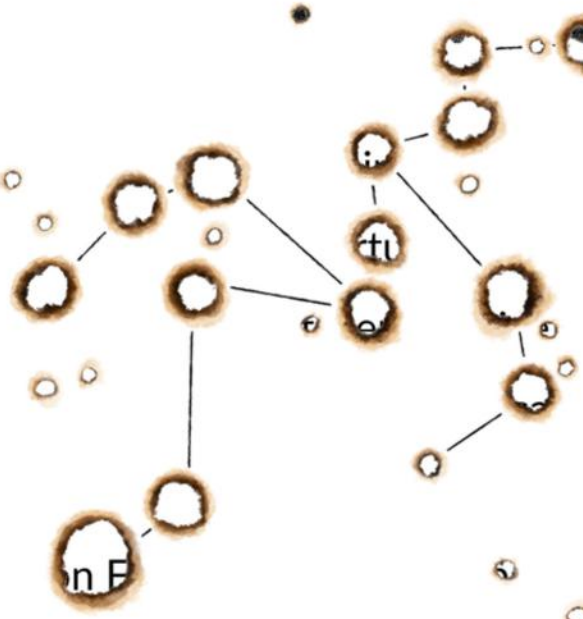
# VERSEVARMINT
## A LITERARY ZINE
## ISSUE FIVE
## CINQUAIN



# VERSEVARMINT: A LITERARY ZINE

ISSUE FIVE



## CINQUAIN

IN MEMORY OF DANIEL MICHAEL EARL

VERSEVARMINT: A LITERARY ZINE

ISSUE FIVE CINQUAIN

OCTOBER 2026 USA

EDITED BY K.MIKOLAJEK

(AUTHORS AND ARTISTS RETAIN FULL OWNERSHIP OF CONTRIBUTED WORK)

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COVER AND THANK YOU FOR READING PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANIEL MICHAEL EARL PUBLISHED POSTHUMOUSLY

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# Varmint's Verse



## a note from the editor...

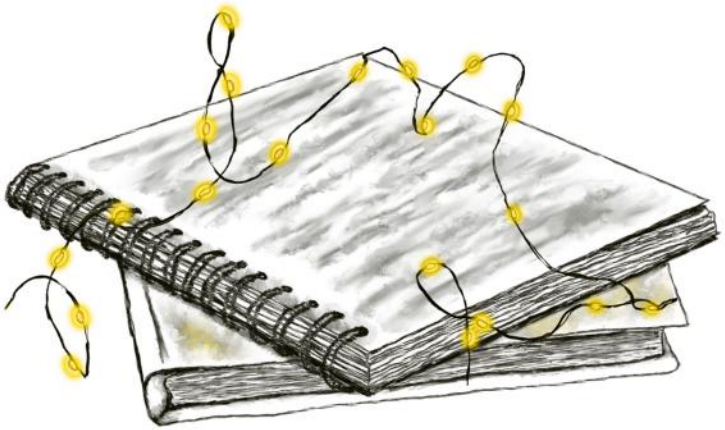
*VerseVarmint: a Literary Zine* crawled up from the litterfall of my own failures and self-doubt as a writer. I decided that if I need to cocoon a while longer, I should help others find their mothy wings. And here we are at our fifth issue, with a sixth already stuffing its pages with words like a chipmunk stuffing its cheeks with nuts!

Even now, a year on, the zine isn't perfect. But all of our authors are brave and beautiful and deserve to be celebrated! Every issue is a heart and soul experiment in finding what works and what doesn't. *VerseVarmint* does its best. *I've* done my best. Which is why...

*VerseVarmint* is growing in other ways! Please join me in welcoming Mike Hornyak to the team! He takes on the role of co-editor (though he's been a valuable collaborator from the start). This issue marks his final chance to publish in the zine; we hope you enjoy "The Lies of Summer" and "The Crimson Flame & the Holy Robes."



–K. Mikolajek



# Virtual Lover

Ece Onmuş

*the most effective way to calm down during a panic attack is to let it be.*
*focus on 3 things you can see*
*3 things you can feel and*
*3 ways you can move your body*
*it is all natural—your body is trying to protect you*

"I will send you a PDF of the book we will work on in next week's session. Make sure you read the first 2 chapters." My therapist loves giving homework from books. Usually I do what he tells me to. As I prepare to start reciting my carefully crafted conclusion to our session, I find my lips moving the wrong way.

"I can't really read online books; I want to feel the pages." It reminded me of the time I said online shopping didn't feel satisfying; I like to touch the clothes before buying them. Virtual life feels abstract, like someone can pull the plug anytime. Uncertainty haunts me.

I couldn't really give detailed arguments on the cons of digitalization when I was meeting my partner's friends for the first time through FaceTime, though. It was the closest I came to feeling like we were real during those first few months. His hologram reads me poems, so my mind doesn't suffocate me. He hangs up when I stop responding. The irony of humanity, my last thought before my eyelids get too heavy to carry.

Everyone praises how accessible life is lately. Witnessing it all without moving an inch of a finger. They act like it doesn't carve a hole inside them, how close they are to living it all but never really can. Maybe it's easier to ignore for others. Perhaps everything they want is right where they need it to be. Scattered across a map are only cities, not dreams, memories, or people.

Our conversations are intertwined with our dreams. When we talk, we talk about the house with the blue blinds. We talk about drinking wine on Thursdays. The idea feels freeing to me; he believes it is irresponsible. I pretend I don't have to guess the words he says from the 2 syllables that are audible; the internet is slow again. We change places in our rooms to try to get a better connection, knowing it won't work. Just to feel like we tried to fix it before giving up. It is no big deal. We got used to it.

I don't ever forget his smell. Partially because I have his

perfume and we smoke the same kind of cigarettes. He doesn't have to ask me to smoke my own pack half-jokingly when I am 800 kilometers away. I spray his perfume on tough nights; it feels like that can bring him here. I can't smoke a pack we bought together without knowing when he is coming back again. Act as if his warmth lingers on the black cardboard box. It is unbearable to think it might be the last thing of his I have that contains his touch. It is always a possibility there won't be a next time. Uncertainty fills the void where smoke burns my lungs.

"Hey, it's over now. You can breathe."

- Tell me 3 things you can see.

+ *my birthday gift, your diaries, a lighter, the first poem we wrote together, fairy lights*

- Perfect! 3 things you can feel?

+ ..

- Keep going, honey.

This time my lips don't move at all. I try to remember where his hands were a month ago—somewhere on my body.



## The Disappearance of Gerald Price

Dana Lapides

I'll disappear on a windy Sunday, on a day, perhaps, like today, in the summer. One moment, I'll be in my living room–breathing, heart beating–the next, only a couch with a fading imprint like a question. Not a death, a disappearance. No grief, no funeral, no pain, no nothingness. I'll just float, like a kite, away from all attachments, and never return. My disappearance will not be an exit from life but rather a fully embodied absence. I won't say goodbye to my wife or my cat, who may object. I'll leave my key under the doormat, abandon my office. I'll release my loves and my hates and my likes and my familiars, my knowns and unknowns, and the last thing I'll do is drop my name into the hand of a person in need. *Anything helps.* Not sure how, but here you go.

It will be a Sunday because today, a Sunday, as I stood in

the yard considering the pansies, awash in the neighbors' screaming from their pool, I forgot myself so completely that I grew into the bark of the birch tree, and my wife had to peel me off, bit by bit, so that I could come inside for dinner. And today, a Sunday, as I sat at my novel with my cat, the book fell open to page 73, a blank page. When I tried to turn to my place, there it was again: page 73. Each time I tried, closed and opened the book, there was the blank page, that 73. So, I got up again without reading at all, just the number 73 each time I opened, the title each time I closed.

It was the thought of Monday that oppressed me. Or just Sunday itself, which is both the last day of the weekend and first day of the new week, that simultaneous end/beginning of the interminable working cycle of adulthood. It was Sunday when I printed my first business cards, and Sunday when I dropped them in the parking lot, the wind scattering them about, all of those GERALD PRICE, ENGINEERs, while I went back in to print them again.

* * * * *

Gerald Price is gone. His office is dark, and his assistants have stopped working. The phone rings when his clients call, and no one answers. His cat checks the bed each morning and sadly makes do with his wife. His wife checks the bed each morning and sadly makes do with his cat. He's gone except for the signs of him–an unfinished cup of water, a partly used tube of toothpaste, the smell of his hair

on the pillow—and those are dwindling.

They've asked the sunburnt, shirtless man who now bears his name if he would take the space, fill the hole in the home, in the office, in the city, in the world left by the disappearance of Gerald Price. They see it as a thing of mutual benefit. They promise that no one will compare him to the previous Gerald Price. No one could because that man has disappeared. He is gone, and now that this man is Gerald Price, there is no other. But the man who now bears the name of Gerald Price wants to know, for instance, if he agrees, steps into the role of the previous Gerald Price, then what becomes of the man he is now? And then—who would they put in his place?

He hasn't said no yet, but as the days pass, the hole left in the world is closing, cinching down, and it becomes each day more unlikely that he would fit into the space. He stands, as always, on the median, considers Gerald Price, how Gerald Price would live, how Gerald Price does live since he is Gerald Price. Looks at the business card they gave him: GERALD PRICE, ENGINEER. Sometimes, the wife of Gerald Price drives by and offers food or coins. He accepts what she offers as from any stranger because he does not recognize her and, in fact, has never met her, although she is, in name, his wife.

They return one last time to offer him the place of Gerald

Price in the world, but it is a formality, he can tell. They are already used to it, the blankness where Gerald Price used to be. The clients have stopped calling. The assistants have found new work. His wife and cat no longer look for him in the mornings and have come to prefer one another. He is Gerald Price, but Gerald Price has disappeared. He is himself also, although he has forgotten the name he used to use and isn't sure who was married, who was the engineer, who had the mother with the cracked front tooth–him or Gerald Price? And he's not even sure how to wonder what he's wondering since he is Gerald Price. Gerald Price has disappeared, and what's left is nothing but also him, Gerald Price. He is the only one for whom Gerald Price has appeared, the only one whose world has had Gerald Price added to it, but it's still not clear what, if anything, was added and what disappeared.

THE FOLLOWING ESSAY CONTAINS ELEMENTS FOR MATURE VARMINTS

TRIGGER WARNINGS:

WAR

RAPE

NATIONAL CONFLICT





## Gračanica

Eliza Tracey

When your mother watched the plane fly into the towers you kicked her insides to let her know you were craving fish oil. Six months later you come out and time starts.

The inch of decades before birth does exist, but flatly, and only when your parents talk about them. They say the names of politicians you will study one day when you have your adult teeth. For now, you are eating fish fingers in the garden. You chew them with a mouth that is all gum. The names Bill and Hillary are being said in the kitchen but they are less real than the TV characters you will watch before bed. Bill and Hillary are on the other side of the watershed. Your father looks out through the kitchen window and wonders if you have lived your first memory yet.

The past is flat but makes a noise. Its volume bounces around the history classroom on the second floor of your school. The First and Second World Wars are particularly

loud but remain as formless and impersonal as museum signage. You know that your step-grandfather puts a cushion between his chair and his spine because he fell out of a helicopter whilst fighting for the World. That blue cushion is the only place where the past has a human shape.

From your viewpoint, four foot off the ground, the World looks as flat as time feels. Adults insist that it's round, and full of more people. You cannot begin to imagine the other people. The repertoire of faces in your dreams is capped in the double digits. Your history teacher is dream face number 45.

Then you are in your mid-twenties with wisdom teeth and dreams populated by faces you don't remember meeting and you are standing beneath a larger than life statue of Bill Clinton on Bill Clinton Boulevard which is not in America. It is in Kosovo.

The Kosovan War ended in 1999. Time's flattest slither. Not yet history, not yet you. Kosovo became its own country in 2008. That makes it six years your junior, a metric you can comprehend. Twenty thousand Albanian Kosovans were raped in the Kosovan war. Some were killed but some might be the woman who smiles at you in the street, or gives you change in the bakery. Or, if she's too young, she might be the product of rape. Or the daughter that the woman made later with a husband she loves but never told.

Clinton waves down at you with an oversized brass hand. The Kosovans thank Clinton for ending their suffering. A banner above him says Thank You America, Thank You Donald Trump.

Gračanica monastery is ten minutes' drive away over the capital's southern flyovers. This is a country that has dug itself out of the earth. The roads are raised on stilts. Where millions of cubic metres of soil have been taken, and why, is unclear. You are driven past the top floors of Malls and arrive before you can register that you have left. Nothing about the journey suggests that a change has taken place.

Gračanica's bars have the same dusty sun-brollies as Pristina's. The bakeries' facades are black and plastic. They look as garish as those in the city and sell one euro burek that tastes the same. The left side of the town's main road is outlined by the monastery's wall. Its stone has the hush exclusive to organised religion.

You look at the frescoes in the atrium. Signs on the walls request that you don't take their photo, bid you put your lens, with its shuttering ability to peel layers off the present moment, away. The monastery was built in 1341 at the behest of King Milutin of Serbia.

By the doorway to the inner sanctum there are two boxed paintings, one of Milutin and one of Jesus. They have the same long white face but one wears a crown. The paintings'

plastic boxes are faded from kisses of worship, wetted already by those of the morning. Milutin and Jesus seem more bodily to you than the twenty thousand women. When history goes far enough down a borehole it finds some dimension.

A baptism is taking place inside. Through the doorway's slip, the backs of four young men form the outer fortress of a family. You can see the outlines of heavy tattoos through their starched shirts. The back pieces emerge over their collars. Like the men's backs, every inch of the monastery walls is covered in images.

There is a fresco of Milutin on one of the central pillars. He is eight foot tall, the same oversized dimensions as Bill Clinton, and holds his monastery in his painted hands. You look at the flaking exterior of the building you are standing in and feel the monastery within a painting within a monastery within a painting, on and on. The chain of microcosms extends in both directions like centuries and the days they contain.

On the wall behind Milutin's pillar there is a painting of Abraham. His chest cavity is filled with grey babies. They look out, maybe dead, maybe unborn, undeniably innocent. A crowd of healthy pink babies clamour to be let in by his knees.

When you leave the monastery you sit outside one of the

bars. The man sitting opposite you realises first. He has read the menu where pancakes, chicken sandwich and cappuccino are written in Serbian, not Albanian. The languages slipped over each other somewhere on the flyover. Invisibly, but not without violence, around the tenth Mall.

Looking back on this moment you will wish that your capacity to notice stretched to facets of life like this, the ones that underline the past and coax it into human shapes. Instead, you were storing away the cadence of the woman limping by and the fact that Skopsko, Superbok and Heineken were the three brands written on the Serbian sun-brollies.

You learn that Gračanica is one of Kosovo's ten Serbian municipalities. Four are contiguous with the Serbian border, six are not. Of those six, which float around in Kosovo's eighteen year old body, like tumours, or strongholds, depending on who you ask, Gračanica is the administrative centre. The Serbs have entrusted their enclaves to the gravity of the monastery.

Alone, later, you will look up a map of Gračanica and see it in relation to Kosovo's wider outline. A little splatter just to the East of centre. A Serbian pacemaker in the heart of Europe's youngest country. In your head, the map mixes with Milutin's painted monastery, as things seen in proximity tend to do. All these little parcellings of the past

within the past within the past.

The man who noticed asks a question about how you would raise your children. Two men have asked you this before. They caught themselves wondering aloud about how our children will experience the future, then quickly, not OUR children, as if you lived in a faster-paced time. This man is just asking.

You think about the Serbian infant undergoing baptism, the process of shedding teeth, and the grey baby souls wrapped up in Abraham. You consider the watershed. You say that if you have children you will do everything you can to keep them young and innocent. Children have the rest of time to be adult-shaped.



# Lies of Summer

Mike Hornyak

Summer was a fiction
neither here, nor there
an untruth to hang my hat on

Lingering, silent heat
Stagnant, gray skies
An unsettling stillness, buzzing around the edges
like a breath on the cusp of a fall
Waiting for a decision
Begging for a storm
A rumbling torrent
Anything to stir the air
        to tip the moment

Or simply to give me succor -
that I may smell the rain
and feel the thick, damp air
through my open window
Safe in my chair
wrapped in wonder,
as nature sounds its warning
        and a season is announced

## The Crimson Flame & the Holy Robes

Mike Hornyak

*The temple bell clangs*
*A clumsy, hollow clatter*
*A comforting sound*

Sometimes I run my fingers across the fabric of my robes
The weave patterns form lines and shapes
Perhaps they mean something
These are holy robes, after all

I trace the stitching at the cuffs and the folds of the joinery
Like a map — a hairshirt legend to a mysterious eventuality,
secret knowledge, or lost treasure
If only it were so easy...
Some traditions read palms
tea leaves
auras
lace
My prescience is elemental
I read fire

*A stranger appears*
*New love among falling leaves*
*Quiet, brave, and shy*
*Romance in the falling snow*
*Dazzling like the rising sun*

The flames snap and flare as I kneel before them
spark and ash curl in the air, a swirling eddy
showing me my own face, and another...
There are so many versions of myself
From one moment to the next
I am a shrine maiden
shield maiden
lady of the cloth
fierce
passionate
lonely
I'm just a girl, you know



Under cloth and armor is a girl
After duty and virtue are dreams and desires
The flames of a temple fire may diminish and cool
But mine do not

So much contained within me...
My song could reach beyond those limits

My passion could break their boundaries
My light would pierce the deepest darkness

*Like smoke, I've lingered*
*Too long among the shadows*
*A bow's string pulled taught*
*Fire away, my burning heart*
*A preemptive strike*
*Is the same in love and war*

# About the Authors

**Eliza Tracey**
is a literary scout's assistant based between London and Eastern Europe. She is a *Granta* moderator and the editor of three Dutch books in translation. Her writing is published or forthcoming in *Southword Literary Journal*, *The Times*, and *The Time Literary Supplement*.

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continued on the next page



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is a student and wannabe writer from Izmir, Turkey. She loves to write and hates to make others aware of the fact that she loves to write.
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# Join the Varmint Gaze*!



Send us
poetry, flash fiction,
and/or short essays!

Also seeking art!
(because our editor's art is great
and all, but we are hungry for yours!)



## Guidelines at:
## versevarmint.com/submissions

*a gaze is a group of raccoons or, in this case, a group of literary varmints


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for
Reading!

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