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# Sad Poems Explode the Heart

Artist Philip Iosca releases his debut book of poetry

BY WAYNE BUND

Roberta Flack's "Ballad of The Sad Young Men" exists in a strange Internet black hole.

Flack's version of the song, for which Philip Iosca has named his debut book of poetry, does not exist on YouTube. A 30-second sample can be heard on Myspace, of all places. To hear Flack's full version, which is recommended, one must purchase or borrow it.

"What she talks about in the song really related to what I found myself interested in when I edited the poems into a book," says Iosca.

Artist-turned-author Iosca sits down in a small corner of a downtown café. It is Valentine's Day and he is dressed comfortably in a black hooded sweatshirt. Splotches of white paint speckle his hoodie, the image of the artist in the midst of creation. The black garb—and black coffee, for that matter—seems appropriate on this holiday, when he ruminates on *Ballad of The Sad Young Men*.

"The song talks about all these sad young men, sitting at the bar, drinking at the bar, looking at the stars. And it's really about all the sad young men growing old. I was interested in this moment of youth, when you stop becoming a child and become an adult. I'll be 29 years old next month, but I still don't feel like an adult. But I'm losing my hair. My gums are receding. My body is already starting to decline. I guess that means I'm an adult, though I don't feel like one."

If anything, Iosca's work, both visual and written, is evidence of maturity and gravitas. In the introduction to *Ballad of The Sad Young Men*, established Portland-based poet Matthew Dickman describes the contents as "explosions of the heart."

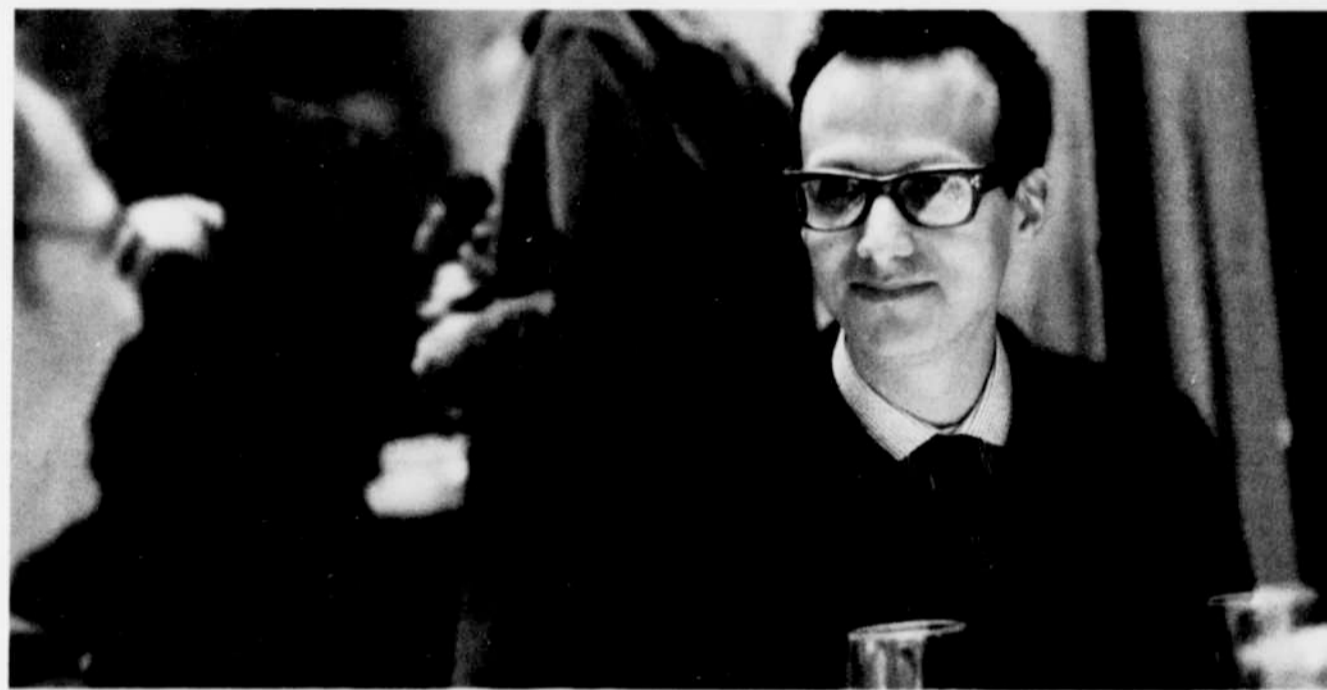
"They're short poems. I have a short attention span," says Iosca. "I think that's why I like poetry a lot. You can pick it up. You don't have to start at the beginning."

The last time we spoke was for his self-published book *The Rise and Fall of My Roman Empire*, a love story told in three chapters. A single copy still exists for sale at indie bookstore Printed Matter in New York City.

Yet, for having published two books, Iosca resists titles like "writer" or "poet."

"I don't know that I necessarily consider myself a writer," explains Iosca. "I feel that writing is part of my art practice. I think maybe more than the poems that I like, that a lot of artists that I like use text. Jenny Holzer is someone whose work I have already loved who uses text in a beautiful way."

Iosca defines himself primarily as a visual



Philip Iosca at Publication Studio's February 15 Publisher's Lunch

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artist. In the last year, he has exhibited work at PDX Across The Hall, 12128, Car Hole Gallery and Gallery Homeland. *The Rise and Fall of My Roman Empire* was entirely self-published: He wrote, made and produced the book himself—what was practically an art object in its presentation. It was Iosca's goal to make *Ballad of The Sad Young Men* in the same fashion but, he shares, another creative process—remodeling the historic building in which he lives—was proving equally tedious: "I ran out of energy. I didn't want to deal with it."

In the meantime he asked Matthew Dickman to look over the collection of poems; they had planned to collaborate on an earlier project, but the venture fell through.

"I'm a twin, and he's a twin. His twin brother is also a writer, they're both poets," says Iosca.

Once Dickman gave Iosca his seal of approval, Iosca turned to Matthew Stadler of Publication Studio. A local DIY print shop, Publication specializes in producing works of artists and writers. Each book is printed on demand in house.

The genesis of *Ballad of The Sad Young Men* took place primarily in the solitude of Oregon's Cascade Mountains.

"I applied to the Caldera Residency for writing, which is funny because I don't con-

sider myself a writer," Iosca reiterates, "mostly to create this document that I could reference for myself as an artist." Iosca brought some 20 odd journals he had written in over the years and "put it into one cohesive document. I had enough time while I was there to go back through the document and create poems out of it.

Caldera is in Central Oregon," he continues. "It's remote. It's snowy. I mostly am spending all day alone in my cabin. I brought my computer with me, so I just listened to my iTunes on shuffle. No telephone. No Internet. No television. Just some music and a snowy cabin and me. Roberta Flack's 'Ballad of The Sad Young Men' came on and it kind of clicked."

So has the book's official release. *Ballad of The Sad Young Men* was launched February 15 as part of Publication Studio's "Publisher's Lunch" series. A themed "all black lunch" catered by Holocene's Jeremy Larter consisted of a four-course meal in which the majority of food was black, or shades of hue between black and white. Portland's intelligentsia—among them Tom Spanbauer, Kristan Kennedy, Rebecca Iosca (Philip's twin sister) and Jack Barron—provided readings of select poems.

On the success of his latest project, Iosca muses, "It's funny [that] it seems easier in this town to publish a book of poems than to get a show somewhere." ☐

BALLAD OF THE SAD YOUNG MEN can be purchased from Publication Studio, 717 Ankeny St. Physical copies are \$15, a DRM-free e-book is \$10 via [publicationstudio.bz](http://publicationstudio.bz) or 503-360-4702.