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ADELAIDE LITERARY AWARD 2019 ESSAYS ANTHOLOGY

Special Issue of the Adelaide Literary Magazine

February 2020 ISBN: 978-1-951896-61-4

Adelaide Literary Magazine is an independent international monthly publication, based in New York and Lisbon. Founded by Stevan V. Nikolic and Adelaide Franco Nikolic in 2015, the magazine's aim is to publish quality poetry, fiction, nonfiction, artwork, and photography, as well as interviews, articles, and book reviews, written in English and Portuguese. We seek to publish outstanding literary fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, and to promote the writers we publish, helping both new, emerging, and established authors reach a wider literary audience. We publish print and digital editions of our magazine twelve times a year. Online edition is updated continuously. There are no charges for reading the magazine online.

(http://adelaidemagazine.org)

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Published by: Adelaide Books LLC, New York 244 Fifth Avenue, Suite D27, New York, NY 10001 e-mail: info@adelaidebooks.org phone: 917 477 8984

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The Sky Stopped Breathing

by Joanna Kadish

We first heard of fentanyl when Jared, one of our 18 year old boys, was arrested for scrawling graffiti on school walls on the island where we lived minutes from Seattle. One of the three kids who came along that day spray-painted swastikas on the yeshiva and wrote "This way to the ovens."

Aaron decided not participate, he counseled Jared not to do it either. Jared said later that he wanted to show he could think for himself and not just follow his brother in everything. They looked the same side of the coin, Greek gods, tall and athletic, dark blond with hazel-green eyes. Aaron wore his hair down past his ears while Jared clipped his hair short so their friends could tell them apart. Jared never told his shrink about this plan: he said it didn't seem important. Jared's psychologist said they had established a trust, and Jared seemed happy. They spoke about adjusting to a new environment—i.e. going away to school—and dealing with change.

Local and national media splashed the news over the front pages and airwaves. Alexander, the one who conceived this venture, also Jewish, had a crisis of conscience and went to his parents to confess. His parents went to the police.

And what was particularly heinous about this prank—because this is what Jared considered it, a sendoff before going to

college—he had no idea that his friend, the mastermind who conceived and executed it, was going to paint swastikas. The boy who did it might not have known himself until the moment he picked up the spray can. They never discussed what they would paint beforehand. They had a code to never stop the others from doing whatever. Jared said, "That's not how we do things."

All of them had tagged walls around the island, and considered themselves to be budding graffiti artists, and usually just drew abstractions that meant little to anyone outside their circle. The comment about the ovens was the kind of joke Alex liked to say around his friends; apparently he didn't consider how this would look to people who didn't know this is how he dealt with the reality of anti-Semitism. And even though Jared didn't ink any of the offending words or images (collaborated from professional handwriting analysis), and found it offensive that Alex did this—the lawyer explained that Jared stood by and did nothing to stop him. Jared was a year older—the other boys were 17 and considered minors. The judge in a nonjury trial decided to punish Jared and not the others. Biologically there is little difference between the maturity of youth of 17 or 18; U.S. law makes a distinction where there is none.

That's when we learned that both boys were addicted to the strongest painkiller ever developed and needed rehab. This was a surprise to us; they had not told us about the drugs they were doing, but then a lot of kids keep their drug use from their parents. As a teenager, I told my father I smoked marijuana occasionally, but I didn't tell him about the time I did mescaline or LSD. I stayed away from meth and heroin. The boys' father smoked marijuana every day, I joined him occasionally. We assumed that our children would be equally cautious.

It's hard to imagine fentanyl as the party drug of the year on this particular island — as it was for a few years—in the sort

of community where American flags mingle with Seahawks memorabilia from porches of multimillion-dollar homes, boasting one of the state's best school districts and hundreds of acres of parks and open space. Most of their friends came from stable families and didn't lack for the necessities of life. All the parents knew each other and the kids went into each other's houses as easily as if they were their own, the parents all looked out for each other's kids. And for Aaron and Jared, before the drug vultures moved in, it was utopia.

A flash of memory: eleven-year-old Aaron and Jared buoyed by limitless energy, holding a contest to see which one could slide the fastest through wet grass after soccer, which they had to act out again in the SUV, pushing each other along long bucket seats in back. Then they upped the ante, dive bombing from the window and sliding upside down. After a time they plopped down, seemingly exhausted. When I started the engine, the two tow-heads were at it again, snapping their seat belts and rocking the car with raucous laughter, taking turns describing in gory detail the soccer they played, boasting of how they kneed and elbowed their way to the goal several times without getting killed.

We raised our boys to believe in two things: God and sports. They chose lacrosse after soccer, practiced their skills daily. They turned out to be standout players, competing each summer in the regional club leagues. Brian, their father, loved watching them play; as a teenager he was a formidable basketball player in youth leagues; and shined on the baseball diamond as well. Brian was always one of the more vocal parents on the sidelines, yelling, "take the ball and run with it," or, "make a pass." After games, in the car he would talk about improving the skills. He had these high standards that were difficult to achieve, and more often than not, he seemed disappointed in their performance, pointing out where they could

have done better. And they listened to him, but it was hard to see what they thought because they didn't say.

But all that changed in junior year of high school. Their father wanted to make them continue with sports, but Aaron the more vocal of the two, said he wasn't going to do it. Jared said he didn't want to do it either. I suggested instead of forcing the boys into something they didn't want to do, why not let them chose what sport they wanted to be in. Brian said he didn't like quitters; I said what if they no longer like the sport? Let them chose year by year, so what if they don't stick with any one thing as long as they do it for the year.

Brian stopped wanting to do things with them. He said if they wanted to talk to him he'd take them out to eat, but he was damned if he would go snowboarding with them, not unless they went back to playing sports. He spent an inordinate amount of time in his room smoking his bong, and started hanging out with his men friends, and not inviting me or the boys along.

Aaron refused to go to lacrosse practice anymore.

I cajoled them into agreeing to play tennis, hoping that would placate their father, but many times they ditched practice. It dawned on me that they didn't want to do a sport at all, and were too afraid to say that, knowing how much their father loved sports. They started hanging out with an artsy crowd. Their new friends wore their hair unruly, dressed in black, and had tats and piercings in odd places. This worried me, but their older sister had a similar rebellious period and she got through it, and her friends had been similarly attired, and acted clannish, and sometimes off-putting. Sarah came through high school with honors and left for college, and stayed on the honor roll. I thought the boys would follow the same path. But then they tried fentanyl.

they injected. Everyone gathered around Alessandro who put a thin line of the white powder on a strip of foil that he held in his palm. He flicked a lighter below it and soon a vapor smelling like boiled milk rose from the foil. Alessandro told them that the Chemical would open their minds to the spiritual. They took turns. Jared quickly felt the explosive onset, mostly a head rush. The high is shorter than for heroin, one to two hours instead of half a day. The flushing in his face was so intense it was almost painful. He held his hands to his cheeks and rushed to the bathroom and drenched his face in ice water. He felt a shortness of breath as if he had been running; his vision blurred and his skin tingled as if he were being touched all over by a beautiful woman. He tried to pee but couldn't. He leaned over the toilet and threw up. All of it felt pleasant. Everyone lay about the couches and floor on pillows. Alessandro took pictures of them in various stages of somnolence with the Leica SLR he always carried with him. Alessandro attended art school summers, and took stunning photographs. Later that day, Jared played the keyboards, and guitar. Aaron played guitar, and Alex played the violin. There was a drummer and vocalist as well. Like the Romantics, they championed an alternative culture, criticizing frenzied pace of learning in the American public school system. Yet they embraced technology wholeheartedly, and went to coding camp. Their faces reflected the beatific visions they had experienced and the sense that they were a special breed put on this earth to make life better for everyone.

After their arrest, Jared volunteered to go to jail for a month at the advice of his attorney so the judge would treat him less harshly. The maximum prison sentence for this type of hate crime was five years. Jared had to withdraw from college the first week of school. We made haste to set up plans to have

Addiction happens fast with fentanyl, only a few uses will rearrange the brain's wiring and begin a lifetime of torment for the victim. We hoped teams of the doctors and psychologists that we hired on learning about this horror would shove the craving that is born out of the cession of pain into cave, so only a background murmur is left — fentanyl literally deadens the nerves so the user feels lightheaded, and a mental clouding occurs, thinking turns fuzzy, and there's a loss of fine motor control. This type of intoxication is highly pleasurable at first, and then no longer works, but by then you're hooked and you need more and more to have a sense of stasis, and not get violently ill.

We saw what happens when users run out of the Chemical (it's nearly impossible to keep up with the body's growing need). One day Aaron got into a rage and accused Jared of doing the last of the Chemical and started hitting him like he wanted to kill him. We had no idea what they were fighting about. It's likely in the psychosis triggered by the Chemical Aaron honestly believed Jared did this to hurt him. Jared had to go to the emergency room to see if his eye had been damaged by the beating he took; it was swollen shut.



Neither boy knew anything about the drug when they first smoked its vapor at a friend's party soon after graduating high school in 2010. All of this I learned after Jared started talking about it with us, releasing a torrent of memories in the days after his arrest, when we learned fentanyl had been found in his blood. One of their best friends from third grade said the high was totally awesome but it was easy to od. They were told that they wouldn't get addicted from smoking, only if

both boys attend separate residential rehab programs when Jared was released from jail. They weren't going to stop using on their own. We heard the recidivism was high.

His jailors assigned Jared to the violent crimes unit, and placed him in a cell with a man who torched a man's face in a home burglary. I was in shock that Jared, never one to start a fight, was sharing a cell with this guy. Jared told me on one of my weekly visits that the cellmate kept making jokes about gay sex. Thankfully, the judge only added another two weeks of jail, along with the maximum sentence for community service. Thereafter he would have four to five years of community service to complete, roughly 20 hours a week of mind-numbing grunt work. He would have to delay college and getting his degree.

I understood the sense they had of being special, of having new insight. Nor could I criticize them for trying this drug. I couldn't say well, why didn't you look it up first on the internet before trying it? I knew what it was like to be at a party with friends you knew all your life and be presented with a drug you'd never heard of. Back in the day, my boyfriend's word was good enough for me.

Now that they had been outed, we discussed the drug scene. Aaron read Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*, and said he felt fentanyl would turn out to be as defining an experience for his generation as hallucinogens were for mine. I went to university in Berkeley, California, where even now the spirit of the '60s is still very much alive, albeit muted. When I was there, in the 70s, the vibe was still a blatant Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds. In a 2006 report in *Wired* magazine, many early computer pioneers were said to have been users of LSD. Steve Jobs described his own LSD experience as "one of the two or three most important things" he had done in his life. But no one I knew was doing opioids. The drugs out today are

a lot more potent than what I had access too when I was their age, and I had no idea how much things have changed. The night of Jared's arrest, I was in for a shock.

After Aaron had been in rehab for several months, and away from the drug, I asked if he could find happiness without it. "I'm not mad at Jared anymore about what happened," he said, his face earnest. "I love my life now. I have purpose. I love the people I'm meeting, really great people. And I'm writing like crazy. I'm working on a screenplay. It's going to happen for me, man."

But the beatific visions that happened in the beginning lost their sparkle. Already he experienced the psychosis, and the anger, and knew that if he continued, it would eat at his mental capabilities in a monstrous way. It was the dreams that captivated him, he felt cheated without the dreams. I told him that Jorge Luis Borges says that modeling dreams is more difficult than weaving a rope out of sand.



Many of their classmates went to rehab as well. The result: ten deaths from overdose over a handful of years. But you won't hear about it, these families don't talk to the media. Addiction to opioids may have halted in my community after these deaths—that's the scuttlebutt on the street—but nationally it's a crisis without letup. Addiction cuts across every socioeconomic class in America, although the media likes to talk about it as a big problem in the Midwest, people from rural outposts to major urban areas everywhere in the U.S. are dealing with it, even in the tech centers.

Young white suburban Americans between 25 to 34 years old experience the highest rate of opioid overdose deaths according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In urban areas, it's blacks. Developed in the '60s as a painkiller of last resort, fentanyl has surpassed heroin and prescription pills to become the lead in the opioid crisis and is now the leading cause of overdose death in the U.S. Last year, more than 31,000 people in the U.S. died after taking fentanyl or one of its chemical relatives, representing a 45 percent jump in 2017 alone. No other drug in modern history has killed more people in any one year. UN statistics shows that opioid use in the US is the highest of any country in the world, and more than 50 percent higher than Germany, the second-ranked country of the twenty most populous countries, and 2,000 times higher than India. And now suppliers are adding it to heroin, molly, and cocaine, anything that comes in a white powder.

It's not a problem in the EU, likely because the family unit is stronger overall and people aren't as frantic about climbing the career ladder, life is slower across the pond. But this obsession with opioids is a totally different thing from what previous generations of Americans lived through, including the opium that Chinese brought in the 1849 Gold Rush. And the marihuana and hallucinogens of the 60s weren't physically addicting.

Doctors in the U.S. meanwhile were prescribing opioids for every sort of malady. It seems a natural progression that fentanyl started appearing on our streets in significant quantities in 2013, produced in China. Remember the Opium Wars? Is this payback? Rather than be a tool for enlightenment, fentanyl is a malignant shadow god that has its talons firmly around the throats of our youth. It's rare for anyone especially one whose brain isn't fully formed to escape its clutches intact. Currently there's no surefire remedy other than naloxone for opioid overdose, and it's best to be trained in how to inject if the need arises. Last year Congress finally passed legislation to provide treatment to people who need it and cannot afford it.

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Today, officials say the bulk of the fentanyl produced in China is funneled to Mexico, where it is remaking the drug trade as traffickers embrace it over heroin, which is more difficult and expensive to produce. While heroin is made from poppy plants that grow only in specific climates and take months to cultivate, fentanyl and other so-called synthetics are cooked from chemicals in makeshift laboratories in a matter of hours. U.S. border agents have been intercepting increasing amounts of fentanyl. In January of last year, they reported their largest seizure ever: 254 pounds of powder and pills hidden in a truck carrying cucumbers into Arizona, enough to kill every American.

In *Infinite Jest* Hal comes to realize that, "we are all dying to give our lives away to something," paralleling what Marathe tells Steeply about choosing one's idols. By giving himself over to addiction, Hal knows he's avoiding some question or realization, and by invoking Hamlet, the narrator suggests that addiction is an attempt to evade suffering, leading to questions about the purpose of life: "... the questions why and to what grow real beaks and claws." The bird-like imagery alludes to the image of the shadow that Kate Gompert uses to describe her depression. Which begs the question: Is addiction the best defense against depression and insanity? Against failure?

The boys went to treatment in Southern California, selected from the *Forbes* list, and very expensive. Nothing was too good for our boys, we just wanted them healthy. A year past us by and from all reports they were thriving, the therapists said that Aaron was leading group activities and doing well in his studies. Jared was also doing well, motivated and getting good marks. The following year I wanted both boys to come home for Thanksgiving, though the prospect worried me. On the phone, Aaron swore he was out of the drug's

clutches, making a lot of friends on the sobriety circuit and actively seeking clarity. The director of the treatment center recommended that Aaron come home, after all he reasoned, he would have to re-enter the world sometime. I knew that Jared would do whatever Aaron wanted.

The minute they came home we shared hugs, and friends stopped by in an endless procession. Everyone trooped into the kitchen. I watched Aaron go through cupboards, saying he wanted to find water bottles. I retrieved a couple for him. Aaron went to fill up, and in the process, sprayed water on the floor. He swiped the spill, grinning at my bemused face; his joy breaking out of him in waves of glee. "I don't want someone to slip on this," he said as if he were the happiest person alive to be doing this chore, his eyes round and glowing, his limbs vibrating.

"Just curious, what drug are you on, is it ecstasy?" It was hard to believe his joy stemmed from sheer happiness at being home, the joy that lit up his eyeballs like a Christmas tree.

"No, not ecstasy." He drank deeply from his water bottle and laughed like a child, with that unadulterated sense of well-being before spraying another layer of water on the slick wood floor, his laughter turning ecstatic, his spirit flowing effervescent like a bubbling stream. He pulled out a clutch of paper towels and bent down again. As he moved, his limbs appeared to shiver like the strings of a violin. "No, I'm just happy. I love you so much mom, and I'm glad we're here with you."

"It's not fentanyl I hope?"

He shook his head and Jared said nothing. In their code, the decision whether to admit anything was his brother's to make. I had my suspicions, but thought after a year of rehab, they should know the drill: how to stay safe, and to avoid overdose. I put my hopes on their good sense.

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Aaron said he couldn't wait to go back to Los Angeles with its young hipsters thronging the streets and clubs. His energy was magnetic; we all hung on his words. Several hours later, Aaron said he was tired and wanted to take a nap. Jared said he was tired, too. The next morning Jared found Aaron's dead body; his twin asphyxiated. The sound of Jared's ear splitting wail pierced my soul, the sound of desperation and heartache. We held each other for the longest time. Then the nightmare began anew, in a different guise, Jared fell into a funk with bouts of sobriety lasting months. I could tell now when he was using, his movements slowed and he spoke in a whisper, he had trouble getting out of bed, and complained that he couldn't get REM sleep, nor could he converse without a lot of pauses and trailing sentences, his understanding was poor and he couldn't finish a book. He dropped out of school and lied about it. Several times he went back to rehab, and each time he got out, he vowed this would be the last time he would use. The stress was unnerving, but I knew I would always be there for him, and help him find his way. Then after a period of successfully staying off hard drugs, and seemingly to have learned to manage without Aaron, he moved to the Bay Area and found a job he loved and friends. Then the friend who had introduced him to fentanyl came to visit, and was booted out by his roommate after threatening her, and acting psychotic. Later I learned from his coworkers that a new girl had joined their team. She had just moved to the U.S. from Mexico and announced to others that she was a meth addict. Jared became her friend and he told the others he was planning to help her overcome her addiction.

His landlord discovered his dead body. The coroner said the meth was so strong it burst his aorta. He died from massive internal bleeding.

In *Infinite Jest*, Gately takes Dilaudid to avoid "a terrible stomach-sinking dread that probably dates back to being alone in his XXL-Dentons and crib below Herman the Ceiling That Breathed." Gately hopes to lose the feeling that he's "under a storm-cloudy sky that bulged and receded like a big gray lung." Once the drug kicks in, "the sky stopped breathing and turned blue."

I wish I could talk with my boys right now, and tell them how much I miss them.

My work has appeared in a handful of literary magazines, print and online, including an anthology by Riverfeet Press, titled Awake in the World, V.2. My work can be found in Catamaran Literary Review, Adelaide Literary Magazine, Potato Soup Journal, Literary Orphans, Cultured Vultures, and Citron Review, and will be appearing in the upcoming summer issue of Juked. I was a finalist in Cutthroat's 2016 Rick DeMarinis Short Fiction Contest, and received honorable mention in GlimmerTrain's Emerging Writers Contest for 2015 and 2016. One of my essays was a contest finalist in the creative nonfiction category in the Spring 2019 Pinch Literary Awards. Years ago, I was a regular freelance contributor for the New Jersey Regional Section of The New York Times, and several regional newspapers and magazines, including The Cleveland Plain Dealer and Asbury Park Press, and received a few awards for that work from the Society of Professional Journalists. After self-publishing two novels I went for an MFA in creative writing from Bennington Writing Seminars in Vermont, and have an undergraduate degree in literature from UC Berkeley.

