

Would You Give Up Arms For Wings?
A story inspired by the visionary life & writings of Paulus Berensohn

by S. Portico Bowman

In 1974 dancer, potter and deep ecologist Paulus Berensohn thought he was dying. He sold his share of the Pennsylvania farm, left in secret, and drove to San Diego in search of healing. *Would You Give Up Arms For Wings? A story inspired by the visionary life and writings of Paulus Berensohn* is based upon Berensohn's unpublished novella *The Silver Sword*. Historical fact and magical realism weave a story that recounts how mystical experience, the craft of Bargello tapestry, friendship, love and Nature restored his life. My book explores what Berensohn learned about overcoming creative fear rooted in false ideals of perfectionism, and the demands of modern-day art careers.

From the early days of this project, I've also wanted to validate my claim that the parallels of Berensohn's bodily malaise are reflected in the eco-catastrophe of our time. And while Paulus healed himself through a variety of interventions that included a full immersion in the craft art of Bargello tapestry, he emerged from this period dedicated to deep ecology and seeking a solution to the healing of Mother Earth.

Writing this book has healed me, and I see healing for the planet is possible. I'm not naïve. We are in crisis. But I write on page forty-three, "because Nature will never stop making wiser children the future is secure." In October 2023 I arrived at the Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, Japan. Kyoko Yoshida's class was prepared to translate the passage I've quoted. For one hour my real life was immersed in the magic moment of these young people demonstrating my prediction true. I listened to them extract their belief in the future from the ineffable meaning suspended in the language of feeling. And because what we believe makes all the difference, I've come to feel that believing in the future will make one possible.

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Paulus is for me one of the most purely creative people I've ever known about. If I'd met him in real life, at a much earlier age, I would have had a very different creative life. I'm sixty-two. I have an MFA, but it is in visual art. My creative writing life took root when I was forty-five as I reclaimed a literary birthright "eaten" by a teacher in Grade Six. Paulus himself was severely dyslexic. One of the subthemes of my book is the harmful practices of formalized education to the neurodivergent mind.

What's come to be of exceptional interest to my research and writing is that while I have sought to understand Paulus, his source ideologies and the man himself, through the vast archives and unpublished trove of written materials in the Archives of American Art, I have found him to be an intuitive force and source of wisdom connected to a deep investigation into his own fear. Paulus' life is a narrative study of the human psyche's essential longing for freedom and the potential for natural fulfillment through enchanted mystical experiences. For most of my life I've felt magic(k) and mysticism to be taboo. However, writing this book dismantled that for me. My work expands to explore the psychological dynamics of belief, magic(k), identity, mothers, Mother Nature, eco-futures, love and freedom.

Central to the magical realism is the narrator, Susannah, a guardian angel assigned to help Paulus. She accidentally turned herself into a Eurasian eagle-owl. Toni L. Cash, an angry young woman and true ally of Paulus, has in her possession a magic(k) stone, but the stone has been lost at the laundromat. Susannah has a love interest, a grey parrot named Isaac. Rainbow, a mime and an actual person in Paulus's memoir, finds the lost stone. He is also an angel. Susannah grants Toni's wish to give up her arms for wings, whereupon Toni is accidentally electrocuted. Although this sounds sad, this in fact is part of the Happy Ending.

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Furthermore, and perhaps most significant is I've discovered mind-bending connections between Paulus' original visionary experience and the cultural forces most impactful on my life and times. Paulus' *Silver Sword* experience manifest as a direct result of his attendance at the matinee screening of Ingmar Bergman's film version of his staging of Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* on Christmas Day in 1974.

It turns out that that the very ideology that inspired the opera, are the philosophies that inspired the entire counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, however I didn't know, and it seems many of those hippies didn't know, that these ideas are embedded in ancient Greek and Egyptian philosophies known collectively as Hermetica. The New Age is actually a very Old Age. Furthermore, it comes to be that Bergman's use of a frame story is the narrative device that allowed me to combine non-fiction and magical realism. This structure holds the story as I move back and forth between membranes of reality, imagination, fiction and non-fiction with my frame story. My Preface at the opening of the text is a guide to how this occurs.

Writing *Would You Give Up Arms For Wings? A story inspired by the visionary life and writings of Paulus Berensohn* has salvaged my dedication to the freeform experience of creativity. I've written the book to give others access to the teachings of Paulus so they can imbibe his mindset that becomes a sustainable life practice of creative practice.