

PORTRAIT OF MY FATHER AS THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

poem by Joanna Preston

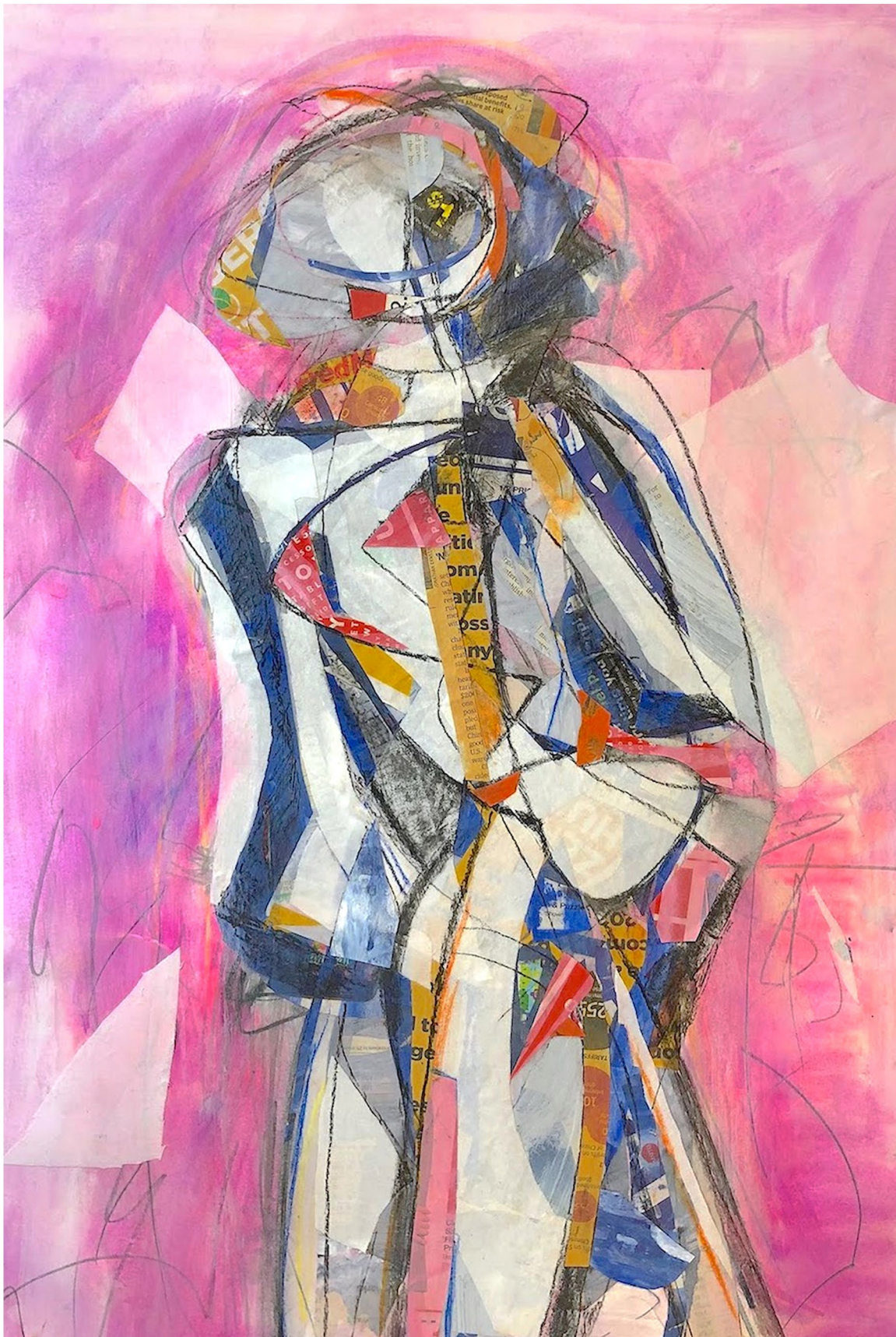


Image: "Desperado" by G.J. Gillespie. "Portrait of my father as the Count of Monte Cristo" was written by Joanna Preston for *Rattle's* Ekphrastic Challenge, January 2024, and selected as the Editor's Choice.

They have made for him a mask, shaped of face and chest and shoulders and throat, not to protect him, but with seven long black screws to lock him firmly down. He goes into the machine and something almost him comes out. Because this is desperation, this attempt by force to burn out every hyphae of this thing burrowed in to his throat his jaw his tongue into the voice and breath and savour of my father, and so now they will burn him.

My father goes into the machine, and something almost him comes out. For the burning they give him morphine. For the burning they give him morphine. For the burning they give him morphine and his skin peels into ribbons and he goes into the machine, and something of him comes out.

A chevauchée campaign. Some of his hair has blackened as though scorched to its roots. He goes into the machine, and something of my father comes out. Kind people pat him dry, press salve and clean cloth and bandages against him. All this they can do without looking. He goes into the machine, and something almost him comes out. But his mouth is a charred cave, smoke-filled and acrid, his throat a scoured-out gully. His voice is a rumour of flame, carried by the wind at dusk to where children are sleeping. He goes into the machine, and something almost him comes out.

For the burning they give him morphine. For the burning they give him morphine and methadone. For the burning they give him morphine and methadone and catch each other's gazes above his weeping skin. He goes into the machine, and something almost him comes out.

His face inside the cage is burnt and his lungs are the desiccated body of a crow wired to a fence as warning and his body is scourged and bleeding and it is Christmas and he has been made into tinsel and he goes into himself and he is dressed in a jester's motley but cannot laugh the white gown of a patient but he cannot take any more wears the memory of my father but it is charred around the edges and there are embers in his mind and he goes into the machine and something does not come out.