new breed of illiterates who warp me into canon
can you hear the rock stars bite the heads off rats? The children in their torn black clothing
speaking of Set and self-reliance
Godly Texan children using you to spice up teenage fucks?
Can you see them quote you in comic books and me in TV miniseries?

Can you feel our words diffuse, powerless powders, scattered as our atoms into the hearts of shallow
imbecilism? Can you feel us, ground into Postmodern pop references, following *V for*
Vendetta in micropress e-book pastiche?

Old enemy, we are nothing but names to drop, now.

And our children speak of the Tower of Babel, when they once called us Babylon
But you are still trapped in the Tower of Ego, from whence none see the Tower of Song.

Iseult Donne on William Butler Yeats

William lies when he speaks of beauty.

I know beauty as well as he,
if perhaps my knowledge is in less beatific shades.
I know beauty and it is not within me
I can know it as a stranger as well as he knows it as its whore.
I do not need it near me.

You see me as grasping, but I am one with simplicity.
I smell poetry and magic no differently than salt.
I want things, sometimes— chocolate a séance to take a proper shit
 to draw something living towards me then
 perhaps to push it away

If mother is muse, then I am essence.
When you attempt your rituals, I am the spell.
You may analyze beauty as it pleases you.
But now, give to me, son of man.
 I want.

Soliloquies

Two of Swords

As a child, I read in *Narnia* that centaurs are slow to anger, but implacable in their rage.
For decades, I aspired to this particular dysfunction
before finally accepting something basic:
I will always be petty. I might as well be forgiving
given to unpredictable, irrational fury
inclined to forget it just as easily.

My anger is nude. It is cheerful and constant
riding my back like a boy rides his father
blessed with the freedom of certainty.

from the Renaissance Tarot

**The Rod of Asclepius:
Two of Cups**

“What can you give away, but not sell?”

Between us is a snake.
(We are drinking, always drinking.)
Between us, two snakes.

Two snakes between us, wound 'round a staff.
(We undress. We entwine.)
The snakes are pythons, whom Apollo killed.
The snakes are lovers, whom Tiresias killed.
They are of Hermes: traveling, commerce, communication.
They trade in things we understand.

We don't know much Apollo, though. We don't know Tiresias at all.
We know health insurance companies. We know the US Army Medical Corps.
We get it twisted:
We mismeasure the snakes. We confuse their spots.
How would we know the difference between a python and an aesculapian, anyway?
We mistake two snakes for one.
We look for medicine in our mercantilism.
(We look for healing where our hearts should be.)

from the Rider-Waite Tarot

Four of Wands

Oh, goodness glory, another font of fruit!
Another feast of flowers in our lovely world of wealth
As we celebrate our discourse with your vodka and my juice
And build new reminiscences of our most clever times
Admire the bulbous nature of our artfully-placed garland
Even though the lyre within it is so very hard to find.

from the Rider-Waite Tarot

Five of Pentacles

So this is the era of crippling
a generation to mock the weak
a winter to pour water on the sidewalk
just to see unsuspecting crutches fly out into traffic.

I've read of such times.
I knew I was not immune
from villainy or victimhood.
I did not know they came upon the heart so slowly
so slowly and suddenly all at once.

from the Rider-Waite Tarot

Five of Wands

He's been known to wear green leggings
with tie-dyed tunics chaps or sandals
gold-leafed barrettes under dime-store berets
immune to laughter, confusion, or praise.

When queried, he'll say
"I'm dressed as Luke Skywalker"
or claim to be imitating Charles Barkley.
The flagrancy of the inaccuracy silences opposition.

from the Rider-Waite tarot

Eight of Swords / Seven of Pentacles

Mostly, it's my brother
the middle one

that same dream since childhood. After the scorpion kills him, I attempt vengeance,
but my ankle collapses and I expose my thigh rather than my boot, dying by
scorpion sting myself.

Last night, it was you in the dream.

Your lover was there with me.

You were abducted by a cult. We tried to rescue you, but could not. The feds raided,
and you were taken to a psych ward. Your lover wanted to attempt a rescue
from there, too. He did not accept that we had failed.

Mostly, it's my brother, still.

But no longer always.

The nightmares are quite varied now:

I know so many lovely people that I could never hope to save.

This was always what the word "wealth" means.

from the Rider-Waite Tarot

Nine of Pentacles

“Depression wears a thousand masks,” he says
but depression *is* a thousand masks
shimmering in vermillion shades
as often as they’re blue.

Depression is top hats and fascinators
hockey masks, burgonets, armets
black and sleek, both helmet and dress.
Meticulously, artfully crafted
varied as anything found in nature
and very nearly as old.

“Depression conceals vulnerability,” he says
but that seems ass-to-front to me
Depression is porous, quivering
as tattered as it is armed
concealing beauty as effectively as sin.

from the Rider-Waite Tarot

Nine of Swords

Of course, today, this card.
Of course, today, it's you.
Of course, this card, it's you, dear heart, on the eve of your birthday
 the first birthday of yours you will not see.
This card, nine of swords, and you in the dark.

Of course her hair is blond, crying there in the dark.
She has your hair, and you are crying in the dark, except you don't cry in the dark any more.
Of course it's me in the dark, old skin, dark hair, hoping my tears can bleach
 my hair until it looks like yours.
Of course I am on my bed in the dark, comparing my bed to yours, my mattress
Too thick, nine of swords, for grief in the dark.

Of course there are nine swords.
There is rye, weed, cigarettes, coke, Fentanyl, heroin, razors and R.E.M.
Especially there is poetry, recited in the dark.
Especially there is me reciting your poetry in the dark, since you do not recite it any more.
There is me, in the dark, with rye, weed, cigarettes, Fentanyl, razors and R.E.M.
Of course I seek these things. Of course there is pizza and fried ramen in the dark. I try to take
Your vice, nine of swords, in me in the dark.

I seek fibromyalgia here in the dark.
Of course I want your fibro here in the dark.
 Still fantasizing I can take your pain for myself
 now that your pain has left you
 now that there is nothing left but your verse and the dark.

Your poems have seen the death of your heart.
I recite and wonder if you believed
Them safe, nine of swords, when you went to dark.
When you stopped crying alone in the dark.

Child of Music

Years ago your mother said, "Be careful selling those wolf cookies or you'll be selling them the rest of your life."

I picture you, a young wolf scout, collecting badges with manic focus. I wonder when you first picked a fight with an adult, when your prepubescent fists prepared to teach them they had no business being wrong near you.

I wonder about your mother's fear, how it transformed as you wore your wolf pelt, year after year. I do not wonder about the pelt's first owner. I have seen its skinned corpse. I know your pelt is no disguise, that you are, and shall remain, woman and wolf. I wonder how your mother felt when she realized it was done, that you had consciously chosen, of sound mind and feral heart, to live and die as both.

My own fear is refreshing. This world is crowded with coyotes and vultures; lousy with flat-toothed bullying moose. The world has too few wolves and almost no wolf scouts. The world will always want for grown women wearing the predators they killed as girls. And I will buy those wolf cookies as long as you can sell.

from the William Blake Tarot

Knight of Pentacles

*Today I am a small blue thing
made of marble, made of glass
—Suzanne Vega*

Today I am that little thing
the part of me your eyes reflect
scratching red mud for imaginary enemies

When we ride into battle
we're never quite sure
if we are head-to-head or side-to-side:
 who is carrying the pentacle
 who has stuffed their helmet with lichen.
We know, though, that you're the one with the Bible in his bag.

from the Rider-Waite Tarot

Queen of Pentacles

I have been sitting here a very long time

I wouldn't call my seat *disjointed*, though it is rickety. Memories pile differently than bones.

I sit on generations of beautiful men, their thumbs and tongues on my button, their cocks teasing my lips then sliding purposefully upward, pricks that now flutter around my feet, massaging the sides of my hips, at best.

I sit on their arms. Strong arms, thin arms, arms that loved me and arms that simply touched, wrapped around me as I slept, as I forever sleep now. Arms that held my shoulder, my thigh, my breast, my throat. Arms I almost feel, if I twist my back just right.

I sit with Maureen. I have to lie back a bit to find her, her dirty sheets in that cold room, the bucolic way she rose from bed, the hundred ways we dealt with hunger.

I am surrounded by young who left to war, the young for whom war came home. I sit with every stillborn kitten, every cousin I vaguely knew, our friendships lost to me but their eyes far clearer than the tedious zinnias of today. I sit with my sister Ava, my brother Emil; we do not speak, but we watch, we watch, we watch.

I had a mother and father. They lie where I rest my head.

I've heard the head that holds the crown is heavy. Have you considered the weight of the air? In my lap I hold a shadow where my baby once lay.

from the Rider-Waite Tarot

Judgement

How can you protect me
from the things I believe in
let alone the things my human eyes can see?

from the Rider-Waite Tarot

Temperance

Should you find me with my toupee'd mind aflame
What little voice I have emerging from between my eyes
Should you find me in the street cross-legg'd
Holding court for pothead drifters, mixing gold-striated cups

So long as you can see four toes dipped in the water
Know the health of that approaching rat is none of your concern
Assume my flight is winged encased and properly oiled
Even if my feathers seem to be coagulated scars

Just please

 don't call it chaos
 these trivial mistakes

Or say it's

 a mistake to live in chaos while I live here in that balance

the essence
 of self-control

from the Rider-Waite Tarot

Transformation

What do spiders learn? They have so much time to watch
the trap the struggle the bite the cycling transformations
their prey undergoes. They must be experts in anatomy.

Can they make assumptions, extrapolate?

If they explore a mouse's viscera, can they guess
the shape of a cat? Can they gauge the size of a man?

What do these two spiders see, as this great angel
sinews its way through the human crowd
halving, quartering, dissecting mortals
with easy movements of flawless brawn?

Spiders are not carrion-eaters. Does all this strike
them as wasteful? Or do they focus
on the anatomy of the seraph, the structure
underneath its impenetrable skin?

Do they see beauty in either monster or prey?

from the William Blake Tarot

How to Recover from Writer's Block

1. Join a high-pressure writing organization that expects a significant level of output.
2. Buy a Rider-Waite tarot deck. Shuffle it. While shuffling the cards, notice that it's no longer called the Rider-Waite tarot deck, but "The Rider Tarot Deck®, Known also as the Waite® Tarot and The Rider-Waite Tarot®." Remember an old book, *Women of the Golden Dawn*, which asserted that Waite, a man, gave vague sketch ideas for this most famous of modern tarot decks, but a woman artist realized all the ideas, and that the deck was properly considered a woman's creation, but a man got all the credit because it was a Golden Dawn and also Victorian and also English and also an everybody thing. Look more closely at the box while you shuffle the cards. The box says, "The original and only authorized edition of the 78-card Tarot Deck designed by Pamela Colman Smith™ under the direction of ARTHUR EDWARD WAITE." Why is Pamela Colman Smith™ trademarked? Is Rider the real name of Smith? Why would the deck be under her real name rather than her pseudonym?
3. Draw a card. It's "Wheel of Fortune," which is a fine card. You don't know what it means but it's clearly got hell of symbols all over it and it's covered in Hebrew letters, which you can read. Your ignorance is by design. This is a perfect writing prompt.
4. Write about your dead cat instead. Consider the way you eulogized her on Facebook. Consider the Creative Writing professor who, rather than offering sympathy, told you that you could get a poem out of your eulogy. Consider the utilitarian aspects of dead cats in the furtherance of literary careers.
5. Acquire a new cat. Acquire a kitten who is too young to be weaned, but whose mother has been cut in half by a car. Give her cow's milk, then wet food, then wet-and-dry food. Live with her in places like Texas and California and Georgia and New Mexico and Louisiana. Take care of her litters until giving in and having her spayed. Wait for her to develop mammary cancer. Wait for her to lose interest in peeing on all your stuff. Wait for her shits to slowly shrink and harden. Wait for the cancer to spread to her lungs and for her breathing to become labored. Wash her tumor while you wait. Wash her tumor in sterilized water, then hydrogen peroxide, then Neosporin, but not the kind with painkiller. This is because cats lick Neosporin off their wounds, which is good, unless it has the painkiller, which is highly toxic to cats. Watch her lick the Neosporin off her wounds, until her breathing is such that she doesn't feel up to doing so any more. Discuss her with the doctor. When the doctor offers steroid shots, take them, once, because she is still eating and still has her personality. Watch her appetite sharply decline in a week. Comfort her as she wakes up, short of breath and afraid in the middle of the night. Spend the night in the kitchen with her, whispering promises that you'll never, ever leave her and she'll never be alone. Call the vet when they open, 11am because it's Sunday. Make your 1:30 appointment, then wait for the Sunday doctor because her last patient bit her and she's gone home to clean up with sterilized water, hydrogen peroxide, and Neosporin. Soothe the cat's anger after she is injected with sedative. Hold the cat's head, rubbing her ear the way she likes, while she receives her lethal injection, whispering those same promises until the light leaves her eyes in an instant. When asked about cremation, accept the service and reject the ashes, tell them to discard the ashes

wherever because cats are people but corpses aren't and you just saw your cat leave, you know she's not there. When you sign the bill, you are either clearheaded or impoverished enough to notice that you were not charged for the cremation.

6. Repeat Step 5. Write one dead cat poem every thirteen years. This general avoidance of poetry will help you live a long time, enabling your heirs to release a single slim volume immediately upon your own death, from breast cancer maybe or according to your specific needs. If you lack heirs, employ a Twitterbot.
7. The cats must be always, invariably, female. You are writing poems about them, *nu*? Let them be Smith poems, not Waite poems. Who the hell was Rider?

The Chariot

My cape billows with sentience
into perfect, flowing seamlessness
Drawing your eye to my breast
Where it meets my armor
There's a lion's head that represents my crest

My armor is resplendent
Shimmering golden opulence
Emblems of the lion, wolf and bear
I draw from these emblems
They're a part of me as much as Sampson's hair

And I grip my spear tightly
Drive grand horses before me
There's no one quite as bright as me
On any battlefield

from the Renaissance Tarot

Author's Afterword

This project began with a community writing workshop, “Acadiana Wordlab,” in Lafayette, Louisiana, 2013, under the guest instruction of Marthe Reed. Reed used the questions in “Incubatory,” a poem by Christine Hume found in her book *Shot* (Counterpath Press, 2010), as a writing prompt. “Incubatory” is a brief epistolary in which Hume asks questions of her insomniacal body and receives answers. Reed presented the questions without context, asking us to respond to them. I decided that the questions were asked by Odin of Adonai Elohim, whom I interpreted as female for the purposes of the exercise. That exercise, entirely dependent on Hume’s superior creativity, is now “Odin Questions the Mother-Maiden-Crone” (p.14).

After that workshop, I slowly considered and crafted a few pieces in which characters of archetypal significance, from disparate mythos, discussed their incompatible philosophies. These poems became the “Dialogues” section of *Backstories*. In writing the Dialogues, I was struck by the patriarchal sexism, and obsession with female youth, of these mythological frameworks (and my relationship to them). I chose to neither revise nor reclaim these paradigms. I was raised in a patriarchal and chauvinistic framework, and have worked hard to examine and correct this within myself. In these poems, I have examined, but not corrected. They are descriptive, not prescriptive.

The “Monologues” are simply poems that I feel go well with the Dialogues, along similar themes.

The “Soliloquies” owe their existence to the Grind Daily Writing Series, organized through e-mail by Ross White. My relationship to the Grind, and my decision to write using Tarot cards as prompts, is explained in “How to Recover from Writer’s Block” (p.39), which hopefully contextualizes the section. I have presented the Soliloquies in ascending order, from the lowest cards to the Major Arcana. They come from three decks: the *Rider-Waite Tarot Deck*, the *Renaissance Tarot Deck*, and the *William Blake Tarot: of the Creative Imagination*. If you want to see the Tarot cards that inspired these poems, you can find images of the *Rider-Waite Tarot Deck* and the *Renaissance Tarot Deck* at <https://www.tarot.com/tarot/decks>, and images and full notes on the *William Blake Tarot* at http://www.blaketarot.com/PDFs/Blake_Tarot_book_1.pdf (both links retrieved Oct. 26, 2017). The cover of this volume appears on the “Stars” (poem p.36) card of the William Blake Tarot.

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I thank Michelle Greenblatt (1982-2015), who inspired so much of this volume, and Marthe Reed, who inspired its beginnings.

Poems from this manuscript have appeared in *Truck*, *Zoomoozophone Review*, and the journal of the Humanities Opposition World League. And I guess that's it. Many of these poems have been rejected, often. Well, *de gustibus non est disputandum*, which is something I learned from watching *Henry Fool*.

About the Author

In 1998, Jonathan Penton founded UnlikelyStories.org in the fires of Mount Doom, and into it poured his hatred, cruelty, and will to dominate. Since then, he has lent editorial and management assistance to a number of literary and artistic ventures, such as *Rigorous*, MadHat, Inc., and *Big Bridge*. He has organized literary performances, and performed himself, in places like Arkansas, California, Chihuahua, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Washington, state and DC. His previous books are *Last Chap* (Vergin' Press, 2004), *Blood and Salsa* and *Painting Rust* (Unlikely Books, 2006), *Prosthetic Gods* (New Sins Press/Winged City Chapbooks, 2008), and *Standards of Sadiddy* (LitFest Press, 2016). He lives in New Orleans, after a fashion.