

MICHELLE BITTING

I went behind the
scenes . . . [and]
found there
the violet coffin

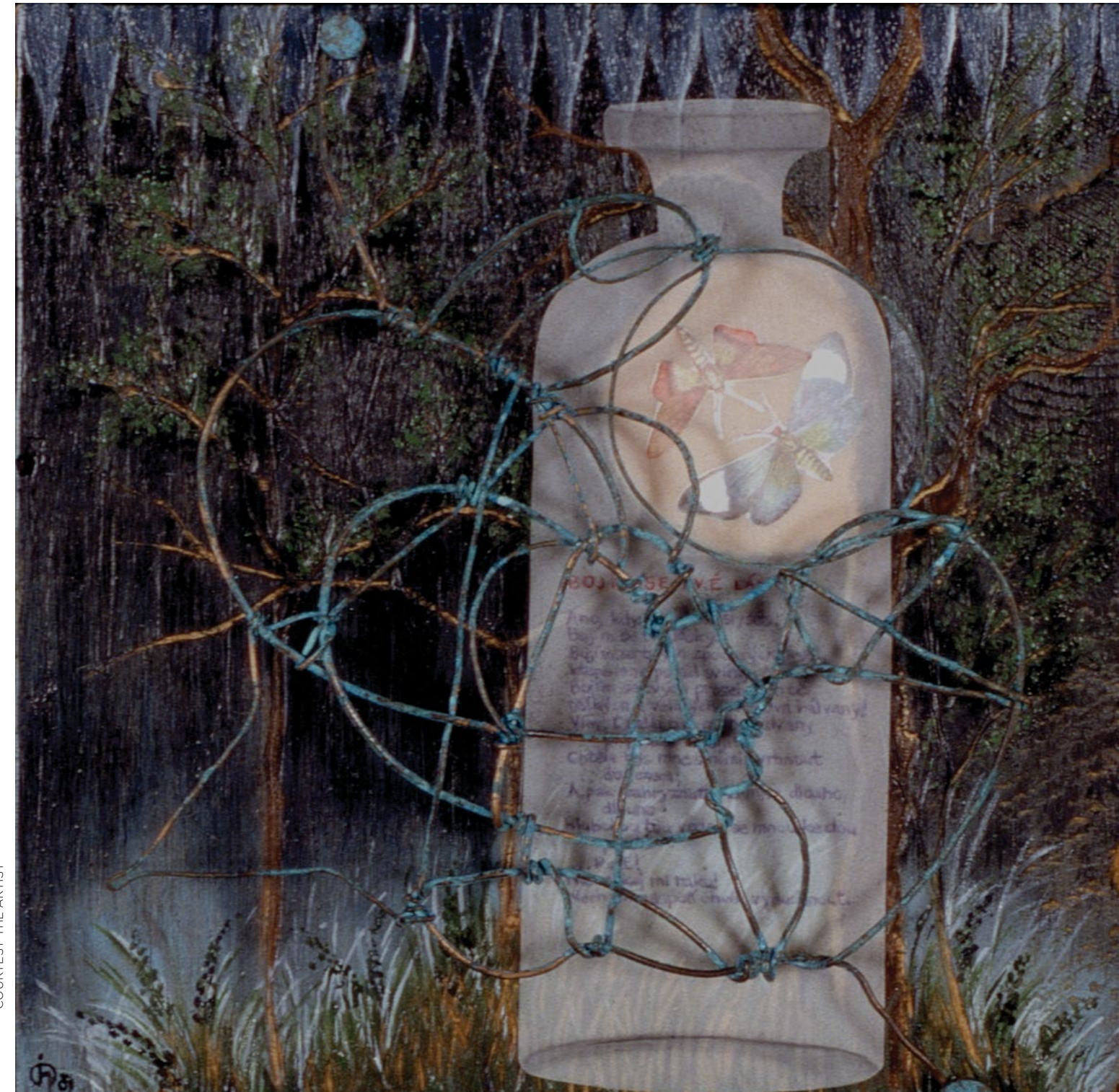
—George Bernard Shaw, from
a letter to Stella Campbell

Actually, it was an old red shoe box
mined from the cave of a musty closet
and my son stood by as I lit a stub
of sage over the puffed pink breast
of a dead robin he'd found, supine
and stiff on the backyard brick. Had it fallen
from the purple crown of a nearby jacaranda?
Maybe it was that shadow of a hawk
I'd seen circling, eying nests clustered high
in the arms of the eucalyptus. The roaring,
feathery draft, honing in on heat and noise.
Some think it strange that Shaw watched
the remains of his mother being burned,
but if it were me, my bones, I wouldn't mind.
Others making a moment of it, the *materia*,
the fire of life forcing change. The way
mothering this boy has worn us both
to something precious that glints,
if a bit battered around the edges,
like a favored antique spoon reached for
from the drawer of all others. The door
of the furnace is beautiful. It looked cool, clean,
sunny, though no sun could get there. Nails and ashes
and samples of bone. My son wants to see
into it, the bird, its stopped clockwork,
the real thing. *People are afraid to see it
but it is wonderful.* Shaw laughed and felt his mother
laughing right behind him, her feet to the flame,
bursting miraculously into ribbons of streaming,
smokeless scarlet. Sifting dust, the hours, my son and I
inspect death, *little tongs* in our hands, *little handles*
without misgiving. Scattering ourselves eagerly
across the garden, sudden wings and the shadow
of a bird passing over, sweeping us up
into its sieve as if to say: *Oh grave, where is thy victory?*

Michelle Bitting has published three poetry collections, *Good Friday Kiss*, winner of the DeNovo First Book Award, *Notes to the Beloved*, winner of the Sacramento Poetry Center Book Award, and in 2016 *The Couple Who Fell to Earth* with C&R Press. She has won the Beyond Baroque Foundation, Virginia Brendemuehl, and Glimmer Train poetry contests. She is the winner of the Catamaran Poetry Prize for her collection *Broken Kingdom*, which will be published in September 2018.

IVA HLADIS

I Am Afraid of Your Love, 2001
Mixed media on recycled wood, 5 5/8 x 5 5/8



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