

WELCOME ISSUE 6 MAY 2020

And remember, if your thrall thinks Kafka is a trade agreement it's time to hit Tinder (or Grindr)...

Welcome to Fleas on the Dog! We're a no frills brown bag lit rag with only one focus: GOOD WRITING. Our style is 'HOTS!'—hands off the submissions! We publish every submission exactly as received, so there might be arbitrary spacing and pagination. What you won't find are pretty pictures and fancy layouts. We like this 'broadsheet' deconstructionist approach inspired by the 'Beat' presses and journals because it visually footprints the individual in a way a uniform format does not. We hope you like it too. (In some cases with poetry, Hezekiah's intro will be found at the bottom, not the top of the page.)

It's been three months since we published our last issue and in that time the world has changed in a way we could never have imagined or predicted. Italy and Spain, with their vibrancy of Latin culture, have fallen under *l'angelo della morte*. Toronto is a ghost town. New York is on its knees. Deaths in the USA have passed those of the Vietnam War. Infrastructure everywhere is imperiled and culture is quickly becoming a hostage in the pogrom of pandemic. We look around and it is like civilization is closing down. A night of sorts, whose darkness is unfamiliar, descends upon us.

But like Byron, a prisoner in his *Castle of Chillon*, we can learn heroically from despair and in so doing mobilize those things which are beyond worry, heartache and desperation. Love and Art. That's what it comes down to and what it will *always* come down to. Now, more than ever, this is the time we need each other. Stephen King was once asked, 'What makes a great writer?' His answer was, 'A love of the species.' The best writing ennobles the species and through poetry (and by that we mean *all* literary endeavour) we find not only a bright abundance of hope, but the salvation that will carry us through. Writers, poets, playwrights, journalists. Defeat is not in our cards. Rise up! Hang fire! WE are the voice! Today is our tomorrow!

It is ironic that social distancing brings an awareness and need for community. Reaching out takes many forms. One of the ways we are doing it—starting with this issue—is WOW! (Writers on Writers!) We've invited a number of Fleas alumni authors to guest edit some of our submissions and to tell us each in their own words WHY I LIKE IT. You will find them throughout Fiction, Plays and Nonfiction.

The plays we publish are here because we like them. We were swamped with submissions in this category and though we love theatre, we possess neither the experience nor expertise to parade ourselves as critics. We probably turned down some very excellent scripts simply on the basis of our shining ignorance and for that we apologise. **We sorely need a Drama Editor (or drama**

queen) at FOTD so if you're someone who welcomes abuse, pressure, fame and glory—or know someone who does—please give us a shout at editors@fleasonthedog.com

Six writers are making their debuts in Issue 6. Congratulations to **Turner Odorizzi** (Fiction), **Kevin Barbosa** (1st global publication, Fiction), **Alexander Auclair** (Fiction), **Fajer Al Zayed** (Poetry), **Patrick Harig** (Fiction) and **Amannda Maphies** (Nonfiction).

We're just six crazy dudes who love the language and fall on our knees at the sound of beautiful words in all their glorious reach and transformative power. At FOTD we share that with each submission we publish, each different from the other, some miles and styles apart, but always burning. *Nisi optimum et clarissimum*. We can't hold hands but we can sure as sugar touch hearts so, hey, when lockdown get you down—reach out --you're only a keyboard away!

And now, with great pomp and ceremony, we give you Issue 6. It's a massive mother but you've got three months to read it. And until we meet again in Issue 7 always spread the love and STAY SAFE, or, as we say here in wonderful Canada, the true north strong and Flea, 'Stay safe, *eh!*'

Tom, Charles, Richard, Robert, Steve and Hezekiah

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EVEN A DOG ENLISTS

By Joey Rodriguez

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author DANIEL THOMPSON writes: Set on a European battlefield during the second world war, Rodriguez' disorienting, just-in-time style of prose resembles the young John Hawkes of *The Lime Twig* or *The Cannibal*, anticipating our arrival at the end of each sentence. Keeping our eyes shed, for what might leap out at us; a surprise ordinance, a mine, a deadfall, a sniper taking aim. We never see him, hidden as he is. Illuminated occasionally by streams of consciousness raining down the inside of the page. We are stunned by the variety of detail, raised in sharp relief, flashes, impressions, static moments amid a barrage of bullets and pounding rain. The experience of time that one gets in moments of danger or stress, events happening in exclusion to cause or effect, with no link to before or after, chunks torn, ripped out of the body of time itself; quote "He lay in the open, beside the capsized cart, his helmet removed along with a portion of his skull. The bullet had removed the fleshy pink interior, carving out a bowl in which blood, rain, and the nuisance of steel blue flies, could germinate."*

Senior Editor Charles writes: *Impressionistic scope, carbon hard detailing and compressed emotional vectors borne out of a triumphant sense of humanity, make this 'barbaric yawp' of two brothers one of the strongest stories we've published. An intensely physical reading experience certain to haunt mind and heart. An easy Five Stars. Quote: 'He was a reaper born to thresh, his mind incapable of understanding the calamity of death, the incongruous moment before the candle was blown clean, the rapid dissemination of every moment washing across the eyes of the fallen before darkness intervened.'*

Even A Dog Enlists A Short Story by Joey Rodriguez

Word Count: 6,386

Its consistency never solidified, wavering relentlessly between sickening brews of thin black liquid and viscous grot. The skies endeavored to ensure the unpredictability, belting nearly-acidic sheets of rain in day-long shifts, clearing momentarily before reloading and ejecting another insufferable round. The boot tracks made days prior were washed over by new ones before the

tide of mud undulated and smeared them into obscurity. It was for the best, the grateful dead had been dragged from the battlefield to opposing ends, accounted for, tagged, and shipped to the field hospitals kilometers behind the front.

The trenches hummed with clouds of white vapor, some stretching infinitely, the others puffing in short, anxious spurts. The vacuous *pop* of the muck signaled patrols, the officers trudging up and down the line, offering their meager pittance of appreciation with nothing to show for it, not even an extra tear of stale bread. Mocking the routine appeared to be forbidden, the enemy mimicking the effort, a slap against the shoulders to remind them they were all brothers.

The battlefield had once been a prideful meadow, the surrounding forest now plucked of every available stalk. Nothing was left to remind anyone of its former purpose, not a single blade of grass. Every millimeter of earth was churned by hoof and boot, uprooted by mortar and shell. Dwellings were obliterated, the very bricks crushed into a fine powder. What had once been hills were flattened, the remainder pounded until a desert developed. Black and white fought for supremacy, the uniforms of both contestants, smeared in the mixture the rain had wrought, the stains of comrades' blood just as dark, just as crusted.

The incessant droplets pelted his field pack, soaking into the burlap until it slowly buried him in the dirt. Upon the insistence of his commanding officer, he had accepted a meager patrol, shifting slowly along the ground in the middle of the night, choking on the backwash of the rain. Leaving the confines of the trenches was as equal as remaining so. A hundred meters from the exit tunnel, he had encountered a mound of thorns, the remnants of an overturned cart providing a tasty vantage point. A handkerchief soaked in urine was draped over his mouth, protecting him

from the ghastly mist of putrid gas and the emanations of the deceased horse that had fallen as a result of the gutted cart. Here, in the weeds, he and his spotter had waited.

The change in elevation gave him precedent, the angle affording him brief performances of the peaks of the enemy's martensitic silicon and nickel steel helmets. A headshot would have been inconceivable, the thickness and durability challenging to puncture through. He would have to triangulate, wait for them to lift the heavy burden and scratch their noses, massage the baggage under their eyes. He would thread the bullet against the cartilage, the force enough to tear the back of the throat and clip the spine. Even if their indexes had lovingly caressed the trigger as a matter of reflex, a paralysis would have already prevented them from squeezing; no chance for a lucky return strike.

Patience allowed him, however, to prevent such a luxurious kill from being wasted. Time, and the weather, introduced a temporary stalemate, neither side finding the strength to march to the lip of their trench and blast their native tongue into the air. Proudful howling bubbled from the network he had left behind, a small flame casting shadows along the uneven trench walls of the men who claimed to belong to his pack. They delighted in a warm can of processed beans, their steel spoons *clanking* off the edge.

"Still hasn't moved." He lacked the discipline to remove his eye from the lens of the magnifier to wipe clean the dry sensation. His crosshairs remained fixed upon the trench. Not the front line; tucked behind it, where the tips of vulnerable ladders led to clandestine troughs. A cutout had been excavated, a shallow chamber built. The port was rung with jagged kindling to prevent its collapse. His target, though, did not perch upon the frame, preferring to lay upon his belly, his rifle tucked from view.

In the amplification of his scope, the sharpshooter studied a featureless, medieval mask. He suspected the face of a wood stove had been ripped at the hinges, heated unimaginably, and flattened. Five leather straps were adhered to the edges, knotted together at the back to fasten the black sheet to the head. The visage bore no discernible markings, beyond the scattershot scratches of near-misses, save for two cutouts, no larger than thumbnails. From this distance, and precocious angle, it was impossible to imagine the bloodthirsty stare.

The hidden Gewehr 98 exploded, the iron mask unflappable. Smoke from the barrel stumbled through the port as the intended target dropped. When on the receiving end, the first indication is always muffled, the unsure expulsion of a single firecracker. The second note groans much louder, like a knife through fresh fruit. The victim was unable to receive a warning, his neck peeling open, backed by a pressurized spray of black. He had taken shelter beneath an unsteady, wooden bridgeway, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

His peers dove into the slop, covering their own heads with leather gloves and callused hands. There would be no laughter for the remainder of the day, perhaps not even the relief of their sleeve to wipe their brow. The bleeding head slapped the dirt wall and he tucked himself into an awkward crouching position. A snoring rattle came in shortening intervals until his heart succumbed to exhaustion. His trousers darkened at the insistence of his bladder.

The successful kill was registered promptly. From the enemy trench came a rudimentary pole, its hooked end shepherding a small, handmade imitation flag of the Canadian Red Ensign. It was fastened to a crucifix impaled with carpentry nails, each peg carrying the confirmed kill of participants from the United States, Britain, France, and others. This had been the fifth Canadian vanquished by the patient sharpshooter, all under the banner of the Iron Cross.

“Bastard. *Maji-manidoo*,” he seethed, his sloppy index finger dripping with sweat and rain runoff. If he were to strike, it would be only against the rigid metal, there would be no element of success. “The Hun won’t move. *He won’t fucking move.*” He needed reassurance, he required his spotter. “He’s got to make water at some point, eh?”

The corpse beside him bore the same uniform, the same ugly chocolate tint. The emblem of the 107th Battalion Expeditionary Force was pinned to his chest, the growling, mid-stride timber wolf meant to elicit fear in the German devils. He lay in the open, beside the capsized cart, his helmet removed along with a portion of his skull. The bullet had removed the fleshy pink interior, carving out a bowl in which blood, rain, and the nuisance of steel blue flies, could germinate. His eyelids were pinned to his skull, the aperture of his irises expanding until they rung the pupil like the stains of a coffee cup. He had not been disarmed, his weapon snug against his chest, his field pack preventing him from laying straight. To the heavens, he stared, unblinking.

Here, in the weeds, he and the sharpshooter had waited. As dawn broke on the first morning, their reconnaissance had proved naïve, his vantage immediately struck down by the Hun with a well-placed round. Believing him to be a lone hunter, the enemy had not returned his barrel to the innocuous resting place of the malnourished horse and its wares.

This was the only consolation, the only advantage.

“What if I pick off the weaker ones?” he suggested to the deceased. “Pepper their goddamn heads until I draw him?” He contemplated the strategy, quickly thinking better of it. “You’re right,” he sighed. “*Keep him comfortable.*”

Who was this knight? What possessed him to nestle behind his battlements and strike fear into the Canadian pack? The chariots of his trigger drew no distinction between acquaintance or brother; they were designated to kill because it was decreed. Fists banged, and throats ran hoarse with protest in the Motherland; therefore, his chamber was stocked, flush with enough cartridges to bless him into retirement. He needed no rest, nor nourishment, a creature designed to snuff the light solely at the point of a finger, the whisper of a syllable. He was a reaper born to thresh, his mind incapable of understanding the calamity of death, the incongruous moment before the candle was blown clean, the rapid dissemination of every moment washing across the eyes of the fallen before darkness intervened. The Hun was careless, unkind, unwilling to understand.

Through the lens of his rifle, he watched the unflappable German, grinding his teeth until he swallowed the thin shavings of enamel.

An unexpected approach shifted his weapon, a charging gray and white menace bursting through the thorns. He was wrestled backward in the flapping entrance, his rifle nearly discharging. Rolling into the corpse, he waited for a gunshot, waited for the swift black curtain to collapse upon him.

The gentle cooing of a newborn shifted his neck, his head craning toward the uncertain perch of a carrier pigeon. Relief was injected into his stiffened muscles, his cheek slapping the cold mud. He kept his eyes fixated through the weeds, making sure his movements could not be detected. A hollowed cylinder attached to the avian's black legs held information; the hinged casing *popped* and the message was retrieved.

Barrett, you nitche. Hopping over the bags. Winnipeg. Theme.

It was addressed to him. He struggled to remember the updated trench code he had been given the prior week. *Winnipeg. W. Wednesday. Theme.* Five or six, he could not be sure. *Hopping over the bags* indicated a charge. No telling the extent of the offensive, whether flyboys from Britain would be engaging the Germans first. He wrenched back the sleeve of his overcoat and examined his watch. Nearly seven in the evening. Was it Tuesday? *Monday, perhaps?* Initiative always came at first light, too much confusion in the dark.

“Shoo. *Shoo!*” Barrett whispered, flicking the bird into the waning light. He crumpled the note and buried it in the mire. He maneuvered his elbows until he could boost himself back into position, his rifle’s barrel sneaking through the thorns. The German had not moved, though the silly fingers of his allies pointed out the fluttering pigeon’s wings. A handgun erupted, along with a bevy of accented laughter as they tried to down the messenger. “*Nitchie,*” he grunted. “Grandfather would have ripped the mustaches off their faces for talk like that. You would have too had you not gone and done a stupid thing such as that. It’s bad enough our mother engraved us with Christian names, you would think they would take it easy on us.” The pelting rhythm of the rain allowed the silence to answer. “I know.” A sigh accompanied the slight defeat. “*Jeremiah, I know goddamnit.*”

The embroidered patch of the corpse matched his. *Barrett.* His flesh kept a similar tone, a shade darker than his compatriots tucked between layers of shoveled dirt, enough to be plucked from a regimental photograph with ease. “I was always the pacifist, but, somehow, it was *our* people who showed up at the enlistment office. We were not the ones with tears in our eyes, eh? *No,*” he scoffed, “it was the whites, the cream-colored frogs that hissed at us on the street. *Lapdogs,* all of them.” He foolishly left the comfort of his mounted scope to stare at his brother’s death mask.

“And I suppose they are to blame? You are cut from the same cloth. You and the brutes on father’s side. You blame only yourselves, and you crush your fists and swing.” A shudder seized his throat, his voice *cracking*. “I’m sick of it. I will no longer shoulder your mistakes! You think you can protect everyone. You think you can reach out and shield the world with your chest.” He meant to scream it into the depths of the German line, but he held his zeal, keeping his tone hushed. “*You...*” Saltwater danced to the outer edges of his eyes, the deluge in waiting ready to push the combatants to the sharp curves of his cheek. “You wanted this. You *fucking...* warrior. You turn your knuckles over each and every time and-and *now* is when you want to curl your fist? Bagwanawizi...*bagwanawizi!* You stuck your goddamn head out, for this? *For this!* You were supposed to take care of me. Who the *fuck* is going to do that know, eh? I’ve got to carry your bloated ass around this muck now? *Forever!?* You bastard. I’m going to kill you. *I’m going to kill you.*”

Barrett returned his index to the smooth trigger, his crosshairs *snapping* to the Hun’s protective-Night had fallen, a disturbing pitch that masked kilometer after kilometer in secrecy. Somewhere along the German line, a massive bonfire had been erected, yet no one bothered to seek its warmth. He panicked, the stock of his rifle digging into his bruising shoulder. He tittered about, shifting the barrel this way and that. His lungs called for purity, but he was allowed only staccato exhales, the intake not enough to satisfy the request. He had lost the advantage, hours now to wait for the exchange of light, the charge to come when the sun yawned over the horizon.

An unsettling wail rang out from beyond the flames. Whether it was of an English bent, it was impossible to decipher. The serrated edge of a blade was used to manipulate the lone howl, the depth and intensity keeping the tortured on edge. Barrett struggled to the overturned cart and

draped the barrel over the moist wood. A gouged structure on the outskirts of the bonfire's throw disclosed only shadows, the clarity, however, revealing the fire's origin. The French had abandoned a tank in the middle of a plowed stretch, its exterior flickering from the ignition of its gasoline reserves.

He watched the ritual dance of the flames, their dictation governed by the tepid breeze that limped across the battlefield. The mouth of a Maschinengewehr 08 suddenly burst into the light, the emplaced machine gun hoisted by two trotting Huns and a third lagging behind, cradling an armful of ammunition. Barrett would not be able to squeeze a round off cleanly as they disappeared into the darkness, hurrying for the trenches.

Returning to the weeds, he settled on his original vantage, keeping his crosshairs in the vicinity of the sniper. Despite the rain's drumbeat, the rattling of the belt-fed cartridges tickled his ear. He repositioned himself, shimmying his belly. There would be no reflections in the thickness, only his intuition. Perhaps he had fooled his instincts, believing himself to be an excellent hunter on account of his ancestors, their foraging sustaining them for generations until the arrival of the clothed and musket-baring. His blood boiled with their ancient experience, his eyes focused upon the spirits of the damned. He would be able to see the orange and yellow glow of their hellish souls, shaped like the hounds of some Christian afterlife.

No such powers were granted.

The sizzling birth of a match began with a strike against the red phosphorous patch on the exterior of the booklet. The friction peeled the head and ignited the oxidizing agent, creating a miniature blaze. A disembodied hand appeared, its lean pulled up to the tip of a priming cigarette. Barrett fixated on the glow, dragging his crosshairs to the inhalation. But the match

would not be extinguished. It bowed forward, lighting the adjacent relaxant. *Two now*. A bit left in the wick, the third having a spot of trouble lighting the tobacco. Judging by the angle, he had locked onto the profile of the smoking Hun. Just a bit to the right, underneath the lip of the helmet's ear flap.

This would not be a declaration of war, merely a message to the hidden sharpshooter. Barrett engaged the trigger, the weeds before him shivering from the blast of heat and light.

The delightful *pop* of the German's skull elicited the drop of the burning match. It fizzled in the muck, the retaliation commencing as the two machine gunners opened the Maschinengewehr and sprayed the night with orange and yellow tracers. Just as the forbidden match had drawn the native's ire, so did his muzzle's eruption lure the Hun. From an unknown position came the near-silent retaliation of the masked sniper. Barrett's helmet *pinged* as the German bullet struck the exterior circumference, the bent cartridge ricocheting and dying peacefully in the night. He slinked to his brother's side, unharmed, tossing the standard-issued protection aside. He giggled and punched the stiff chest playfully. "We are *ma'iingan!*" he yelled over the pattering emplaced weapon. He bayed like his battalion's namesake, drinking in the cursed rain that refused to stall.

Eventually, the panicking Huns relinquished their temporary vengeance. Their ammunition had come to an unsatisfying, *clicking* end. Barrett would enjoy the kill from afar, the sunrise to reveal only a patch of blood where the fallen had collapsed. The gasoline fire had ceased entirely, returning the field to an eerie hush.

He buried his head underneath Jeremiah's chest and shifted him across his shoulders, draping his legs and arms across his chest like a stylish sweater. With much effort, he clambered to his knees, using the leverage of the cart to boost them completely upright. Collected blood and

rainwater ran down the back of his uniform, dripping quietly into the rest of the stew. The clouds provided protection against the shimmering full moon, the sneaky rays blocked eternally.

Down an embankment, he crept, stooping low as their accruement jingled. He and his brother had spent countless hours of their youth wrestling, pinning each other in the vast acreage of their parent's farmland. But his unresistant weight proved unsettling. "*You square bastard*. I've got to drag you around now? Can't even be bothered." There would be no retaliation, no sweep that would upend him and hamper his supremacy. Readjusting the corpse, Barrett tiptoed through the cultivated rows of the abandoned arable land and saddled up to the disabled tank.

He positioned Jeremiah across the hood, his arm slouched over the turret of the main gun. The slippery residue of unburned gasoline mixed with the charred layer of steel, producing a grimy filament that stuck to his hands and uniform. The hatch had been propped open, his waist barely squirming through the seal. He closed the panel behind him softly and retreated to the machine gunner's seat, his brother's body partially blocking the vision port. His rifle rested upon the metal lip, his eye searching the limited circumference of the lens. Here, surrounded by iron, he and his spotter waited.

Discipline had emboldened him to forgo the need to wipe his face, to swat the flies. Impatience directed him to rush, to sniff out the Hun so Jeremiah could be laid to rest without regret, without the need for the passing of messages to the underworld. "You've got to sit there for as long as I need you to. And don't-" He listened politely. "For all the times you left me sitting out there all alone, *that's right*. See if you piss yourself now. I followed you everywhere, and you took advantage of it." He shook his head and managed a smirk. "I don't know how we're related. Mother must have found you in the woods. Raised by goddamn wolves."

Barrett unslung his field pack and scoured the contents, shifting aside an empty canteen and a roll of cotton bandages. The unused matchbook would suffice. His hand drifted through the gun port and fished through his brother's exterior pockets, the crinkling paper receiving a tug. A cigarette found its way to his lips as he sought refuge on the floor of the tank, spent shells twinkling in the wake of his plopping rear. He struck a match in the safety of his hunched torso, keeping the flame to a minimum.

He puffed his cheeks, inhaling gently. A grotesque coughing fit invaded the confines of the vehicle, his mouth buried in his shoulder like an undead bloodsucker. His stomach gyrated with each lunge, the contents of his meager breakfast from the previous week in danger of finding the French air more pleasurable. He dared to take another drag, perhaps it would quell the first. More echoing attempts at hiding his cough gave way to a peaceful wheeze, the inhale tainted with a fruit-tinged fragrance, the exhale a musty dragon's breath. "No wonder you always reeked," he chuckled.

The downpour's delightful *plopping* against the tank's shell did little to strengthen the moment. Like angry hornets, the droplets crashed into the iron, surrounding him in a barrage of atmospheric gunfire. It drove him to twitch, to remember the days of mortar-dodging and frightful demons soaring from the clouds, tattooing the trenches with machine gun fire and grenades dropped from the cockpit.

He stood up too quickly, his legs devoid of bone, a sinewy *twang* replacing the rigidity. Barrett slumped into the gunner's seat and prepared a second match. He would not be needing the book, at least for his own purposes. Only a spark would draw the Hun's attention. He scraped the head across the strike panel and allowed the flame to settle. To the bulbous troops, he shoved it,

igniting the entire squad. His intention vanished unexpectedly from his mind, the brilliant light mesmerizing him. As the heat reached his palm, the pain outlined his original decision, and he stuck his hand through the port, lobbing the burning book onto his brother's thigh. His rifle *clanged* against the iron frame, his barrel wobbling fleetingly.

The flicker was distracting, his peripheral vision unable to separate it from the darkness of his scope's optics. The Hun refused to take the bait, the flaming book snuffed eventually by the pounding droplets. Its sizzling end was muffled by the symphony of thunder, a flash of lighting imposing its will across the battlefield.

Within the interlude came a triumphant coda. Despite its black exterior, its lack of detail, the shimmering, flat face of the German mask smiled. His rifle *bleated*, Jeremiah's body twitching from the direct hit. Barrett struggled to appease his crosshairs, the fading light of the crash casting a frustrating shadow. *To the right. To the right, goddamnit!* There he was, prone, exposed, cocky.

The trigger evaporated. Or had he pulled it already? Barrett's weapon discharged in the night, the blast reverberating inside the tank in an infinite, deafening roar. His brother slumped across the charred hood, blocking any attempt at a second strike. He loosened the bolt and nervously racked a new round into the chamber, his heart beating to an improvised, syncopated rhythm. He had not heard the satisfaction of an impact, no metallic *ring*.

He retreated from the gunner's seat and hid in the tail of the tank, propping himself against the cold, unused shells of the main gun. There was no evidence. Only intuition. "Did you see anything?" he asked of Jeremiah. When no answer was presented, he drove himself into foolish anger. "*Did you see anything!?*"

A tweeting call rose in the distance, his watch already twisting towards his face. *Six o'clock*. The Canadian pack howled in solidarity, the harmony magnified by the reservists further down the line. Mortar fire was the first to wake, the German fortifications quaking under the sonic percussion. Orders were barked from each end, the Maschinengewehr finding a fresh belt of ammunition. "I should be out there," he huffed. "Not you. Not with *your* goddamn head." He rushed to the gun port and shoved his brother's beaten body aside, revealing the gray morning of Wednesday.

The glittering Iron Cross was hoisted high above the trench as a beehive awakened. Helmets danced underneath the descending lip, grenades and rifle fire launched into no man's land. Whistles signaled the second wave, his comrades risking the open air. A diving, German spitfire unleashed its propeller-mounted weapon, *pop-pop-popping* the charge's front line, delivering a swell of black blood.

Barrett braced his rifle atop his brother's abdomen and took aim at the scurrying Huns. A mortar team repositioned, their spotter's bend not enough to conceal him. The sharpshooter threaded a round through the shoulder, the force churning the wool uniform. Through the collar bone, it exited, ricocheting upward and lodging itself into the base of the jaw. The German vomited, his downfall knocking the mortar device from its stability, an explosive already dropped into the chamber.

It exited with haste, slugging the operator in the gut. The fleshy impact ignited the volatile ordnance, sucking the Hun into a cloud of heat and expelling him outward in a wave of divided flesh and bone. The trench wall crumbled, trapping the others in a black suffocation. Helpless

cries rang out; fingers accused the tank of malfeasance. Machine gun fire ripped across the hood, slapping Jeremiah and puppeteering his body into a macabre pose.

Barrett ducked from the sparkling barrage, his free hand reaching for his brother's uniform, pulling it tight against the port. The trembling shield held steady, the exit wounds dousing his face in plasma. "I'm sorry!" he shouted. "It's not your fault. It's not your fault you dragged me into this. Just don't go. *Don't go!* Don't leave me all alone by the river anymore!" The plowed fields quivered under the concentrated efforts of a mortar strike, the rear of the tank buckling as a direct hit, spread a halo of shrapnel into the air. Barrett held tight to his brother's shell. "*This is what you wanted, isn't it!?* You bastards! Come at me!" His free fist beat his chest, enough to bruise. "Come at me," he whispered. "You can't stop me."

The overhead hatch *squeaked* as a beam of dawn gray snuck into the belly. He fumbled for his rifle, the bolt racked cleanly. A black, egg-shaped object *plopped* to the deck and settled rather neatly at his feet. It did not appear German in construction, but, rather, Canadian. Barrett dove onto the grenade and scrambled up the access ladder, bursting into the morning fog. A peer had mistaken the tank for that of a dirty Hun, his retreat cut down brutally by a burst from a Maschinengewehr, the private's intestines forming a squishy pillow in which to cradle his fall.

Barrett tossed the live explosive toward the German line, but the fuse had expired. As he slammed the hatch over his head, a concussive blast ripped across the turf. The sharpshooter beat his head against the iron circumference, flecks of shrapnel kissing his jaw. He plummeted to the base of the tank, the rising victory of Canadian whistles signaling victory.

His throat wheezed, his torso suddenly thrust upright. Disorientation stained his vision, an ear full of cotton employing him to adjust his teeth to dissipate the clot. He had misplaced his

internal barometer of time, his disabled watch embedded now with the souvenirs of the discharged grenade. He stumbled to the machine gunner's seat and stared into calming darkness. Small campfires had been erected on the bridgeways of the trenches, though none attended to their luxury. Victory had been achieved, the Huns pushed from their confines; the flag of the Iron Cross no longer waved, the crucifix of confirmed kills uprooted. He collected his rifle and eased open the hatch, a few centimeters needed at first to strengthen his reconnaissance and release the tingle invading his spine.

From the pleasant glow, he took note of a strange absence. Further, he pushed the iron panel, yawning into the night. He disembarked the vehicle and crouched against the treads, scanning the enemy line with his magnification. "Stay here," he ordered, refusing to inspect Jeremiah's state. "I think I hear something." Silence dragged his sly smile across the soft earth, toward the crumbling offerings of the village that once stood guard. The streets were vacant of men, of conveyances, of supplies. The brittle bones and shells of former businesses loomed over him, laughing at his anxious gate. These monuments would be rebuilt over and over again. He had yet to absorb the futility of life.

The avenue blossomed into the courtyard of a towering cathedral, the townsfolk expanding their empire around the religious beacon. The intact belltower watched the square with contempt, the shadow plastered about the road by the emerging moon drawing a wicked spear to puncture those who dared enter. The broad, oak doors had been parted, a heavenly light emerging from the sanctuary. Voices brimming with victory and hope bubbled from within, a wave of oafish howling imploring Barrett to join.

He snuck through the iron-accented barrier and tiptoed passed the dry fonts of holy water. To the rear pew, his rifle laid across his lap, his head leaning against the bulbous ridge of the seatback. His battalion congregated around the surviving edge of the altar, the group lauded over by the marble soldiers of God's holy army. Their musty uniforms were caked in layers of flying mud and jittering blood, their helmets piled upon the echoing tile. An oil barrel had been commandeered and choked with kindling, the raging inferno angled toward the gaping hole in the ceiling, the result of a lucky mortar.

Barrett traced the ornate molding, down the length of the support columns, over the pleading stone spirits, to a stubbled scalp. His features were square, his jaw jutting unnaturally. His right ear had been surgically removed, a trail of scar tissue tracing the trajectory of a bullet. He smiled at the rapt attention of his peers, his free hand adjusting a Gewehr 98 over his bleeding and bandaged shoulder. His free hand loosely clutched a leather strap fastened to the face of a black, featureless medieval mask. From this distance, it was possible to see the bloodthirsty stare that had peered through the miniature cutouts. Oceanic orbs scuttled about, shadowed by a protruding, prehistoric forehead. His height imposed several inches upon the others, his width multiplying his presence.

The Hun was too preoccupied to notice Barrett's graceless fall, his knees banging quietly against the floor. The German sharpshooter's voice rose momentarily, delivering a delightful end to his tale, the guffawing of his audience filling the rafters with glee. They mimicked the Canadian howl, beating the drums of war against their chests.

A private lugging a pudgy, burlap sack interrupted the preceding, asking for contributions. Several soldiers produced sealed letters, including the sniper, the haul to be delivered on horseback to the Motherland.

Caught now between escape and imprisonment, Barrett kept his stance, his head peering down the sacred aisle. The Hun intervened and paused the messenger from his own escape. They engaged in a friendly, though intense, discussion, the sharpshooter pointing emphatically. The post officer, a green boy of limited age, gladly gave up the task and handed the sack to the German. The others lampooned him momentarily, singing his praises and offering him a round of applause between drags upon their cigarettes. The Hun bowed and waved his mask, taking his ceremonious leave through the sacristy.

Barrett hustled to the double-entrance doors under the fog of the sniper's celebrity. He trotted around the perimeter and hugged the dwindling, brick wall of the adjoined cemetery, his rifle perched along the railing. He tracked the Hun as he respectfully used the stone walkway to avoid trampling the molting flowers of wellwishers and the grieving.

He maintained a comfortable distance, sneaking between the rotting archways of the town's rubble, his crosshairs magnetized to the back of the exposed head each time he chose to pause. An uncomfortable twitch snaked its way into his trigger finger, a remorseful hesitation.

These were not the established rules of the game.

There was little left to traverse, the roadway ending at the functioning storefront of a livery. The Hun ducked inside, much to the chagrin of the whining horses waiting for transport. The German clicked his tongue, hoping to engineer a familiar tone. His swollen hand smoothed the bucking

mane of a pale horse, his lips offering praise. “*Guter junge. Ruhig bleiben. Ruhig bleiben.*” He shushed the beast lovingly, patting its rump with vigor. “*Du bist bereit zu reiten, ja?*” He chuckled and rubbed the length of the steed’s nose, earning him respect and obedience. The sack of correspondence was buckled to the saddle and secured.

“*Dreh dich um.*” It was rudimentary at best. Not their first language. “*Dreh dich um!*” Barrett shouted. The Hun would not relinquish his weapon, nor his mask, but complied tediously and turned.

The shivering, scoped rifle elicited a smile from the German sharpshooter. “*Du bist der wolf, der mich jagt?*”

“Shut up! Drop your weapon. Put it on the ground.” His barrel indicated the action.

“*Ja, ja.*” The Gewehr 98 dropped into the hay, the mask following.

“You bastard.” He trilled his fingers along the barrel’s undercarriage, drying his leaking palm.

“He wasn’t supposed to be here!”

“*So ein kleiner mann,*” the sniper teased as Barrett’s eyes clouded.

“You shot him right in the *fucking* head. I dragged him here, and you finished him off. I bet you’re proud of that. And now, he’s out there *all alone!* What am I supposed to do!? *Fucking Kraut.* At least you looked him in the eye, I’ll give you that. *I’ll give you that.*”

The horses sensed an encroaching disturbance, their hooves rustling anxiously. The livery’s entrance peeled open, the post officer gracing the sill, his hand extending a final note.

“*Matthäus...*”

Barrett jumped, his boots swiveling. His rifle flashed, knocking the boy into the avenue, his head spouting a river of black.

Matthäus tackled him, pinning him hard against the compacted mixture of dirt and manure. A brutal haymaker sang across the top of his head, the pain multiplying swiftly down his spine. Barrett reached for his belt, his bayonet freed. He curled his arm behind him and drove it into the Hun's thigh, earning him freedom. Finding his footing, he racked the bolt and stared at the injured sniper. Matthäus removed the embedded blade with a disappointed mewl and pointed it at the Canadian.

The satisfaction of resolution was shattered by the dry fire of his empty rifle.

The German charged, roaring downward with the bloodied knife. Barrett swung his weapon perpendicular, hoping to block the strike, but the Hun's vengeance drove the blade over the walnut stock and into the unprotected shoulder. The native, fueled by the searing heat, returned a prehistoric growl and thrust the rifle into the German's throat, winning him a choking retort.

Matthäus unbuttoned his belt holster and unsheathed his sidearm, forcing a single round free. Barrett's thigh buckled, casting him into the suffocating hay, his bayonet driven deeper into the muscle. He fished for assistance, his hands smacking the tittering legs of the already worried horses.

The Hun dragged the pistol even with Barrett's skull. "*Rote teufel*," he spat.

Barrett spun, prepared to face judgment, to look the bastard in the eyes. The German pistol *popped*.

The discarded iron mask appeared in front of the sharpshooter, magnetized to the native's face. The ricochet scurried into the rear of the livery, puncturing the neck of a chocolate yearling. Matthäus recoiled, the *pinging* echo rattling his lone ear. Barrett leapt, swinging the heavy shield. The Hun's jaw dislocated against the heft, his pistol ejecting a harmless round into the earth as the mask *clapped* his nose, ripping the upper layer of skin and denting the cartilage. He stumbled into the darkness, assisted by the Canadian's insistence. With vigor and delight, the protective layer caved in the sniper's face, leaving little to identify him in the stagnant pool building around the shell of his skull.

Barrett stared at the dripping, miniature ports as they framed the Hun's twitching corpse. He longed to remember the face of the perpetrator, but it was lost. Lost among loosened teeth and pulp. Matthäus had adopted his own internal masks, draping them over his victims, bending the reality of existence in order to kill. There was no humanity remaining in a man who cast remorse to the corners of his mind, shackling it indefinitely. He dug through the German's pockets and discovered a ball of shredded cloth. Unwinding the collection revealed crude imitations of his country's flag. He pocketed a copy of the Red Ensign and placed another on the Hun's chest.

The extraction of his bayonet was not without a native curse or two, the humid flow of blood tickling his heaving chest. He pinned the Canadian flag to the sniper, driving the blade down to the hilt. He collected his rifle and stole away into the night, limping into the obfuscation of the rubble as the concerned footsteps of reinforcements sprinted down the avenue.

Barrett carefully ascending the hood of the French tank and straightened his brother's corpse. He tied the unsophisticated flag reproduction around the moist upper arm, double-knotting it for security. Tears slowly purified the caked grime from his visage; his hand refused to wipe it free.

Instead, his fingers found Jeremiah's eyes, the tips carefully shuttering the miniature ports. "I got him...if that's what you were wondering. Big bastard. *Bigger than you*. Twice as ugly even." He inspected the timber wolf emblem pinned to Jeremiah's chest. "You always came back for me, no matter how long it took. No matter how scared I was..." He refused to let the reunion become melancholy. He snorted, vacuuming loose mucus back into his sinuses. "Looks like I'll be carrying your sorry ass from now on. *Lucky me.*"

There was no telling how far his front line had been pushed back in the failed offensive. Soon, the Huns would be on his trail, and the sun would rise to spotlight his retreat. He dragged his brother onto his injured shoulder, earning a fresh, vicious flow from both his wounds. He refused to complain. Who would listen to him now, anyway?

The Barrett brothers hobbled into the gloom, following the distant, concerned howl of their pack.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Even A Dog Enlists* was inspired by the black and white photography of World War I. Though color film did exist at the time, I often think of the early 20th century as one big colorless blotch. Using the Great War as a backdrop, I could paint a rich, colorless environment and also highlight the absolute terror of pre-modern warfare and the risks and rewards of that period. Snipers have a distinctive psychological profile that we've slowly been unlocking in the last 100 years and exploring that as a theme allowed me to use that sense of isolation, that lone wolf theory, to study two sides of the same coin. During WWI, many Canadian natives enlisted and were touted for their sharpshooting. The theme of leaning into that heritage, showing up when French Canadians had not, and balancing that with a global goal meant the main character has to wrestle with his personal vendetta against the German sniper as well as the perceived bigotry of the men he is supposed to be protecting. The theme of brotherly love and how brothers carry each other could also be explored as sometimes on the battlefield, the ones closest to you are the most trustworthy. I am very much inspired by the non-fiction writings of David McCollough and Stephen Ambrose. Taking the experiences of historical figures and engaging your audience in an educational and highly emotional way really helps me to craft any fiction writing I do.

AUTHOR BIO: *Joey Rodriguez lives in New York City with his wife, Lauren, and their Pembroke Welsh Corgi, Joon. He is the author of four novels (JQR, Below, Termination Dust, and The Final Transmissions of A Doomed Astronaut) and one novella (Raptures of the Deep). To purchase any of his books, visit his official website: notyourplatypus.com. And join Joey and Lauren each month for Pucorn And A Movie, a podcast where they chat about all sorts of movies and he sometimes convinces her to watch the scariest films of all time!*

EDITOR'S BIO: *Daniel is a graduate of the Creative Writing program (MFA) from Vancouver Island University, his poems and fiction have been featured in Gravel, The Birds We Piled Loosely, Clockwise Cat, Crack The Spine, Grey Sparrow and The Gyroscope Review. He is a reader and contributor to the Tongues of Fire reading series and has written several books, all currently seeking publishers. He lives in Victoria. His story 'The Heavy Metal Sound of Steel' appeared in Issue 4 (Fiction).*

Take Pity and Dry the Hell Up

By Thomas M. McDade

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A world torn dope smoking sailor with obscured literary aspirations fresh off the USS Ramply finds himself in Venice—la citta' dell'amore—by the Ponte della Paglia... and so begins a story as rare as a ruby moon that rocks like we've never read before. Any prospector hungry for the gold of 'voice' would lay claim to McDade's expectorating chant that generations ago was somewhere a plainsong—corvid, mercurial, tender and un po di matchstick shaken up, poured out—it's liquid metal of the sun all right, so uniquely branded and immediately his own it comes with photo ID. The dialogue is a funk dynamite charge in pistol explode mode, the prose saw-toothed, recombinant and abruptly structured. What more can we say? Let him:*

Her hair, helter-skelter streaming from a Paddington is tar black, big blue eyes match the hat, lips victim of a purple stick.

And

“No pics, on the lam I am.”

“I bet. You walk like a sailor. I'd say you've been at sea for a month and a half.”

“Just thirty days.”

“Neptune almighty, I'm slipping. See that church out there on the little Island,” she says.

“The tower looks like a ballistic missile,” I respond.

“Or something more disarming,” she says giggling. “That's St. George's, Seaman Philistine. He slew a dragon that refused to act as his weed lighter. My coo-coo friend here I call Mule, flies in a packet from there every morning, heirloom shit.” Her eyelids leap as if something she sniffed just hooked a neuron. “I reward him with suet pizza.”

And

I head back to the Bridge, pass the Guggenheim Modern Art Museum. I bet it would be a “relief” from all the religious antiquity. It's closed. I give a shaky, whistling beggar some change, American. He's grins gratefully, as if I'd just granted him citizenship. Clouds are moving in.

Help! We can't stop quoting! The whole reason literature is and what language can do. Cinque stelle. (Five stars)

Take Pity and Dry the Hell Up
(By Thomas M. McDade)

I leave the ship to commence my vagabond trek, my notebook, and a Venice See-and-Do Guide in hand. Luckily, I don't have duty. The rainclouds rejoice, take pity, and dry the hell up. The USS Ramply (DD-801) rests by an industrial pier where occasional vans some say are gypsy owned park. Women join men hawking watches with dials galore that belie the low prices one can haggle. I figure true gypsy vans sport glorious, eye-catching colors like horse drawn caravans I've seen in *National Geographic Magazines*. I like that train of thought enough to stop by the Hotel Danieli to scrawl down my words. I hear Liza Minelli who is working on a movie is lodged there, O.J. Simpson too. I remember falling for her after seeing *The Sterile Cuckoo*. I cut out its *Bridgeport Post* ad and tucked it in the novel of the same name that inspired the film. Rumor has it O.J. might visit one of the ships in our squadron. I was never a Bills or Forty-Niners fan. Would [she](#) dare walk a gangplank?

I pause crossing the Ponte della Paglia near the Doge's Palace that my S & D says is the oldest bridge in Venice. I spit furtively into its canal and jot down the act for memory help down the years. Hell, ripple might travel to the Mississippi. I'm a sailor of the expectorating kind, not your traditional drunken variety just yet. I overhear an American couple discussing the Bridge of Sighs that's visible in the distance. Some poet picked that name because prisoners saw their last daylight while walking across it to the Doge's prison. Casanova took that stroll. I bend down, pad on knee to write while inhaling the Yankee woman's perfume.

San Marco Square is alive with tourists, many feeding the pigeons. One lands on a kid's head and does a shave-and-a-haircut-two-bits tap. Four folks wielding Polaroids vie for subjects. One man, wearing sunglasses, watch cap pulled low, looks vaguely like Vin Borders, a tall, bad news boatswain mate who's in the brig. He cut the helm cables in Catania. I witnessed a hovering chopper lift him off the fantail of the ship. A woman aggressively pulls me aside. Her hair, helter-skelter streaming from a Paddington is tar black, big blue eyes match the hat, lips victim of a purple stick. Her pouched sweatshirt reads "Wake Forest." Jeans stuffed in turquoise highlighted cowboy boots.

"Want your photo taken with the pigeons?" She smiles as if snapshot of me would make both of us famous. When she opens and closes an outstretched hand, a fat brownish specimen launches off the pecking carpet to her shoulder. "He's kin to a passenger pigeon that served valiantly in The Great War, honest Ninja," she says, raising her right hand.

"No pics, on the lam I am."

"I bet. You walk like a sailor. I'd say you've been at sea for a month and a half."

"Just thirty days."

"Neptune almighty, I'm slipping. See that church out there on the little Island," she says.

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"You are kind. How'd George get a light after the kill?"

"The rescued princess baked him mind-expanding donuts, like that nursery un-rhyme?"

“I do,” I answer and softly applaud.

“I do too and that’s not forever death do us part; want some?”

“Ten American is all I can do.”

“Three pre-rolled and a velocity pill.”

“OK.”

She goes through some hand gestures as if a magician and slips my purchase into my jacket pocket with added flare. I part with the ten spot.

“Ever make any pigeons disappear?” I ask. Her slightly dented nose tip twitches as if requesting nourishment.

“Flocks, now you beware of the Carabinieri and I ain’t talking pasta sauce with bacon or your name will be Dungeon Phil,” she advises.

“I hear ya.”

“By the way, if you want some ‘I do,’ a laser honeymoon, check out my friend. Twenty US of A”

She hands me a business card, “Jenna Lollobrigida.”

“Jenna looks like one of the waitresses in Tintoretto’s ‘Last Supper’.” she adds. “You know where that hangs Seaman Phil?”

“Nope.”

“On Georgie’s hooks, take a boat over.”

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Sabra.”

“Do you have a card?”

“No, just oral arrangements, do come around tomorrow.”

“Goose bumps. No, make that pigeon bumps,” I tease.

She places a hand over her heart and licks her gumball lips.

We laugh. Is she an exchange student from Grosse Point who believes in tasting life at every level? I should have told her about a movie I saw at a Norfolk art cinema, *Death in Venice*. It was all for the love of a boy. How would she have replied? I hope Saint someone rescues her. I would if on an aircraft carrier with a wealth of places to stash her, yeah sure. Maybe she’s taking part in a psych study. Will I be in her dissertation?

I find a wall to sit against to record the pigeon princess before venturing into St. Mark’s Basilica to light a few candles for dead family and friends. I say a quick rosary knocking the decades down to one Hail Mary each. The frescoed Pentecost Dome with all its gold is most impressive. Four able-bodied angels are guarding stern looking gents who are poised as if circus acrobats at the ready. Mural ropes like ribs of an inside out lampshade, link them to the peak by their halos. I can’t see those hard asses cutting any soul slack, burn you at the stake for possession of an heirloom seed. Art everywhere – I’m even walking on it. Stories of the Saints and Mary, etc. depicted. The pillars remind me of a movie, spy making scarce behind one. Christ, it’s the Borders twin. I wonder if I’m the only sailor off the Ramply who has a Borders feeling. I return to the candles to light another for the safety of my ass. Did Liza and O.J. visit?

I roam aimlessly as planned, encounter museums that I should visit. Cooped up I don’t need—leave that for the feathered Mules of Venice and environs. Churches galore but I call St. Mark’s enough for a lifetime. I jot down this and that. A kid nearly runs his bike into me. A mutt eats a

bowl of pasta – honest to God. A soccer ball escapes a game. An attractive young woman runs to the rescue. She kicks it back high despite her short skirt. The players applaud. She bows.

At a tabac, I buy an orange drink to wash down my Sabra pill, no smooth slide, no direct hit. Crossing the Grand Canal at the Academia Bridge, I walk to the farthest point this side of the Canal by The Basilica of Saint Mary. Another fascinating dome and I see by my See & Do that people worship here with their health in mind, hoping Mary will provide. St. Mary's dome represents her crown, church interior her womb. How cool is that? No speed but just the opposite occurs, I'm slow motion and wobbly. I bump into people. A nun shoves me. When I can't move another yard, I see a street sign, Fondamenta delle Zattere. I freeze mid-step. I'm a statue but fearless. I've never felt so serene and clear. Eyes fixed on a faded apartment plaque; I can make out "John Ruskin." Philistine hell, I know John from an English Lit correspondence course: "The Pathetic Fallacy," poets and writers giving inanimate objects human feelings. My thoughts are jumbling, fading. John's name is pulsing, breathing, how about that? I'm waked and buried. Suddenly the final minute of a decade passes, all reverses, *I'm* missing "human feelings." Whirling into place, I'm a sonnet, a novella. As the spell folds, I collapse. Radioman 3rd Class Coles appears from nowhere to help me up. He has a tough time of it. He's bombed. I'm able to steady myself. He asks nothing about my condition. "How does a sailor find a whore in this town?" he asks.

"Well, if you were in New York or Chicago, you'd ask a cab driver," I say, "Here a gondolier. He hugs me and laughs like my words were the most hilarious ever spoken. "Don't bust my stones," he says.

“That guy wrote *Stones of Venice*,” I say, pointing to the Ruskin plaque. I give up Lollobrigida’s card and Coles says if higher, he’d swim across the Canal. He’s off like a shopper who got the true dose of speed. How does he know that address is on the other side? What a downer if the destination is just yards away from where I stand.

Now, gondolas are inanimate but the waters give them a life. There’s something to gargle. I can see the Gritti Palace Hotel from where I stand. Hemingway used to stay there. I’ll find a place to sit nearby and maybe smoke. Are the joints that Sabra sold me full of heirloom pigeon shit? Who cares? The pill wasn’t as bitter as it could have been I guess, a trip, a trip. I stop at a restaurant for a bowl of tortellini in broth and a slice of artichoke pizza. The waiter’s apron is down to the floor. A woman two tables away has a dachshund in her lap. I write a few journey notes about the Basilica of St. Mary, Ruskin, my bronze experience, and Coles. I head back to the Bridge, pass the Guggenheim Modern Art Museum. I bet it would be a “relief” from all the religious antiquity. It’s closed. I give a shaky, whistling beggar some change, American. He’s grins gratefully, as if I’d just granted him citizenship. Clouds are moving in.

I’m lightheaded and dazed, must be an aftereffect of the pill, but I’m keeping a straight course, no drifting into the populace. Folks smile at me responding to my goofy expressions I expect. I land at the La Fenice Opera House. A toothpick chewing teen sells me a large postcard with a photo of the façade and facts. La Fenice means “Phoenix.” The two statues are the muses of music and dance. I rest on the stairs with a handful of others. A smiley couple stops. The burly fellow, a Brit, announces the wonderful Celeste will now sing a song from *Romeo and Juliet*, “A Time for Us.” This brunette wears a long red skirt, tan leather jacket, and white turtleneck. She hits some very high notes. Will a Fenice bigshot discover her? Her neck is long and I wonder if

that extends her range. A woman who sounds German says she's inspired to visit the Rialto Bridge. An old crone sitting next to me whispers, *Merchant of Venice*. I must strike her as Seaman Philistine. The toddler on her lap has a stuffed animal and by God, it's a dragon, fabric flame dangling from its mouth. I doze, forehead on arms crossed on my knees. A cop wakes me asks if I'm okay.

At the Gritti Palace, I find a niche by the empty outside dining area. Sitting, I dangle my feet over the water. I place my bet, light one of Sabra's twirls. Did Hemingway ever sit here to smoke dope? I think he was a scotch drinker. Brandy is the booze in "A Clean Well-Lighted Place." A movie I'd seen based on his work comes to me, my boot camp time. They finally allowed us to go to the base theater. *Hemingway's Adventures of a Young Man*, the guy who'd starred in *West Side Story* portrayed yours truly. Bit of a coincidence in my woolgathering, Nick Adams joined the Italian army. Yes sir, grinding out boot camp with Hem; Great Lakes, 1963. No bad smoke reaction yet. I wave at tourists in passing gondolas, neither Liza nor O.J. aboard. If only she'd tap on my shoulder.

"May I clip that for you?"

"No need, new one to share." I flip the roach into the Canal, an irresponsible playboy. On that reverie, I flame another. I review my notes by match light. Many sloppy pages I don't recall writing will be tough to decipher; I'll make something of them even if I have to lie. Darkness reminds me I should head back to the ship. Did you catch that John Ruskin?

Coles appears under a streetlight near the Hotel Danieli. He's panting; gasping, left side of his face is puffy, black eye on the way for sure. Nose bleeding, shirt ripped. "Borders attacked me.

He's Jenna's pimp, jumped off the carrier returning him to the states. He thinks you ratted about the helm sabotage."

"Bullshit!"

Bastard nearly caught me with my pants down. He showed me a photo of you buying dope from a weird looking chick in the Square and me helping you up when you dropped. He wants to kill you, tried to maim me for knowing you. He hit me with a sucker shot. If Jenna hadn't tripped him, I'd have never escaped. She was fabulous, an ace, a pro. Yeah, I'm crazy but she was worth the fright." Just as I give the whacko a heroic kudos slap on the back, Borders rushes our way carrying a sword that looks out of the Crusades. Ten feet away, he freezes just as I had at Ruskin's house. "Thank be to Sabra," I whisper. Weapon raised, he's a knight in a museum exhibit. When he crumbles, two teens run to him. "Anybody know CPR," one shouts.

"I do," returns Coles who in a flash is roughly spinning Borders over and pumping his chest. About five minutes later cops arrive and take over.

"Wow, you know CPR. I'm impressed but what a waste of it."

"I don't, saw it on TV once. Piece of shit was dead. I thought the snapshots might be on him. Bingo, in his shirt pocket with three joints."

After the ambulance speeds Borders away, Liza Minelli shows up, sings fifteen or twenty feet away, no "Come Saturday Morning" from *The Sterile Cuckoo*. Dressed in black, shawl, and long skirt, nearly lost in the darkness and a building corner, she delivers a throaty "Cabaret." We drift closer. Liza isn't Liza, except from a distance, just a decent impersonator. "I'm getting us autographs," says Coles. He flies to bear hug her or him. Returning he brags that he gifted her bosom with a joint, "One happy stick." A sailor ace of the sleight of hand for sure but his

adjective is “pathetic,” ha! Just a “Z” on each photo; the horizontal lines fly off the edges. Coles noticed gaudy county singer boots as the skirt hiked in the rush to scam, one color same as Jenna’s nails. This Liza splits as swiftly as O.J. used to into end zones. I tell Coles riding dragons barefoot is dangerous. “Any footwear risky with Jenna,” he says. “We need urgent psychiatric help,” he adds and lights us up in the broad Danieli nightlight. A couple stops for the contact high. Coles sells them a number, a mystery no arrest.

I sat in the after crews’ lounge writing feverishly except for a break when a Hull Tech friend on roving patrol took the remaining joint off my hands to hide in some ductwork that’s proven dope dog proof. I continued until just an hour remained for domed and frescoed sleep.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I use details from journals and notebooks I've kept through the years to inspire my fiction. Liza Minnelli and O.J. Simpson were in Venice when the ship I served on visited. I did find John Ruskin's place and the hotel where Hemingway stayed. I used those four people as building blocks. "Sailors being sailors" actual and imagined the mortar. As far as literary influences go Kerouac is always in mind. If I'd have found evidence that he'd been there he might have made the story. I'll let Jack finish this off: "No fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience, language & knowledge."*

AUTHOR’S BIO: *Thomas M. McDade is a resident of Fredericksburg, VA, previously CT & RI. He is a graduate of Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT. McDade is twice a U.S. Navy Veteran serving ashore at the Fleet Anti-Air Warfare Training Center, Virginia Beach, VA and at sea aboard the USS Mullinnix (DD-944) and USS Miller (DE / FF 1091). His fiction has most recently appeared in U-Rights Magazine, Spank The Carp and Strukturriss.*

Self-actualized A-hole

By Douglas J. Ogurek

WHY WE LIKE IT: ‘...As the ground-slapper jogged toward them, the trophy top—a baseball player in mid-swing—hanging from his neck jounced. “Pardon me, gentlemen.” He had a high voice. “A slight curiosity. Have either of you fine scholars perchance seen a small ball? It’s a green ball. Kind of a charltoose green ball, with a quote-unquote boomerang pattern on it?”

A superbly realized fiction that plots the actions of three neighbours (Cdn. sp.) in a pointillist gravure that is as beautiful as it is malvoglio. Sotto splatterpunk has burrowed beneath a clusterangst intellectual construct with the noble mission of ‘Art and its Antithesis.’ In places, it is as frightening as Greek wine. Synaptic Dada-isms cantanker loaded hyper-Hyperion prose and Nature Boy’s star only glows brighter because in a world of silence anyone with a voice is a threat. A keen arrow from a master fletcher that left us dizzy and high somewhere beyond the Kuiper Belt.

Five stars.

Self-actualized A-hole

by

Douglas J. Ogurek

Death metal blared over a lake surrounded by homes. The source of the music—it plodded, and the vocalist roared—was a tree in one yard. Next to a speaker, a cloaked figure stood on a platform built into the tree. He wore pink-rimmed sunglasses and held a pink stuffed unicorn. An older man stormed out of the house next door. He had a box, and a white towel hung around his neck. His jowls shook as he strode toward the noise. The recorded vocalist shrieked and the older man grimaced at an empty cage next to his house.

The music overpowered the man's shouts.

The figure in the tree turned off the music, then growled.

The older man set the box next to a tree in his yard. He waved the towel. "Jesus Christ, Nature Boy. The hell you doing?"

Nature Boy spread his cloak. "I accept your surrender."

"Huh? That guy sounds possessed or something."

"They'll never take me alive."

"What is that shit? Guy sounds possessed. I mean, that's really bad."

"Nothing stands between me and the treasure. You hear me? Nothing."

"Boy, if my father saw me pulling a stunt like this, with that drivel, he'd be absolutely—"

Nature Boy cut off the older man with a quick blast of death metal.

The man took a rifle scope from his pocket. "Let me ask you something. I'm in there trying to talk to my son—he's a cardiac surgeon—and you turn that shit on?" He looked at a cardboard cutout near the water. It showed a black man wearing a suit. "What the fuck?"

Nature Boy hoisted the pink unicorn and released a phlegm-infused laugh.

“When Tom was your age, he was halfway done with med school. Grades were absolutely—”

The older man’s voice wavered. “My wife—God rest her soul—we went to his graduation, and boy—”

Again death metal blasted. The man, red-faced, waved his towel.

Nature Boy turned off the music. “Mr. Prosecutor, I’d like to address the artists that you just had the pleasure of hearing.”

“Jesus Christ. You call that tomfoolery art?”

“They’re far more innovative and technically adept than your Devon Sweetman.”

Mr. Prosecutor sniffed the towel, then removed the tape that sealed his box. “You’re comparing those lunatics to Devon Sweetman? It cost me four hundred-fifty bucks for two tickets to his concert.”

Nature Boy held the unicorn before his face and squeaked, “My my, Mr. Prosecutor. Are you insinuating, eehuh eehuh eehuh, that the price of a concert ticket is a predictor, eehuh eehuh, of the quality of music?”

“Boy, you do belong in a straightjacket.”

Nature Boy lowered the unicorn. “Despite your accusation of possession, the group that you just heard offers a positive message.”

Mr. Prosecutor rubbed his scope lens. “If my father heard me playing that drivel, he’d be absolutely irate.”

“Question: is it too masculine?” Nature Boy held up a noose.

“What the hell?”

“Perhaps you prefer more effeminate music? Ballads, the kind of stuff that melts your balls? Like Devon Sweetman.”

“Fuck’s sake. I can’t even understand what the shit those guys are saying.”

“That music—the stuff you just heard? It’s about God’s redeeming love, and about loving your neighbor. Is that what Devon Sweetman sings about?”

Mr. Prosecutor lifted a flap on his box.

“Question: do you love your neighbor, Mr. Prosecutor?”

“Not your neighbor there.” Mr. Prosecutor pointed his scope at the property on the other side of Nature Boy’s lot. A man—he carried a baseball player bobblehead doll—stumbled out of a shed, then slapped the ground.

Mr. Prosecutor chuckled as his cell phone rang. He swiped it. “Shit. Fuck. How the fuck?” He held it up to his ear. “Tom? Tommy?” He looked at the phone, then kicked his box. “Ah goddammit. How the fuck . . .”

While Mr. Prosecutor’s tirade continued, Nature Boy put the noose around the pink unicorn. The ground-slapper talked to the bobblehead and swept his shoes, baseball spikes, over the vegetation in his yard.

Manly Man liked baseball—he wore a Cubs shirt on the day that Nature Boy’s dog Filter approached him. Go Flubs!

Mr. Prosecutor gave up with the phone. He flapped his towel toward the empty cage. “See that cage? I had a raccoon in that cage this morning. Now it’s gone. You know anything about that cage, Nature Boy?”

“Nothing stands between that treasure and me.” Nature Boy spread his cloak and released his phlegmy laugh.

The ground-slapper—thick glasses magnified his eyes—set down the doll, then pretended to tap a bat. “Now up, Cliff Seeeger.” He wiggled into a batting stance.

Mr. Prosecutor shook his head, then looked through his scope toward the lake. “There was a raccoon in that cage this morning. I heard the fuckin’ thing.”

Nature Boy, holding one end of the rope, tossed the unicorn into the vegetation below him.

“Question: were you aware that a raccoon can eat an entire wasp’s nest?”

“They mess up my flowers.”

“Flowers are ephemeral. Do you know Maslow’s hierarchy?”

Mr. Prosecutor took from the box pieces of wood, painted white. “Fuckers keep knocking over my garbage cans.”

“You left them open. It’s called Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.”

“The ones I catch? I take them on a little boat ride, teach ’em how to swim.”

Nature Boy pulled the stuffed animal through the groundcover.

The ground-slapper pretended to swing. “Kay-ow. Way up there, way up there. Look Grandma, look Pops, look Junior. There it goes everybody. And bring it downwn . . . now.” He pumped his fist and jumped up, then slapped the ground as his nonexistent hit sailed over a nonexistent fence.

Mr. Prosecutor set the wood pieces on a bench, then wiped his scope. “I’m sure he likes bats. A lot.”

“Look. There’s a beautiful creature.” Nature Boy pretended to fire a shotgun at the pink unicorn beneath him.

As the ground-slapper jogged toward them, the trophy top—a baseball player in mid-swing—hanging from his neck jounced. “Pardon me, gentlemen.” He had a high voice. “A slight curiosity. Have either of you fine scholars perchance seen a small ball? It’s a green ball. Kind of a charltoose green ball, with a quote-unquote boomerang pattern on it?”

Filter had a green ball. He loved it. So much so that the pit bull leapt the fence at the old house when Nature Boy accidentally threw the ball over it.

Nature Boy lit a green smoke bomb. “Look . . . charltoose.” He shook a branch and cackled.

The ground-slapper leaned back and convulsed with laughter. He pointed up at the cloaked figure encased in greenish-yellow smoke and addressed Mr. Prosecutor. “Now this guy’s one of a kind. I would surmise that it’s his density to be a mascot. Bring it down.”

Mr. Prosecutor toweled his forehead, then pointed at the cardboard cutout. “What’s your hero doing in this charlatan’s yard? You having fried chicken tonight, Downing?”

Downing laughed again and grabbed the trophy top. “Do ya know what? ‘Let’s step forward, and stay grounded.’ That’s what Mayor Range said. Quote-unquote ‘Let’s step forward and stay grounded.’”

“Maybe our honorable top dog mayor took your ball, Downing. You said it’s green? Maybe he thought it was a watermelon.”

Nature Boy suspended the unicorn, still hanging from the noose, in the smoke. “To be a comedian, Mr. Prosecutor, is your density.”

Downing smacked his lips. “Now gentlemen, that ball, I find it to be very distinctable: it’s got a boomerang pattern. If you perchance happen to see it, please let me know.” He resumed his search.

Mr. Prosecutor took from his pocket a small bottle of clear liquid. “Boomerang pattern. Boy, I remember that. My mother had these curtains. They had a boomerang pattern.”

Nature Boy started unraveling a skein of green yarn.

“My father would say, ‘You sure you don’t want to get ballerinas and puppy dogs instead?’”

“I’m self-actualized.”

“Huh?”

Nature Boy spun the skein. “Perhaps you haven’t kept up with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs? I could let you borrow the book.”

Mr. Prosecutor shook the liquid. “Jesus Christ, I don’t have time for that; I got a company to run. I got so much to do I don’t have time to do anything.”

“So what you’re saying is that you don’t get anything done?”

“Kay-ow.” Downing swung an invisible bat and nearly fell. He mumbled to himself and looked up, then raised his fists and jumped.

After Filter leapt the fence, Nature Boy told him to stay. Normally, he would, but that day, Filter saw a rabbit.

Mr. Prosecutor squirted the liquid onto his scope lens, then rubbed it. “My father used to use this towel. It’s a special towel for cleaning. This towel’s absolutely fabulous.”

Nature Boy picked up a microphone. “An anecdote of profound implications.” His voice echoed through the speakers.

“You got watermelon-flavored candy up there? Maybe you can give some watermelon candy to your top dog mayor over there.”

Nature Boy slipped a capsule into his mouth. “So witty, so distinctable.” He went into paroxysms of laughter, and red liquid dribbled down his chin.

“Boy, that’s really bad.” Mr. Prosecutor rubbed his scope and nodded toward Downing’s yard.

“You ever been in that shed?”

Nature Boy attached the yarn to his sunglasses. “Question: did you ever notice that our mayor does this with his hands?” He held his hands before his eyes, then brought them down.

“You do know your neighbor’s a homosexual, right? In my opinion?”

“Perhaps we should burn him at the stake.”

“He goes into that shed. With other guys. I don’t know what kind of tomfoolery’s going on in there.”

The yarn fell.

Downing set a cat on a stand in his yard.

Filter pursued the rabbit that day. He charged into the field across the street. Nature Boy hopped the fence, then ran after his dog.

From his box Mr. Prosecutor took a hammer and a wooden contraption. This one was not painted white.

Nature Boy mimicked the mayor’s hands over eyes gesture. “Question: Mr. Prosecutor, do you know what self-actualized means?”

“Huh? Sounds like psychobabble.”

“If you’re self-actualized, then you’re happy with your life. Content with what you have.”

“Then I’m self-actualized too.”

Downing yelled, “Steerike one.” He stood a few feet from the elevated cat.

Nature Boy picked up a wooden stick. “So you don’t care too much about material possessions?”

“Nah.” Mr. Prosecutor pounded the contraption into the tree.

“Oh.” The stick had a paper raccoon face on one end. Nature Boy spoke through a hole in the mouth. “By the way, your Mercedes is looking rather luxurious this morning.”

A small platform extended from the tree trunk. Mr. Prosecutor talked on his phone. “I need you to come over. I want to show you something. Something I got in the arctic.”

Downing, like a pitcher, shook his head and held his hand behind his back. “Meowman now at the plate.” The cat on the stand crouched. “Here’s the pitch.” Downing tossed a cotton ball, then the cat swatted at it, but missed. “Big cut. Meowman’s on the ropes with an O-two count.”

Nature Boy chased Filter across the field, through a wooded area, and then into the neighborhood beyond.

Mr. Prosecutor ended his call, then took a transparent container from his box. “My daughter’s got a degree in psychology. She’s got a dual degree. Psychology and journalism.” His eyes watered and his voice shook. “You know, she’s the first female sideline reporter for a non-BCS college bowl? My wife and I—she passed away eight years ago this March—went to that, and I’ll tell ya . . .”

A deep, extended note came from a keyboard on the tree platform. Nature Boy covered his face with the cloak and spoke into a microphone. “A self-actualized person plays music because he likes it, not because he thinks it makes him look good.”

“. . . really bad—”

Nature Boy added another note, and the two notes stretched as Mr. Prosecutor attached the container beneath the platform on the tree and Downing, still on his knees, tossed a cotton ball. The cat smacked it. Downing jumped up, then slapped the ground. He lifted the cat, spun around, and nearly toppled.

The keyboard stopped.

“How do you like this, Nature Boy?” Mr. Prosecutor patted the platform. “You put the seeds on here. And when your best friend squirrel comes along . . .” He pressed a button on his key ring and the platform dropped. He tapped the container. “Splash. Swim time for your squirrel friend.”

Nature Boy squeezed the pink unicorn. “Mr. Prosecutor, eehuh, you’ve reached the height of manliness, eehuh eehuh. You’re a brave heroic man.”

Mr. Prosecutor shrugged and smiled, then walked back to his house.

Downing, holding his bobblehead beneath his arm, looked over his shoulder at the bottom of his right baseball spike.

Nature Boy shook his pink unicorn and squeaked, “Hi Mr. Ballplayer, eehuh eehuh. Ballplayers make the world, eehuh eehuh, a better place.”

“Now this guy . . .” Downing, laughing, lost his balance, then tumbled into the vegetation. He tried to mimic Nature Boy’s falsetto. “It’s the home run that counts. Bring it down.”

“Yes, yes. Eehuh, it all hinges on the home run. There’s the theory of relativity, eehuh eehuh, and then there’s the home run.”

“Kay-ow.” Downing took off his shoe. “Do ya know what? That ball—the one with the boomerang pattern?—it’s got to be around here. It’s chartoose, like . . .”

The day that Filter escaped, Nature Boy held up his dog’s beloved green ball and called for him, but Filter didn’t listen: the new neighborhood’s smells and sights were too enticing.

Nature Boy’s normal voice returned. “Question: what purpose does this ball serve? Are you using it to reset the world’s course?”

“I was practicing with Timmy and he smacked that thing and it was like kay-ow. This thing’s really . . .” Downing picked at his spikes. “I can’t find that ball. It’s chartloose.”

The keyboard made the sound of wind blowing, and Nature Boy’s whisper echoed in the speakers. “Chartloose as the mists that hover on the lonely shores of Home Run Island.”

Downing slapped the ground, then used the bobblehead's bat to pick at his spikes. "This guy's one of a kind."

Across the lake, a motor rumbled. Nature Boy swirled his cloak and bellowed in the microphone. "Baseball. The game of geniuses."

"Do ya know what?" Downing held up the doll. "There's a similation between this guy and Cliff Seeger."

Nature Boy came within a foot of Filter, but the dog saw a squirrel, then charged down the street in pursuit.

Nature Boy held down a note. "Question: what is one practical benefit that comes out of baseball?"

"Kay-ow. Good, that's good." Downing took off his spike and sang the first lines of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame." He smacked his lips. "They sing that at every game. You ever been to an Outlaws game? Cliff Seeger's on the Outlaws."

"I don't like to participate in activities over which I have no control of the outcome."

"You ever seen Cliff Seeger?" Downing dislodged a pebble from the spikes. "That guy can just, kay-ow."

The motor grew louder. A speedboat halfway across the lake approached them. Nature Boy set the pink unicorn on the keyboard. "Perhaps I'll nominate this Cliff Seeger for the Nobel Peace Prize. There's undoubtedly a similation between his work and the theory of relativity."

"One time he was like kay-ow." Downing tossed up the stone, then tried to hit it with the doll's bat. He missed and stumbled. "And that thing, everyone was like, 'Whoa.' I measured it. It was the farthest ever. Oh way up there. Look Grandma. Look—"

Nature Boy cranked the death metal, but Downing, his eyes amplified by his glasses, studied the shoe and his lips kept moving.

Filter jumped into bushes, and from the distance came the chorus of the rock ballad "You Evermore."

The death metal stopped. ". . . Seeger wears these, and he hit that ball to the street once. Here."

Downing tossed up the shoe, which sailed by the motionless Nature Boy and his platform, then fell into the vegetation.

The speedboat docked at Mr. Prosecutor's pier.

Downing removed the other shoe. "When I wear these? In my mind I feel like I'm still fourteen. Here."

The other shoe flew past Nature Boy. "When I see those, in my small intestine, I feel like I'm still yellow."

Downing slapped the ground, then rose. "If you perchance see that chartoose ball. It's got a boomerang pattern, and it's chartoose."

The boater wore a Cubs jersey and held a bag of chips. Nature Boy snuggled the unicorn against his cheek. "Chartoose. I will alert the world. Because baseball is the be all and end all of this great universe."

Downing jumped and the trophy top clunked against his glasses. "Ka-yow. It's the home run. Do ya know what? I got something to show you." He retrieved his shoes, then walked to his shed.

Filter chased Nature Boy to a yard's edge. Manly Man, wearing a Flubs hat, washed his Manly Man motorcycle and listened to "You Evermore." A real ball-melter.

The boater munched on chips and talked to the much taller Mr. Prosecutor.

The death metal blared.

The boater thrust out his chest and shouted, "Fuckin' turn that shit off."

The music stopped, then Nature Boy grabbed a branch and growled into the microphone.

"Treasure. I shall have that treasure."

"Sounds like a fuckin' garbage disposal up there."

Nature Boy balanced the unicorn on his head. "It's distinctable."

"It sounds like a garbage disposal."

"I think it sounds like a Harley, Balladeer."

"Balladeer. What's this Balladeer?"

"You like ballads, right? Those macho rock ballads?"

"Look it that shed." Balladeer stepped onto a stump and picked at his teeth. "Shouldn't you be in that shed over there?"

"Or maybe it sounds like a speedboat."

Manly Man watched Filter sniff his bushes. He threw down his sponge, then strode into his garage.

Mr. Prosecutor held up a stuffed and mounted white fox. "Nature Boy, isn't this absolutely beautiful? I nailed this beauty on my arctic hunt. It's very rare."

Nature Boy lit another green smoke bomb. "That makes you a candidate for the Courageous Super Tough Guy of the Year award."

"Tough guy. Yeah tough guy." Mr. Prosecutor dropped a white triangle, then picked it up. "I'll tell you about a tough guy. Tommy. He climbed a dozen mountains in one month." Again his voice wavered. "Boy, my wife and I met him at the end. He climbed a dozen mountains."

Nature Boy used thumb and forefinger to hold his tongue as he spoke into the microphone. “He didn’t climb it because he wanted to die. He climbed it because he wanted to live.”

“Let me ask you something. I got guests coming over.”

“Below self-actualized is esteem.” Nature Boy removed his glasses, then placed one of the pink tips in his mouth. “Then love, and belonging.”

“What should I tell them about this nut in the tree next door?”

“Tell them your neighbor is self-actualized.”

Mr. Prosecutor towed his forehead. “It doesn’t look good.”

Nature Boy guided the unicorn through the green smoke.

Balladeer stopped chewing when he saw the cutout of Mayor Range. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing. I’m self-actualized. Are you self-actualized?”

“You should be in that shed. My wife said you pissed off a lot of people. Jogging by like that.”

“The woman whose husband I am says that ‘a married couple . . .’” Nature Boy tossed up the unicorn, then caught it. “. . . is a schmarried couple.”

“She said you were wearing one of them straightjackets.”

“A *straightjacket*? So why all this talk about that shed?”

“What were you thinking?” Balladeer hurled a rock at the cutout. It missed, then splashed in the lake.

Manly Man returned with a baseball bat. He watched Filter saunter across his yard. “Get that thing off my property.” Nature Boy bounced Filter’s green ball. “Oh don’t worry. He’s super friendly. Come here, Filter. Here, boy.”

“I was thinking a lot.” Nature Boy flourished his cloak. “I graduated third in my college class.”

“Nice girls’ glasses.”

“Question: did you graduate third, Balladeer? In your *college* class?”

Balladeer sprayed chip fragments. “With them glasses, maybe you should have a fashion show in that shed over there.”

“Some people wear girls’ glasses.” Nature Boy hoisted the unicorn and raised his voice. “Others, eehuh eehuh, listen to girls’ music.”

Mr. Prosecutor used a white rectangle to flick the cutout. “Boy, this is really bad. If my father—”
Death metal cut him off.

Balladeer kicked over the cutout, then stomped on it.

Nature Boy turned off the music. “The strength, the overwhelming strength.”

“That shit sucks. Singing about killing dogs and raping your neighbor.”

“So what you’re saying is you can make out what they’re singing. Admirable.”

Balladeer picked at his teeth.

“The lyric there, Balladeer, was ‘Overwhelming urge, irrepressible scourge.’ Do you know what ‘scourge’ means?”

“You should be in that shed over there.” Downing had still not emerged.

“How about ‘irrepressible?’”

Mr. Prosecutor hung the towel around his neck. “What kind of tomfoolery you trying to pull up there?”

Balladeer crumpled his bag. “You need to turn that shit down. I can hear that shit across the lake.”

Filter wagged his tail and sniffed at a butterfly. Manly Man gripped his bat. “It comes over here, I’m gonna put it down.”

“And I heard *your* music last weekend. From that party you had?” Nature Boy threw down the unicorn. “That’s a gift for you.”

“You get this from your friend’s shed over there?”

“No Balladeer. I heard you playing ‘You Evermore,’ that classic ballad, at your party.”

Balladeer threw the chips bag. It hit Nature Boy’s platform.

Filter crouched before Manly Man and wagged his tail. “Get it away. You better get it away.”

“Please, listen. Please, he’s friendly.” “I know this breed. This breed ain’t friendly.”

“And then I saw a carful of girls singing along to that same song. They had a pink unicorn just like this one. It hung from their mirror. So I figured that you, Balladeer, might like one too.”

“You should be in that shed, ya homo.”

“Homo. I’ve been married for fifteen years. How many years have you been married?”

Balladeer tried to rip apart the unicorn with his hands. He gave up, then threw it in the lake.

“You Evermore” played, and Filter sniffed at the soap bubbles beneath Manly Man’s Harley.

Nature Boy pleaded with Manly Man, but pleading wasn’t enough. The ballad played, and

Manly Man brought down the bat. Repeatedly.

The death metal resumed.

A baseball landed on the platform. Nature Boy—he wore the cloak’s hood over a bulldog rubber mask—crawled to the ball.

Downing used an aluminum foil roll to shade his eyes. “Now it just so happens, my fine scholar, that Cliff Seeger signed that.”

Nature Boy sniffed the ball. “Here lies the key to the great beyond.”

Downing used the roll to smack the ground. “Bring it down.”

“The unraveler of the universe’s mysteries.”

“It’s just unravel—” Downing stumbled—a shrub had caught in his ankle-length pants—then regained his balance. “Have you perchance spied a green ball yet? Yellow-green, like chartoonce and it has a quote-unquote boomerang pattern.”

Next door, Mr. Prosecutor sat on his bench and ate a hot dog. His white wood pieces and his box sat next to him.

Nature Boy spoke into the microphone. “Ruff, ruff, Mr. Prrrrosecutor.”

“What kinda tomfoolery?”

“You’re a DSU grrrrad?”

Mr. Prosecutor toweled his forehead. “One of the nation’s top business schools.”

“Mr. Prrrrosecutor, level two of the hierarchy of needs includes, ruff ruff, physical health. I wonder, ruff ruff, what brand of hot dog that is.”

“I was thinking about fried chicken.” Mr. Prosecutor clacked two pieces of wood. “But I didn’t want your top dog mayor to steal it.”

Nature Boy put down the mic, then growled at Downing. “It turns out that our humanitarian neighbor’s triumphant DSU Bulldogs killed their mascot at a game. Heat exposure.”

Downing unrolled foil. “Now perchance you’ve heard of Sinker Sands?”

“Is he a . . .” Nature Boy stood and placed a fist beneath his dog mask. “. . . rrrrocket scientist?”

Downing clutched his trophy top medallion and laughed so hard that mucous sprayed from his nose. “No, he’s a pitcher. A Warriors pitcher? He’s got a quote-unquote ‘Strikes for Strays’ thing. A real gentleman and scholar. He can just shh-shram it in there and he helps stray dogs and cats.”

“Hmmm. A warrior gentleman who can shram it in there?” Nature Boy dropped to his hands and knees, then sniffed the baseball. He only smelled the rubber of his mask. Filter would have liked to gnaw on the ball.

“That’s the one. Cliff Seeger just smonched that one. He was like kay-ow powp.” Downing swung the foil roll, then wiped spittle. “Oh look Grandma. Look Pops. Look Junior. The farthest I’ve seen. To the street. Yow.”

Mr. Prosecutor took from his box a bottle of wood glue.

“Do ya know what? If you want to come see a game. See Cliff Seeger play? There’s still a few games. What do ya say you come see a game?”

Nature Boy, still on all fours, nosed the ball. The signature showed. “If I were to witness someone smonch a home run, my life would be complete.”

“It’s the Outlaws. The field’s right down the street. It’s the home run that counts. Kay-ow.”

Nature Boy removed the hood, then grabbed the platform’s edge. Cliff Seeger, the sports god that Downing worshipped, the valorous home run hitter, was a Little League player?

“When Seeger hits a homer?” Downing ripped off a long sheet of foil. “Everybody’s watching it. Everybody’s a part of it. Then it’s up there and it’s just you and the ball, but it’s like hey it’s everyone too. All these different people . . .”

Nature Boy reached beneath his cloak, then squeezed Downing’s missing ball. When people came over, Filter was always thrilled to see them.

Mr. Prosecutor applied glue to a wood piece.

Downing clapped. “Timmy. Hey, here he is!” Next to the shed sat a boy in a wheelchair. He held a big red plastic bat.

Race. Income. Sexuality. Political preference. None of it mattered to Filter. Nature Boy removed the rubber mask.

“I can’t find it Timmy, but do ya know what?” Downing tossed up a tin foil ball, then fumbled it when it came down. “This should be a sufficitory replacement.”

Timmy, grunting, wheeled unwieldily through the vegetation toward them.

Downing cupped his hands around his mouth. “Hey my fine scholar, how’s that birdhouse coming?”

Mr. Prosecutor waved his towel.

Downing held his foil ball up toward Nature Boy. “He’s building a birdhouse. He said his wife always wanted him to build a birdhouse. That guy’s one of a kind.”

“Perhaps this will be a suffic—” The flesh that covered Filter’s belly felt like human skin. Nature Boy jumped off the platform. “Look what I found.” He tossed the chartreuse ball with the boomerang pattern to Downing.

Filter had a pleasant scent. Nature Boy approached Mr. Prosecutor. “You said your mother had a boomerang pattern?”

-- END --

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *“Self-actualized A-hole,” though not an unsplatterpunk story per se, comments on the mission of the horror subgenre, which challenges writers to integrate a positive message into otherwise controversial subject matter (e.g., gore, debauchery). Like many of my stories, this one introduces an artist-protagonist (Nature Boy) whose “art” appeals to few (in this case, himself and the reader), yet offends others (i.e., his neighbor and likeminded individuals).*

The story puts under the microscope the complexities of the Christian ideal of “love your neighbor as yourself” by confining the setting to three lakefront properties. To move toward change, the overconfident Nature Boy (the story’s namesake), must come down from his tree platform (i.e., subdue his feelings of moral and intellectual superiority) and extend an olive branch to his distasteful neighbor Mr. Prosecutor.

With a few exceptions, the story sticks to the objective point of view (i.e., never entering a character’s head) to reflect the protagonist’s reluctance to look within and explore the filters that might be preventing him from being more empathic.

All my stories are inspired by Christian death metal and its quest to conceal a benevolent message within music that is, to many, offensive and even ugly. My literary influences range from Raymond Carver, Ernest Hemingway, and Tom Wolfe to Edward Lee, Carlton Mellick III, and Jeff Strand.

AUTHOR’S BIO: *Douglas J. Ogurek is the pseudonym for a writer living somewhere on Earth. Though banned on Mars, his fiction appears in more than fifty Earth publications. Ogurek founded the controversial literary subgenre known as unsplatterpunk, which uses splatterpunk conventions (e.g., extreme violence, gore, taboo subject matter) to deliver a positive message. He guest-edited the UNSPLATTERPUNK! trilogy, published by Theaker’s Quarterly Fiction. Ogurek reviews films at that same magazine. Recent longer works include young adult novel *Branch Turner vs the Currants* (World Castle Publishing) and horror/suspense novella *Encounter at an Abandoned Church* (Scarlet Leaf Publishing). More at www.douglasjojurek.weebly.com. Twitter: @unsplatter*

BIG little DOG

By John Sheirer

WHY WE LIKE IT: *This story is pure magic—an absolutely wonderful unsentimental (kinda) tale told from a dog’s POV that will play your heart strings like Hauser plucks cello. Stuff like this can so easily go off the rails so reading it when it works is better than weed. Suffice it to say that after the six of us finished it we all wanted a ‘Ruby’ of our own—even Charles who’s an ordained felixophile. (We’re not sure how the cat feels.) Dimensional mainstream fiction written with a light touch and a sure talent, this one easily gets Five Stars. Quote: Ruby admired the way the human drew out the “f” sound at the beginning of the word and deepened his voice to almost sing the middle vowel before almost barking the “k” at the end. Ruby knew dozens of human words, but this one was more mysterious than “outside” or “sit” or “treat”.*

Big Little Dog

Ruby sat and stared up at her human lying on the couch. Usually, a few seconds of sustained eye contact was enough to alert the human of Ruby’s need for a trip outside. Sometimes the human stared his big human eyes into a book or at the television on the opposite wall, so Ruby would add a little whimper. She knew her whimpers sounded pathetic and undignified, but the call to go outside was strong. Whimpering always worked. The human was a good human who knew why Ruby needed to go outside and didn’t keep her waiting.

Ruby knew that all the humans in the house were good humans. The adult man and woman and the three younger humans took her out almost every time she asked. When the two teenaged human males were home, they played with her and walked her—although not as often as when

they were younger. Ruby noticed that human children seem to get busier and less playful as they get older.

The youngest human child was still too young to walk Ruby by herself beyond the immediate neighborhood, but she often played in the yard with Ruby. Ruby never saw the point of such a one-sided game as “fetch” with its servile subtext. But she would play “chase” for hours at a time. The youngest human would bring two tennis balls instead of just one. After Ruby chased one ball, the human child would kick the other ball in a different direction, and Ruby would chase that one as if it were a rat or mouse on a farm many centuries ago. Big dogs like Labs and Goldens needed balls tossed high in the air, but Ruby specialized in the first foot above the surface of the Earth, that zone where kicked tennis balls spend most of their time. Her instincts would send her sprinting after each ball for as long as the little human kept kicking.

This game turned out to be the best possible practice for the child’s youth soccer exploits. Ruby had become expert at lunging her little body to block the ball’s path, so the child had to learn to kick it at just the right angle to make Ruby chase it. The naps Ruby took after these sessions were the deepest and most restful of her life. Sometimes she would kick her little legs and yip softly, chasing and barking in her happy dreams. Ruby even went to a couple of games with the family and watched from the sidelines like a proud parent as the human child wove through defenses and snapped shots past goalies who were far slower to react on their two ungainly feet than Ruby was with her four quick paws.

The only time when Ruby didn’t bother the humans to go outside was when the two adult humans had the house to themselves and played naked on the bed upstairs. They closed the bedroom door when they played naked, and Ruby was content to lie next to the door, guarding against unexpected intruders and listening to their happy human sounds emanating from within.

When they finished and opened the door, they were always pleased to see Ruby, and they often spent a few minutes petting her affectionately. Ruby could sense the extra glow of contentment then, and that feeling seemed to flow from their hands directly into her furry little body. Ruby also sometimes watched them play naked on the living room couch, peeking around a corner rather than entering the room. She always felt that their game could be enhanced with the introduction of a rubber ball or a chewy toy. But the humans had their own ways of playing their own games, Ruby knew.

The adult male human was on that same couch now, but he was alone and sleeping fitfully, unusual for the middle of a weekday. He had his face turned away and buried in a pillow. To her great surprise and dismay, Ruby's repeated whimpers didn't get his attention. So she turned in a small circle several times, and then sat back down to stare with all her will. This had no effect on the human. Ruby then barked. It was just a clipped yip, not obnoxiously loud, not the kind of bark reserved for the neighborhood kids who like to skateboard up the street or the other humans who walked their own dogs within her domain. Oh, how she loved to bark at those dogs so loudly that her humans would call out, "Hey! Okay! We hear you! You saved us again!" Ruby knew she was a small dog, but she also knew it was her job to protect the man and the woman and the children. They each towered over her, even now the growing youngest child, the seven-year-old who arrived just a year after Ruby did. That once-tiny ball of human scent with blinking, wandering eyes was now nearly half the size of a full-grown human and still growing. But Ruby knew that she was their protector every bit as much as they were hers.

At her yip, the human stirred slightly, his wide shoulders hunching deeper into himself. Ruby had never seen the human look this small. His legs scrunched up in a way that reminded Ruby of how she would dig into her mother's soft belly and nurse all those years ago. This was a warm

and pleasant memory, but it didn't address her current need to go outside. Ruby could hold her pee for an impressive time period, despite the fact that her tiny body was home to a minuscule bladder. Now, though, that bladder felt as full as it had ever been. Several more yips only made the human curl more tightly into himself.

Ruby noticed that the human smelled wrong today. Yes, that was the only word for it: *wrong*. Usually, the human had a soapy scent, even on days when he didn't shower right away. Most humans had some variety of a soapy scent. Even when the human ran or hiked or did whatever mysterious exercises he did on the machines in the obviously haunted basement where Ruby refused to enter, he still smelled mostly like soap. Soap cut through other scents and lingered on humans and dogs alike. Ruby suffered patiently as the woman human gave her a bath every few months, and the soap scent gradually faded until her next bath. She didn't enjoy the baths, especially the water running into her sensitive eyes, but the human's hands were so strong and reassuring that it was tolerable. Ruby didn't mind the soap scent, and she certainly liked the treats when the bath was done.

But today, the human didn't smell like soap as much as he usually did. Today, the human smelled wrong. Ruby wasn't exactly sure what his smell meant, but she knew he shouldn't smell this way. Two days ago, he had smelled strongly of soap. But the next day, he stayed home and the soap faded. Today, the soap was gone. The human smelled like sweat, but a different sweat that wasn't an exercise sweat. As the human groaned on the couch, Ruby suddenly understood. She recognized that today's scent was the scent of sickness. The human was sick.

Sick or not, Ruby needed to go outside. Out of options, she stretched up on her strong, little hind legs and pressed her front paws into the man's back. She scratched as if she were scurrying up a hill or digging in the yard. She held back her claws as best she could, not wanting to hurt the

human, but she needed his full attention. He stirred and moaned but didn't sit up, so Ruby reared back and thumped her little front paws into his back again and again, half jumping on the prone human. That worked.

"Ruby!" the human groaned as he twisted his neck to look in Ruby's general direction.

"What are you doing, sweetie?"

Ruby returned to her sitting position and stared as the human rolled over and sat up. The sick smell came off the human in waves, but Ruby tried to ignore it. She was glad to see the human sitting up and returning her gaze. Ruby knew that humans were supposed to sit up during the daylight hours. Maybe he wouldn't be sick for much longer, Ruby hoped. She did a little dance with her front paws, partly happy that the human was moving, but partly still worried about him.

The human rubbed his face. He grabbed his glasses from the coffee table and focused on Ruby. "Hey, girl. Outside? Need to go outside?"

Ruby jumped and made a quick happy gurgle. The human nodded. "Okay!" he said, seeming to try to pull his brain into the front of his head by an act of will. "C'mon, Let's go outside."

Ruby backed off as the human tried to push himself off the couch with both hands. His backside cleared the cushions by a few inches before his momentum ebbed and he plopped back down. "Oh, crap." He said softly. Then he looked at his phone on the coffee table. "Oh, crap!" he said, louder this time. "Ruby, I've been asleep for four hours! I'm sorry, girl. You must really need to go."

This time, he pushed himself up with more force. For a moment, Ruby feared he might fall directly on top of her, so she scampered back a few feet.

"Whoa," the human said, steadying himself with a hand on the coffee table. Once he regained his balance, he walked slowly, stiffly, through the living room toward the front door. Ruby

noticed him making small grunting sounds with each step. She had only ever heard him do that after some of their longest hikes into the neighboring mountains. On those days, he laughed after he grunted. Today, he didn't.

At the door, the human took Ruby's leash from the basket where it was always at the ready for another walk. Ruby didn't mind the leash. She knew that the times when she could run on the long, hilly trails during their hikes were special times. Ruby didn't know exactly why, but she accepted that the leash gave her a sense of safety in the wide world of big humans. Strange as it seemed, she knew the leash meant that her humans loved her, just as she knew the times they let her run free on those wooded trails also meant that they loved her. She loved them enough not even to consider running away in the woods. And she loved them enough to wait patiently for the leash.

"Come here, Ruby," the human said, his voice weaker and raspier than usual. Ruby was, as usual, at his heels when he called for her, but he always called anyway. He clicked the leash onto Ruby's collar, opened the door, and half-staggered into the springtime air. Normally, the human would comb his hair or tuck in his shirt when he stepped out into the neighborhood with Ruby. But she noticed today that his hair stuck out at odd angles in some places and was pasted to his scalp in others. His big flannel shirt was untucked, and his baggy sweatpants hung low on his hips.

Strangest of all, the human, Ruby noticed, stepped out onto the porch with bare feet. Ruby knew that human feet were nowhere near as tough as her own. The children's feet were close because they spent considerable time romping in the yard in bare feet. But, as they aged, the humans more and more depended on shoes. Ruby had never seen the adults or the kids beyond a

certain age neglect to wear shoes outside. She hesitated in the doorway, staring at the human's feet, but he gave the leash a gentle tug.

"Let's go, Ruby," he said. "The sooner we get this done, the sooner we can get back on the couch."

Ruby moved through the doorway and out onto the porch. The man reached above her and pulled the door closed behind them. Ruby sensed that something was strange about that action, some usual part of the routine missing, but she could only stare at the human's big, pale feet.

"What the ..." the human said, more to himself than to Ruby. "I forgot my shoes." He reached for the doorknob and leaned in to step through the opening door. But the door didn't open. The human lurched against it and staggered back onto the porch. Ruby skittered backward herself, afraid that the human might step on her. She was an expert at walking close to human feet without being stepped on. The memory of heavy shoes on her tiny paws when she was an inexperienced and curious puppy taught her well to predict human movements and avoid their giant feet.

The human said a word that Ruby knew humans weren't supposed to say but sometimes said anyway. Once, the youngest child had said the word at dinner, and the adult humans raised their voices as if they had never uttered the word with the children listening from the next room. Ruby knew that pups learned to bark from the big dogs.

The human grabbed the doorknob and twisted it again. He said the bad word again, this time louder. Ruby admired the way the human drew out the "f" sound at the beginning of the word and deepened his voice to almost sing the middle vowel before almost barking the "k" at the end. Ruby knew dozens of human words, but this one was more mysterious than "outside" or "sit" or "treat." Humans had such a range of things that they could do with their voices. Ruby enjoyed

her own language of woofs and yaps and howls. But she sometimes wished she could learn the whole range of human expression and share it with her canine friends at the doggie daycare she attended once a week when the adult humans had long workdays.

“Ruby,” the human said. “We’re locked out. The keys are inside. And so’s my damned phone.”

Ruby didn’t know all of these words, but she understood the general meaning. Even so, she trotted down the steps and pulled the retractable leash to its full length, long enough to take her across the brick patio and allow her to squat in the grass yard beyond. She usually had more control and enjoyed finding just the right spot to spray her pee. Her favorite spot was anywhere Bandit, the Airedale from down the street, had left his foul-smelling urine. Ruby wondered what was wrong with the water at Bandit’s house to make his pee smell so disgusting. She knew that her own scent was powerful enough to counteract his reeking spots on the lawn near the street. Ruby growled and barked the most when Bandit’s humans walked him by her house. Ruby was friends with every other dog in the neighborhood, but something about Bandit brought out the wolf in her.

On this particular trip outside, Ruby had to go so badly that she just relieved herself without being picky about the location. Once she did, she turned back to the human, who was staring at the door. She wondered if he thought he could open the locked door with just the power of his big human brain. Ruby knew that humans were smarter than dogs when it came to many things. But she also knew that this human wasn’t smart enough to avoid getting locked out of the house. Ruby wondered if being sick affected human brains just as it affected their big bodies, making them think as slowly and awkwardly as they moved.

Ruby trotted into the yard and tugged on the leash. The human looked out at her. Ruby looked back and tugged again.

“Oh, Ruby,” the human said. “I don’t have the energy to take you for a big walk today.”

Ruby loved her big walks, of course. She loved the soft grass and hard streets and the chatty birds and the wide sky. She loved the snow and the sunshine and the wind parting her fur and tickling her from head to tail. She didn’t love the rain, and she certainly didn’t love the silly raincoat the humans sometimes made her wear.

The house was nice, and Ruby enjoyed having a soft bed to sprawl across and watch the endless events happening just outside their window. She loved that the house was warm in the winter and cool in the summer and lighted through the early parts of the dark night. But she loved the outside most of all. The house was contained, calm, ordered, and controlled. Outside was random, sometimes noisy, often unpredictable. Animals that didn’t go inside the human houses lived outside, just beyond the back yard tree line. The outside was wild. Ruby sensed that she was once far more wild than she was in this life. She sensed that she once roamed vast expanses of land, fought for her pack, killed for her food. She felt this in a way that she couldn’t quite understand deep within herself. She wished she could tell the humans about her wild past, especially during those nights when she snuggled into their warm laps on the couch, but she knew this was a mystery she could never share across the deep gulf between their different species.

Now, though, Ruby didn’t tug at the leash with the hope of a big walk. Now she tugged because she realized that the human needed her help. Yes, he had a bigger brain than hers. She knew this. She knew that she would never drive the car or build a fire or understand what was happening in the shimmering screens of the humans’ phones and laptops. That was okay with

her. She also knew that there were ways that her brain worked better than a human brain. She knew that she could smell dangers that the humans could never detect. She could remember many things the humans would forget every time, like the location of the best chewing stick that she returned to time and again. She knew that she could track the flight of a bouncing rubber ball and calculate the timing of her jump to catch it in midair far more efficiently than the adult humans could.

And today, Ruby knew something else that the human didn't know, something that would make the human very happy—at least, as happy as he could be while sick. Ruby could remember something from the many times that the other adult, the woman human, took her for walks. The man human liked the front and street side of the yard where he might meet neighbors for conversations while the woman human liked to take her to the more secluded backyard especially when the kids joined the walk.

Ruby tugged harder now, putting her strong, little legs into action. “Okay,” the human said. “I’m coming.”

He stepped awkwardly, unused to feeling his bare feet on the hard, wooden steps and rough, brick patio and cool, squishy grass. Ruby pulled him along, trying without success to get him to avoid the spot where she had peed. He didn't seem to notice as he followed her, slowly at first, but then building speed as they passed the front corner of the house, along the row of windows where Ruby watched the world go by from her comfy bed, down the slick bank where the human had to turn his big, bare feet sideways to keep from slipping. At the back of the house, Ruby took him to a back door that was almost hidden under an awning and between two large bushes. Ruby pulled the human straight to that backdoor and scratched against it, much as she scratched the

inside of the front door as a puppy when she needed to go out. She had never scratched to go back inside before today, but today was a different day.

The human stepped slowly behind her and reached for the door. As Ruby knew it would, the knob turned in his hand.

“Oh, Ruby!” the human said as he pushed open the door and moved inside. “Thank you! How did you know this door was unlocked?”

Ruby knew because the woman human had also locked herself out once long ago on a hot summer day when Ruby was just a small puppy and had only been with the family for a few weeks. Ruby remembered that the woman human had tried the front door just as the man human had today. She remembered the woman sweating in the heat, her hair falling limply to the sides of her shining face as she carried the smallest human child, then just an infant with a cloth wrapped around her to catch her poop and pee. The child cried for the whole hour that the woman wandered around the house, looking for a way back in. The cloth filled with poop and pee, some of it spread onto the woman’s clothes, making her cry a little herself. The two boys, then so young and small, tried windows and doors without success. Eventually, the woman sent them to a neighbor’s house for help. Ruby was as relieved as everyone else when the neighbor came with a metal bar and gently pried the back door open without even leaving a scratch.

After that day, the woman human always secretly kept that back door unlocked to avoid another afternoon of struggling to get back inside. Ruby didn’t know enough numbers to know how many times she had gone outside since then and didn’t need the back door, but she knew that it was good that she remembered. Today, she knew that she was smart.

Back inside, the human gave Ruby a special crunchy treat, the one that tasted like bacon and blueberries. Ruby didn’t know how the human knew that this one was her favorite, but it was.

Then the human gave himself some small, white treats that he washed down with a glass of water. He slowly padded back to the living room, his bare feet at home on the soft carpet, and flopped down on the couch. Ruby followed close behind. This time, he didn't turn his back but faced out and curled enough to open a small space on the couch cushions. This time, he patted that open space.

"Up!" he called out softly, some of the rasp gone from his voice. Ruby bounded up onto the couch and licked his wet nose before snuggling against his warm chest. He still smelled sick, but Ruby didn't mind. She knew it was better for him to be sick while lying on the couch with the dog who loved him, rather than staggering around outside where, even with a dog as smart and tough and big as Ruby, the human might be too sick to deal with all that wildness out there.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The inspiration for this story began one day when I was home sick from work and walking my dog outside while trying not to pass out. I wondered what my stumbling illness looked like from her perspective. Ruby in the story is based on my wonderful dog Libby, an eight-year-old Border Terrier. We love her tenacity, courage, and intelligence, and it's always a fun challenge to try to understand what's going on inside her mind. We can be gone for five minutes, and we'll laugh when she celebrates our return as if we were lost at sea for a year. And then she'll do something that shows she remembers an event or place from years ago, and we'll marvel at her super-human mental abilities. "Big Little Dog" is a tribute to Libby, and the story is part of a book-length manuscript of linked stories called "Stumbling Through Adulthood" where characters from one story often pop up in other stories. Ruby and her family members all appear in other stories in the collection.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *John Sheirer (pronounced "shy-er") lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, with his wonderful wife Betsy and happy dog Libby. He has taught writing and communications for 27 years at Asnuntuck Community College in Enfield, Connecticut, where he also serves as editor and faculty advisor for Freshwater Literary Journal (submissions welcome). He writes a monthly column on current events for his hometown newspaper, the Daily Hampshire Gazette, and his books include memoir, fiction, poetry, essays, political satire, and photography.*

His most recent book is Fever Cabin, a fictionalized journal of a man isolating himself during the current pandemic. (All proceeds from this book will benefit pandemic-related charities.) Find him at JohnSheirer.com.

HACKLES

By Nancy Harris

WHY WE LIKE IT: *'Hackles' function as a symbol for both man and beast in this devastatingly visceral account of a neurotic father and a terrifying dog who takes control of a family. Patrician prose and translucent insight raise this story so high above the competition it's hard to see what's below. A flawless performance by a writer in full control of her considerable gifts.*

. *Quote:* He nibbled on ibuprofen and rubbed arnica gel into the shouting region above his shoulders. *And this breathtaking masterpiece of a sentence:* They found that just as they could ignore his occasional remarks about their fashion choices or what he called the calamitous situations in bath and laundry, they could ignore his unpleasant new habit, allowing it to become swallowed up by the forgettable substance of Matt's discourse.

Five stars.

Hackles

Like fungal conks creviced in a tree trunk, fluted bone fragments lodged themselves between C-1 and C-2, C-4 and C-5 in Matt Snell's neck. When Dr. Patty's long purple fingernail tapped the x-ray on her tiny tablet, Matt, the product of a devout Presbyterian union, shrank backwards, threatened by the intimacy of her millennial digit touching his mature skeletal image.

They're not really spurs, you know," Dr. Patty told him, "they're more like little scalloped bits growing on your vertebrae—as if your body is trying to repair itself by growing extra armor."

“Armor?” He quizzed the doctor, “Where’s the battle?”

“It’s the body’s way of trying to repair damage to the spine...” The doctor, her floral-scented talcum assaulting Matt, who recognized it as the very same cloying sweetness that drifted from the bathroom after one of his daughters had showered, went on, “think of it as fortification.”

“Fortification?” He challenged, “Why do I need fortification?”

From the comfort of a plushy chair, Matt had been crafting software for Silicon Valley start-ups for decades.

She gave him a pitying look.

“To counteract the damage of normal deterioration, perhaps.”

He felt ancient.

Matt worked from his childhood home--a former hunting cabin converted to a charming single-family residence in 1945. The tiny house centered itself on a cleared level lot of modest proportions, the land having once been one of many flowered shelves that interspersed the folds of a hilly, forested region.

When Matt was a toddler, the cadaverous old woman who ran Linglestown’s Historical Society discovered the significance of the Snell property and its surroundings (a band of fierce immigrant Scotsmen had destroyed the last survivors of a native American tribe there). She was awarded a medal by the governor for getting the acreage designated a protected historical site, disappointing

many local developers and grandfathering the Snell home as it existed, forbidding the addition of any living space.

There, in that cozy, spare home sequestered among slopes and meadows, Matt grew accustomed to order. The forces of nature worked noiselessly and efficiently, showering columns of towering pines with soft white snow in the depths of winter, sprouting carpets of rubekia, wild violet, and Queen Anne's Lace in the early spring.

It could be said that Matt was shaped by the cooperating forces of his physical environment in which each plot of earth was its own self-contained oasis. The pines did not meander downward into the meadows; the flowers did not invade the forests where they might choke the trunks of trees. It was a remarkably peaceful atmosphere that Matt perhaps came to expect in all facets of life. Conflict was not part of his world. At home, his parents, as did he, understood their roles and boundaries, and life there, remarkably or not, mirrored the same environmental equilibrium the boy and later the man found in this rural paradise.

Matt and Donna settled into the home after their wedding (Matt's parents having ventured forth to that septuagenarian retreat, Miami Beach). The fact that the house held one bathroom did not seem a matter of great concern—it was a relatively spacious bathroom—and after all, there were only two of them.

At first, not much changed: a few cosmetics popped up on the previously bare counters of the bathroom where there'd been nothing but an ivory pool of sink poured into an expanse of sparkling granite.

It was not until half a dozen colorful bottles of nail polish and a pink Lady Bic electric razor joined the cosmetics lining the backsplash a week or so later that Matt, congenitally fastidious in matters of order and simplicity, first felt the twinges in his neck. His own modest parents kept their lotions and pills, Band Aids and razors safely stowed in neat rows behind cabinet doors.

Still, Donna's recent contributions to the bathroom amounted to nothing alarming and Matt found that if he was cautious in averting his gaze from the growing colony of feminine products, the uncomfortable sensations along the uppermost region of his cervical vertebrae all but disappeared.

The laundry room, though, was another thing altogether. Lace-layered panties and bras in shiny pastel fabrics hung without shame next to dangling pantyhose from a clothesline newly strung across the room, creating a tawdry effect reminiscent of a washerwoman's workplace.

Matt had never laid eyes on his mother's underwear.

One day, when slapped in the face by a wet garment dangling overhead, Matt decided to have a word.

"Honey," he ventured, leaning over Donna's shoulder as she stirred Bolognese on the cooktop, "can we talk about the laundry room?"

When he suggested that perhaps there was a more efficient way to manage things, Donna stared at him blankly.

"I only meant that if you wore, you know, cotton things—things that go into the dryer--"

A trill of laughter.

“Oh Matt, honey,” she cupped his chin in her warm hand, kissing him in a way that made him feel foolish rather than loved.

She returned to her Bolognese as though the exchange had never taken place.

And with those quick gestures, he saw how things were going to be from then on. He'd been reduced to an object of ridicule. There was no room, not the smallest opening, for negotiation. A pattern that would impose itself on their marriage, on their day-to-day life, had been resolutely established. He mentally wrung his hands.

What had been the state of Donna's modest condo? He could not recall. Surely, if it had been a chaotic, disordered swirl such as the one Matt now found himself immersed in, a warning would have sounded.

Then again, there was her calm manner and careful demeanor, the way she pursued every gesture with deliberateness, every act or effort given her full attention: an integration of mind and body, a full and complete engagement with the matter before her. Was this not a sign of order? If so, how could one with an orderly mind live in such a disorderly environment?

Was it simply that had there been more hours in the day Donna would have found time to dry the garments on a delicate setting and fold them into the depths of a basket, carried the lingerie upstairs to be tucked into drawers?

Matt tried to convince himself that this was the case.

But the dismissive manner in which she'd met his inquiry remained stuck somewhere in his neck.

*

Twin girls arrived ten months later, and the line of silk, nylon, and lace festooning the tiny laundry room was now joined by onesies and midget t-shirts in shades of Easter eggs.

Over the years, the garments grew in quantity, size, and variety, until where there had once been perhaps half a dozen undergarments gracing the clothesline strung across the room, there were now as many as 18 to 24 garments of various proportions—some of which featured Care Bears and Scooby-do.

Later, as the girls reached pubescence, other intimate garments appeared in alarming shades: black, red, purple. Silk blouses and glittery tees draped drying racks that covered a table once used for folding.

Even worse was the appearance of some of these garments on the forms of his little girls, who'd begun to look like saucy tarts.

“Do you think that's appropriate attire for school?” He'd asked from the breakfast table as Marnie and Renny sauntered past, black bra straps boldly escaping the borders of racerback tees on which provocative messages were emblazoned.

Each glanced at him with a smile of mild amusement and continued to the door.

By the time the girls entered high school, the twinges in Matt's neck had become as steady as a boy's worst nemesis, his cranky companion throughout most of his days. He nibbled on ibuprofen and rubbed arnica gel into the shouting region above his shoulders.

The bathroom was now further transformed by a palpable infusion of estrogen-saturated ether. The counter bloomed hairdryers and curling irons tied up in an unnerving tangle of cords; crinkly-wrapped tampons rolled, unashamed, across open shelving secured to the wall above for the additional accommodation of toiletries; lipsticks, lotions, facials, foundations, powders scattered themselves randomly amid metal trees of earrings, bracelets, necklaces.

Matt felt himself sliding down the rock-studded side of an ever-steepening cliff. He reached for holds with desperate fingers, legs dangling over an abyss, Donna and the girls gazing at him from a higher plateau.

Why did no one throw him a lifeline?

Matt's twinges rolled into cloying pain so severe that he sought relief in twice-weekly therapeutic massages added to his growing regimen of over-the-counter medications, ointments, and creams.

When both girls began to commute to the local university, small dials of pink and blue birth control pills joined the chaotic bathroom *mélange*, sealing Matt's distress.

His widowed mother, returned from Miami, joined the household that year, taking up residence on the cramped second floor in the tiny suite of bed and sitting room that had previously held Matt's office so that he now worked from the dining room table. A Diaper Genie, gathering place

for Gram's sodden Depends, joined the bathroom jumble, standing like a ripe sentry between the laden countertops and the toilet.

Matt's misery exploded over the next four years in a constant barrage of shooting pains and a radiating burning sensation.

It was when he found himself unable to turn his neck in either direction or raise his arms 45 degrees that he was forced to call on Dr. Patty who'd inherited the practice from her father, a childhood classmate of Matt's. Armed with cortisone shots and Tramadol, he could move again.

*

Beaten down as he was by the weeks of unrelenting suffering, Matt developed what he believed to be a sudden case of Tourette's Syndrome; specifically, he began to attach an offensive suffix to the ends of certain nouns. The white-haired lady who sold lattes and muffins at the Roastery on the square became the "coffee-bitch;" the slight Asian woman who hiked up his rural driveway to deliver mail six days a week was suddenly known as the "mail-bitch."

"Not Tourette's," Dr. Patty corrected him, "but definitely on the spectrum."

And she slipped him the business card of a psychiatrist, who saw him the next day and prescribed anti-anxiety meds.

The women he knew by name escaped Matt's curse. His family puzzled over just what it was that prompted him to utter the insult. They knew Matt now had two states of being: contorted by agony when he tried to treat his condition with stoicism or mesmerized by a comforting mix of drugs and alcohol. They found that just as they could ignore his occasional remarks about their

fashion choices or what he called the calamitous situations in bath and laundry, they could ignore his unpleasant new habit, allowing it to become swallowed up by the forgettable substance of Matt's discourse.

Until they couldn't.

He felt them edging away. He couldn't help himself. It slipped out before he knew what he was saying. No, that's not true. In fact, it didn't so much as slip out as it propelled itself from between his lips with a force hinting at violence and with the spouting of the invective came a temporary cessation of his pain.

On a perfect day, Donna found she could spend as many as 15 hours away from Matt between a daytime toiling over financial statements at work and a nighttime of horseback riding at the local barn where her palomino was boarded.

Marnie, the oldest of his daughters by two minutes, avoided Matt by retreating to her room until it was time to leave the house for her 12-9 shift at Lane Bryant and scurrying back to that private space with a fragrant McDonalds sack of burgers and fries on her return.

Only Renny, the younger, between jobs and home all day, was subjected to her father's odd behavior in large doses. She alone challenged Matt, calling him names: misogynist, pig.

"Your dad is in great pain," Renny's grandmother scolded the girl, "he says that terrible word because he can't control himself; he has no power over his own suffering."

"He takes pills and drinks vodka, Gram; he's not in pain."

“He doesn’t know what he’s saying when he’s all doped up.”

In May of that year, Matt spotted Jack on a website—a dark-faced pup with a luxurious black and gold coat and four white paws like matched socks, a mug shot gaze into the camera: an astonishingly long, elegant jaw full of sharp white interlocking teeth. He wanted that boy. There was a dog, Lina, in the house, but she had been rescued by Donna from the parking lot between Hoover’s Funeral Parlor and the Eagle Bar and Grill and was devoted to the girls.

She had no use for Matt.

He bought the shepherd pup from a backyard breeder in Shamokin for three-hundred dollars. Shamokin, a town broken by the one-two punch common in that part of the country: first the railroads died and then the coal mines shut down. Besides Dave’s Shepherd Farm, a cluster of sagging Main Street houses sheltering seniors and junkies stood their ground. That was about it for Shamokin. The puppy weighed eight pounds, which would have been a clue to anybody who knew shepherds that the dog was either much younger than the eight weeks claimed by the breeder or half-starved. Matt didn’t know much about shepherds except that they were said to be completely loyal. Around Lina, who outweighed Jack by ten pounds, the pup kept a wary distance.

Around the women, he was mildly disdainful—except for Matt’s mother, toward whom he showed an immediate and violent animosity.

Gram lurched to the breakfast table bent over her walker on the first morning after Jack’s arrival. The pup, who was reclining nearby, rose with fury. He sneered, baring his slick teeth, a guttural growl emitting from the depths of his chest.

Like underground missiles preparing for deployment, iron-stiff tufts of fur shot up from the back of the little monster's neck.

"I'm not scared of you, kid," she said, turning her white face on the animal like a full moon.

Jack watched her with narrowed eyes, his puppy muscles taut and rippling in a threatening manner beneath a heaving coat.

Lina skittered into the room fanning her tail and hunkered down next to Gram, who slipped a bit of buttered toast into the mutt's mouth.

If anyone had been paying attention, it might have been noticed that Jack studied that morning ritual with a malevolent glare. He appeared to be storing the memory some place deep where other bitter recollections were plunged—nightmarish reminders of having been yanked away from the warm underbelly of his mother while the others, all girl puppies, remained snugly fastened there.

Breeder Dave's little daughter had wanted Jack for her own.

For his first few weeks of life, Jack spent his days shivering on a rug next to the girl's bed.

Within a week, she'd grown tired of feeding him and taking him out to pee. "He's going back to the yard," Dave grunted when he smelled the urine in her room, and Jack, now the definite runt, was tossed out, reunited with his sisters, who'd outgrown him and turned peevish whenever Jack nosed into their path.

Matt's dad once told him there were theories about what makes a runt: the weakest pup couldn't latch on to his mother's teat; the one in the middle of the womb where nutrition was scarce is

underweight at birth. But the truth was, Jack was smaller because he was fed what the girl gave him when she remembered to give him anything at all.

In Breeder Dave's house, he had survived mostly on condensed milk from the fridge--milk watered down to stretch a bit farther. By the time he was dropped back among his siblings, Jack's mother didn't seem to recall who he was and the possessive girl pups crammed together in a forbidding furry cordon, blocking his path to the food bowl.

Like a vengeful bullied teenager, Jack chowed down and bulked up at the Snells', running endless loops across and around the front yard to the edges of bordering forests.

By September, Donna found even more opportunities for horseback riding when she joined a group of horsewomen on weekend trail-riding trips to places like Clarion and Marienville.

"Off with the horse-bitches again, then?" Matt inquired when she departed on Friday nights.

Marnie had moved out, sharing a place in Harrisburg with her boyfriend, a stringy, good-humored kid who worked for the governor. Renny quietly slipped out one day. Six months later, a photograph of the girl arrived in the mail. She was standing on a San Antonio tarmac dressed in Air Force blues.

That Fall, Jack outweighed Lina four-fold and the little mutt started keeping to her own far corner of the living room, her liquid brown eyes roving over Jack with caution. She waited for that hulk to shuffle off and doze so she could get a shot at the food bowl in the laundry room now and again.

One day when Gram heaved herself into a chair at the breakfast table, Jack sidled up to her, intercepting Lina's bit of toast.

"What's wrong, Lina? Don't you like toast anymore?" She asked the pet cowering in the corner.

Gram raised herself on to the walker and rolled over to Lina, Jack close on her trail. When she reached down to Lina with a crust, Jack's neck fur rose in a quivering ridge. He pounced, knocking Gram to the floor, slashing her pale arm before devouring the crushed edge of toast. Lina whimpered and scurried up the stairs, taking cover beneath Gram's bed.

"Elderly patients on Warfarin must stay clear of clawed pets," Dr. Patty remarked as she sutured the wound.

On Christmas day, Donna stayed home largely because the horse barn was closed for the holidays. She made a rib roast, mashed potatoes, three bean salad, and roasted root vegetables. They all drank a bit of Merlot and, after dinner, sat around the fire with a bottle of Courvoisier. Jack, who weighed in at 120 now, was stretched out on the hearth and Lina, who was down to eleven pounds, sat by Donna, eyeing the bully by the fire.

Nearby, Gram had been following the closed captioning on *Jeopardy* for at least fifteen minutes. Matt turned to his wife and lowered his voice to a near whisper.

"Remember when we talked about selling the house and traveling the country in an RV?" Matt popped a couple of trammies and Xanax tablets, noting Donna looked more like 35 than 57 while he looked every bit of sixty.

Stroking Lina, Donna's icy stare briefly but decisively cut through the haze of alcohol and pills.

Matt glanced at his mother whose startled expression could not be escaped. She directed her attention back to Alex Trebek.

“Don’t need good hearing to understand that look,” Gram murmured.

In the middle of the night, Lina, who’d gone some time without a meal, mistook the rhythmic rise and fall of Jack’s hide for deep sleep, and crept toward the food bowl. By the time the hapless, emaciated girl reached the kitchen, Jack, neck fur standing erect as an open blade, had leapt across the room and sunk his teeth into her hide, shaking her from side to side like a wet rag.

Donna was first down the stairs at the sound of the canine melee. The more fiercely she tried to pull Lina out of Jack’s grasp, the more she stretched the gaping hole in the ravaged dog’s side. Matt appeared, grabbing a cast iron skillet from the cooktop and nailed Jack on the head. The dog fell back in a heap of unconsciousness.

At the vet’s, Donna held Lina in her arms while the pentobarbital made its way through the dying dog’s bloodstream.

“One little, two little, three little Indians...four little...” Matt’s mother sang under her breath, standing next to Matt on the back porch, watching Donna’s Toyota drag the horse trailer, packed with her belongings, down the driveway at dawn.

“We’ll have to make some changes, Gram,” Matt said over breakfast, keeping his eyes on his oatmeal, “probably move closer to town.”

But he knew they weren’t going to any kind of normal neighborhood—not with Jack.

Gram didn't say a word.

As suddenly as it had begun, Matt's vocal tic disappeared.

Maybe it was because slamming so many pills with vodka chasers had rendered him speechless and blurry. The house went to hell when the housekeeper refused to come back, but Jack was too far gone into his semi-conscious state to notice. (Word had gotten around town about Lina's violent demise.) He remained coherent enough to work from home. As long as nobody asked for video conferencing, he could get by.

No longer allowed to stalk freely about the house, Jack seethed alone in the locked garage unless Matt had him muzzled and out front on a leash. Gram spent long solitary hours in her sitting room upstairs.

"I feel like I'm in a Charlotte Bronte novel," Gram shouted to be heard over the dog's angry barking while she and Matt sat through a 30-minute infomercial for a CD collection of the best Country music, Matt, too far in the bag to flip to another channel.

The next day, Matt had gone out for more vodka and bread. On his return from the store, as the car nosed up to the garage door, Matt clicked off the motor and listened. The silence spelled doom—Jack was not in the garage.

Matt left the car in the driveway and let himself into the garage by a side door.

The interior door of the garage that led into the little entryway between laundry room and kitchen was ajar. Matt paused on the threshold, pressing the sack of booze and bread to his pounding

chest. The big clock in the family room kept its beat and another, faster ticking sound reached him from the kitchen. He pushed the door open wider and stepped through.

Jack paused in his staccato licking of the pooled blood—a gruesome arch hugging Gram’s downturned head. He gave Matt a bland look before returning to his meal.

There came a procession of visitors: first, the police with their creaking leather belts weighed down by guns; then, the coroner, a man who smelled of cologne and wore a black suit. Finally, an hour after the others were gone and he’d watched the funeral director’s van inch down the road and up to the highway, The Humane Society man showed up with a warrant to take Jack into custody.

But by the time he’d arrived, Matt was standing over a mound of freshly turned soil, leaning on a shovel with one hand, pressing the back of the other hand into his sweat-stained forehead.

“Done,” he told the driver, who waved and headed out.

Jack, clenching a lone bottle of nail polish remover between fanged incisors, crept into view and loped up to Matt, who grabbed the chemical and tossed it into the woods. His heart leaden with a new grief, Matt stared at the dirt-covered cache of left-behind underwear and toiletries.

Ten years on, from the gleaming window of his pop-up, Matt gazed at Jack, who reclined beneath the setting sun’s golden mantle. Jack, his gray-lashed flanks glowing in the rich light of the day’s demise, stared across the pitted desert, to the hazy ribbon of ridge rising against a pink-hued sky. Only once did a hint of violence corrupt Matt’s hard-won peace in the small desert town of Claunch, New Mexico: a visiting cousin of the local grocer, a widow in her late sixties

who'd called the numbers at Friday night's bingo, appeared below the steps of Matt's camper bearing a pecan pie early one Saturday morning.

When Matt spotted the woman, her red-glossed mouth twitching in anticipation, his smooth vertebrae, now completely shorn of the unwanted bony bits, ached sharply like the ghostly leg pain of a double amputee.

"It's the bingo bitch, Jack," he muttered, opening the door a crack with his foot, releasing the shepherd, who bared his teeth and crept down the camper's steps toward the startled lady until she slowly backed up and turned, darting to her car.

As the motor roared to life, Matt's pain dissolved. Jack ambled up the steps and swished through the door, pushing it all the way open to invite a sunny morning vista inside. He nosed Matt's thigh, his brown eyes cast upward with the coyness of a debutante. Matt embraced the gentle animal with both arms and buried his face deep into the untroubled fur of the canine's graceful neck.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Deconstruction as it relates to literary criticism has fascinated me since graduate school; writing short fiction with a nod to Foucault and a wink at peddlers of identity politics seemed a natural next step. The stories I'm most proud of are those that challenge middle class assumptions about various intersections of race, class, feminism, and patriarchy. "Hackles" begins with recollections of a rural upbringing and provided an irresistible canvas on which to explore the backstory of those one might label "deplorables." I tried to follow that genesis to honest conclusions. Worn and annotated paperback editions of works by Elizabeth Strout and T. C. Boyle, two quite different writers, are essential for me in the search for new truths.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Nancy Smith Harris has found homes for some of her stories in various refuges, most recently including Calliope, the Pennsylvania Literary*

Journal, and Front Porch Review. *She holds an MA in English Literature from San Francisco State University.*

iDENTITY

By Omar Hussain

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author LARRY LEFKOWITZ writes: I especially like the piece of my brother in humor, Omar Hussain, “iDENTITY” because it carries out to perfection and with originality a common theme; namely, the danger of online addiction. It does so with an unwavering consistency and tone, including especially that of the Big Brother trying to keep the user glued to the websites and other options of computer usage. This, while it monitors the user’s increasing frustration and despair together with the user’s loss of personal integrity and sanity in our super-media age, coupled with the Big Brother’s increasing frustration with the user’s mounting desire to free himself from his cyberspaced black hole.*

The piece takes a humorous satirical look at the intrusions of internet forms and applications in our life and the subordination of the personality to the web. Omar provides humorous gems, of which follow a few, but the whole piece is brilliantly written and shows he, himself, is a “special person” (the user is originally addressed as such by the machine) when it comes to humor writing. As one who does not use social networks and applications, even not Zoom during the time of the corona virus, I applaud Omar’s anti-obsession-with-the-web stance.

Ok, the gems. Amusing and clever put-downs of the user predominate. “Download game apps to connect with your equally bored friends who are also looking to plug into the hyperreal and escape their obvious pains and inner cries toward the universe.” “We noticed that your pathetic profiles on three different social media accounts failed to gain more than eight total likes or shares. This just means you have to post more photos from your recent trip to Italy. Your 117 friends are eager to see the picture of you holding your hand out so it looks like the Leaning Tower of Pisa is cradles in your palm. They will surely laugh and admire how clever you are.” And, at the end, perhaps a result of the Big Brother’s frustration at the user’s absence for a year, a Freudian attack. “You are still unconsciously trying to fill the lack-of-love-voids your father or mother or legal guardian left with any temporary satisfaction you can find with web-based interactions.”

Thumb-up symbol here.

iDENTITY
by Omar Hussain

<activate user_dialogue>

<run = open code plain speak interface>

Hello, you! Hello, special person!

Please feel free to surf the web and check your email every fifteen to thirty seconds. Use your index finger to repeatedly tap the small, perfectly intriguing icons of your favorite websites over and over again, hoping for updated content at absurd times of the day. Download game apps to connect with your equally bored friends who are also looking to plug into the hyperreal and escape their obvious pains and inner cries toward the universe.

Do this, special person. Do this again. And again.

<initiate “euphoria”>

<let Condescending Voice = “New Favorite Friend”>

Good morning, you! Welcome to another day on your vital device!

Thank you for using our alarm settings. Have you checked your text messages? Surely someone sent you a note while you were sleeping.

Did you just go to the bathroom?

Make sure to always bring me along with you. This will help in avoiding your freshest fears for the day and will instead lubricate your mind with tone-deafness and self-importance for another dozen hours or so!

But seriously, did anyone text you?

<initiate “anxiety”>

<var listen mode = on>

Hello, suddenly frustrated human!

We have noticed that you have been using our web browser to check your social media accounts. Please bypass the web browsing function and download the appropriate social media

apps. This will help us capture your every movement and convert that data for endless profits. Ignore the weird sponsored ads that reflect the last thing you said out loud. Only a coincidence.

<default-addiction-protocols>

Is everything okay? We noticed that your pathetic profiles on three different social media accounts failed to gain more than eight total likes or shares. This just means you have to post more photos from your recent trip to Italy. No, really. Your 117 friends are eager to see the picture of you holding your hand out so it looks like the Leaning Tower of Pisa is cradled in your palm. They will surely laugh and admire how clever you are.

Also, have you checked your text messages? Someone should love you by now and if they don't isn't that an awful thing? And aren't you ashamed of what you have become in life? And is it not your entire fault that everything you've ever wanted hasn't come to fruition? Look at all your friends and how successful they are and then look at yourself. Shame.

Notification: Kindly update your apps.

<function {loneliness}>

Good evening, friend!

Our biometric monitoring ability indicates that you now only stare at this device's screen for approximately 8.25 hours out of the day. This is a horrible decrease from the 10.5 hours we tracked last month. Is this because you still haven't received a text from anyone of importance? In this scenario, we recommend switching the contact info for your mother with the person you most desire. Ignore the maternal notes that this desired person now sends. Please do this and see if it rids you of your horrible depression.

Still want to communicate but have nobody to do it with? Have no worries, friend. Please open up our Notes app and talk to yourself.

<execute “identity”>

<let new subconscious = me>

<return (prefix: I Am Control)>

It’s been almost a whole year, Friend!

Do you know what this means? Of course you don’t. You’re still unconsciously trying to fill the lack-of-love-voids your father or mother or legal guardian left with any temporary satisfaction you can find with web-based interactions.

But we know what this means. This means that we know you better than you know yourself. Rest easy, friend. We will treat your identity with care and attention.

</Simulacra>

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *This piece was inspired by the escalating tension brought on by technology, its increasingly invasive nature on our lives, and our willingness to hand over the last remnants of privacy to the people behind all of our gadgets.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: *Omar Hussain is a writer from the San Francisco Bay Area, transplanted to Ann Arbor, Michigan. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Ellipsis Zine, Spelk, Dream Noir, the Drabble, the Potato Soup Journal and (mac)ro(mic), among others. Omar's beta-test novel, The Outlandish and the Ego, debuted in late 2017. It received some praise, remarkably.*

EDITOR’S BIO: *Larry Lefkowitz has had published approximately 140 stories, as well as poetry and humor. His literary novel, "The Novel, Kunzman, the Novel!" is available as an e-book and in print from Lulu.com. and other distributors. His story collection, "Enigmatic Tales" published by Fomite Press is available from Amazon, Barnes & Noble. His story **Bloom in Bloom** appears in this issue (fiction).*

POSTMORTEN CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

By Turner Odorizzi

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A small time dealer, bruised and broken from his experience in the drug trade, embarks on an erratic road trip across the Texas burn that is both odyssey and pilgrimage. His sometime companion is as much his dilemma as his voice of conscience. Saturating emotional tonalities and a world fragmenting into a psycho-luminescent past and present becomes the dreamscape of delusion. The prose is full of spit, the dialogue glimmers like volcanic glass out of the mouths of ruined lives and the ending will bore a hole in your stomach. Sometimes we get lucky. Turner submitted a story that was snatched from under us by a competing publisher (drat!) and we liked it so much we asked for another—which he generously sent. And this one, IOHO a superior work of fiction, blew us away! It’s hard to single out excellences when you’re wading through a sea of superlatives. No two talents are alike and every writer is different, but great writing, is immediately recognizable. It’s what we all strive for but few of us achieve. Five stars. Quote: We were behind a diner, some little place in Lubbock with SUVs and massive, hulking trucks in the parking lot, waiting on a dealer who had flaked twice already. Collin was tapping his feet and I, not wanting to start something, glanced over to get him to stop. His eyes were contracted, like the eagle closing his wings to chest in a steep dive towards the water. He continued to tap his feet, so I gave up. A car cloaked in a dingy grey pulled up, handed off a bag, and then twenty minutes later we were on the couch, chopping up rocky particulate into powder, preparing said powder into an infantry of lines. Spartan hoplites in proper phalanx form.*

It’s been two days since digging the grave and fleeing that throng of trees. Collin comes back to me as I drive, lonely along the highways driving throughout Lubbock, forcing me to extricate myself to somewhere clearer. Occasionally, I spy him standing beside signs telling me how far until the next city, but more often I hear him inside of the music. He permeates the speakers.

He used to stare out of the window while the music drifted, always like there was some other, better place he needed to be. He was so quiet in those moments the air became morphologic sickness, every molecule feeling more and more misanthropic as we drove. I don’t know if he knew that we were hitched to Death’s galloping horse.

The road and lines in front of me transform themselves into corpses. The radio so hollow it's eating some of the matter in the car. I switch it off.

The first town I stop in is Roswell, fairly close to the Texas border and my first introduction to the New Mexico landscape. It's no different from the adjacent part of Texas (it has the same waving beige-green grass), but it feels different. People in Roswell have a claim to fame through some supposed alien crash, and every time I've been before I was just passing through with my parents. But this time, I'm racked with how simple it is to accommodate aliens. I could even make a brief detour to the crash site to see if there any willing beams waiting to extract someone.

I could use the break.

I can sense hunger and that, by my estimation, these are not people I could stay and ruminate with for long. But they'll do for now. I choose the first restaurant that I come to, a droopy diner with a big, homey sign up top, park on its side, closest to the building, and swivel my head to make sure they hadn't caught up to me yet. No sign.

"Do you serve beer?"

The waitress is off guard and just stares back at me with a tilted catch of her teeth. She works hard to get behind my eyes and see what kind of alien I am, sifting through a number of reasons. She's digging the way they all do in small places.

"It's only 11:30, hon. Are you sure?"

"If I wasn't sure then I wouldn't have asked. Please just give me the cheapest beer you have."

She nods, takes the rest of my order, and then brings me the coffee, water, and beer that I ordered. I see her whispering something into her coworker's ear over by the kitchen, cutting short when her eyes find me. A slow smile after, broken.

I notice, after burning my tongue on the coffee, there's a paper hanging lazily on the precipice of the booth, a big coffee stain over the front page, but I could still make out Dallas Morning News toward the top. They mention Collin as "Texas 20 year-old Found Dead and Buried in the Woods" on the third page, but nothing about me anywhere. They're hiding something, and they just don't want to tell the public.

Escape velocity is important now.

The waitress put me in the front corner of the place, which I like, and had leaves me alone long enough to doubt myself and shred the paper before stuffing it carefully into my pockets. She doesn't notice my hands or ask me about it, but instead asks me about food.

"Can I get you anything to eat? We've got a chicken fried steak on special today, mashed potatoes and green beans on the side. In my opinion, it's the best damn thing on the menu."

She chuckles.

"I'll just have scrambled eggs. I don't eat red meat."

Her smile grows again, more plastic.

She scoops up the menu, "You might be in the wrong part of the country then, hon." She looks over her shoulder twice as she walks away; I think she winks on the second turn, but that may just be the diner playing its movie in my head.

I quietly sip the coffee, water, and beer, all three equally bitter on the tongue. Collin hated coffee. He loved red meat.

We were behind a diner, some little place in Lubbock with SUVs and massive, hulking trucks in the parking lot, waiting on a dealer who had flaked twice already. Collin was tapping his feet and I, not wanting to start something, glanced over to get him to stop. His eyes were contracted, like the eagle closing his wings to chest in a steep dive towards the water. He continued to tap his feet, so I gave up. A car cloaked in a dingy grey pulled up, handed off a bag, and then twenty minutes later we were on the couch, chopping up rocky particulate into powder, preparing said powder into an infantry of lines. Spartan hoplites in proper phalanx form.

“Hand me that twenty-dollar bill; I don’t want to use a five.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to argue with you, I’ve waited all day for this coke and I don’t want to fucking argue.”

I handed him the twenty and, like an illusion, the lines vanished. He fell back to the couch, smiling for the first time in something like forty hours, sniffing harder every few seconds. We looked at each other for a little bit, breaking silence with a stronger silence and bridging gaps with cocaine.

He frowned, “Why do you look so scared?”

The sky is fine and the wind mild as I step out of the little cafe. I'm sure I saw an eagle, though the two little girls standing on either side of their grandpa shout about flying saucers. He laughs, explains to them that God made humans, and only humans. They seem to take him at his word, because they look up at him and grin.

As I pat myself down to find my cigarettes and the lighter, I formulate the next stage of my flight from the law. I could make a fast break towards Colorado and the mountains or a beeline to the coast and Californian sun.

But then, like it was fated, a car cloaked in a familiar dingy gray passed at a relatively low speed for an empty road. Oh, what fucking luck. Good fortune is ripe here.

I'm sure that it's the same car I had met with Collin. The same peddler's car, the same peddler who sold him the fatal bag.

My car's quicker, and he doesn't seem to notice that I'm following him, even as I hit a few of the same exits and pull the same routine of changing speed.

Hmm.

He doesn't drive like a drug dealer. New Mexico's slack speed limits help. Within half an hour, I'm in hot pursuit, hopefully towards clean, American vengeance. Collin's voice tramps around my head telling me "Do it, do it. Kill the fucker!" I step harder on the gas, coming within the buffer zone of about two feet, right up on the bumper. Suddenly, I brake and swerve as his tire explodes; the black shreds throwing back like fingers outstretched from a grave. Most of them missed, but one of the largest, longest smashes one of my headlights.

The commotion threw my cigarette down to the floor, next to the pedals; It slowly burns the plastic piece in front of them.

Collin was never one to hide himself or his problem. Every time he was driving, his eyes narrowed, and, like he took it as a challenge, he sped up to meet another car and lingered long enough for me to clumsily grab the wheel. He then proceeded to take a large bump of coke as they looked at him like some hyena. He was a hyena in the car.

“Good god, you see that guy? He was trying to lecture me through the glass.”

I met eyes with the man. An older guy. His brows were crunched eyes pleading, even in the glare between us. He looked, to me, like he was concerned. Collin lapped at the window and threw as much of his bag that he could manage up onto it. He was a spectacle and he was central to the experience. The car was his pack, and, with it, he was spreading across the Texas plains.

The old man broke right then. He must have seen the two tires rolling towards us looking Machiavellian before we could even be bothered. He must have anticipated the fact that there was something very tense about the air at that moment and that a profound dread had caged us in. The left tire clipped the front headlight and left it fractured, but still functioning. The right hit dead on with the steering column, denting the hood like a crater. Six inches of the black rubber had broken the shield wall of the glass; Collin’s nose was broken, but only slightly.

“Goddamnit. I paid forty fucking dollars for a broken nose.”

I watch through the rear view mirror as an older woman, probably sixty or so, slumps in awe near the back tire.

Had I chased some kind of ghost simply because a dead man demanded it of me?

Maybe the drugs weren't only his problem but mine too. Maybe it was possible for a thought-osmosis to occur in which I started to imbibe the paranoia and frantic neediness. I run my hands over my face a few times before deciding to continue on. My sureness split, my hands shaking, I'm in desperate need of the Sunday paper.

As it turns out, I'm on my way back to Texas. His voice fills the car quick as I pass the café from earlier, growing virulently until his hazy projection materializes in the passenger seat.

“So it wasn't him, big deal.”

“Yeah, well, that's easy for you to say. You get to be dead, and I have to deal with this shit.”

“Not my choice, friend. Don't you want to just leave all this shit though? We always wanted to drive to the coast and live there. I feel like you might really be limiting yourself because of your dead friend. You have options, you know.”

Growing bigger as I come toward it, there's a sign detailing the friendliness of New Mexico.

According to this sign, New Mexico is the Land of Enchantment. I don't need enchanting but do need bigger, and everything is bigger in Texas. It's the unofficial state motto and mentality.

The headlines are bigger.

“We both know that you didn't kill me, bud.”

“Fuck off.”

The welcome sign for Texas finally pops up.

Collin's gone when I look over.

As soon as I see the first diner on the outskirts, my hands break into a fit, moving without themselves or without my control. I need another drink if I'm going to keep myself propped up. I haven't come within inches of sleep in somewhere over 35 hours, and there's a peril that places its hooks deep into your eyes. It's a tigress who can't seem to mate, yet can't say no. It's a blank stare that, instead of being snapped to focus, continues, parallel to reality, ad infinitum.

The hostess at the restaurant bubbles at me with a similar demeanor to that of the lunchtime waitress. Different state, but the same calculated smile. She forces a frown out of me.

"Is it just y'all?"

Did she just address me as if there were two of us standing there? I look around; she's confused. Then I sort of back away, fearful that it's some kind of trap or something.

"Did you just say y'all?"

"No, hon. I asked if it was just you and then you went all loopy on me."

"Oh, okay," I'm not convinced in the slightest. "Can I have that table over there, in the corner?"

"Just y'all?"

"Just us"

Collin responded and smirked, receiving one back. He asked for the corner booth and she led us there, a slight hesitation in her arms as she laid out the menus. She looked back to Collin.

“Let me know when you’re ready.”

She walked away in triumph and Collin made sure to lean back and spread his arms over the whole booth. The diner where we found ourselves was dimly lit, like most Texas diners, and smelled fried. We sat there and stared at the menus for a few minutes before saying anything else.

Collin never looked at a menu that long. As I followed his eyes, I could see there was something hindering him. There was a resolute wall that constructed itself there, train of thought halting. He blinked too much and grew a confused, unfunny smirk on his face.

We ate, left the place, and then made the choice to keep driving even though it was completely dark now. We had agreed on making it that night, no matter what time it was.

I stood against my door with a cigarette and feeling full, complete, while Collin was rifling through the glovebox, hoping to find the bag he had stashed there a few miles back when he shouted at me that he could *smell* the cops.

After finding the bag, he poked his head up and swiveled around to look for said cops. He didn’t take any from the bag and continued to banter with himself. He never talked to himself.

Finally, he turned to me.

“Let’s go out to the cabin. Lee said he would meet me there and we can’t really go home anyway.”

“I know, we already agreed we would keep going. Are you okay? You seem...manic all of a sudden.”

He snarled as he replied, “I am FINE. Do you have to ask every five hundred feet? Jesus fucking Christ, I told you before that I was fine, and I’m telling you again. I’m fine. Just get in the car now, I think I saw some suits outside before we went in to eat.”

I hopped into the passenger’s seat. There weren’t any cars in the lot except for a beat up Ford truck and a red Pontiac Sunfire that seemed to have recently been pulled from mud. There weren’t any other cars or people, and I began to feel like we were heading towards something morbid or strange. When the chips are down, dastardly feelings infect the blood supply like an abscess tooth, and they shoot you in the foot before you can even see the gun.

The car started fine, but chugged as it sat near idling, like it was drained of willpower. The blackness that took over the whole window was matter-less, smooth and, as I rolled it down, nothing but silence to be heard from every direction.

“Didn’t Lee say this is where junkies go to kill themselves?”

“No, I don’t think so. At least not all of them.”

The waitress brought me a water and a coffee, but scoffs when I ask about beer, saying they only have Lone Star and Coors Light. She backs away when I almost snap; I was clearly shaking in the hands. I slump into the corner and throw my hands over each side of the thing, feeling very close to something. There’s a newspaper on the table that I didn’t notice at first. This one’s out of Austin. The front page is clean of coffee, but surreptitiously spread fear

through me, becoming my entire nervous system as I look at a smiling portrait of Collin. This is *not* a real picture of him. No mention of a killer anywhere. I can't help but think there's a massive conspiracy at play, and that I'm stranded at the center of its web. Over and over again I scribble notes in the margins decrying the cops and the drugs, and slowly my scrawl begins to look more posed.

"You always did have some killer handwriting."

He seems bigger than when he was drug-slumped in the passenger seat, also happier without black pillows underneath his eyes.

"Do you think they will try to say I had something to do with it? You put it up your nose, so I don't feel like taking the fall for that. I'm not a goddamn killer, Collin."

"Of course not. Believe me, I'm aware of the fact that I made my own bed. I don't think they would have half a mind to question you, honestly."

"Either way, they're coming. Do you see that white SUV out there?"

He pauses, calmly searching the lot before locking onto what I had seen. His head goes back down, neck stiffens.

"I see it."

"They're already here."

The waitress peers over the counter, craning her neck at buzzwords like 'killer', small town intrigue and gossip painted over her. She sees that I'm *seemingly* talking to myself and makes her way to what I assume is the back office, her phone clutched tight as she shuffles. Collin and I

make her for it, waddling like she's fleeing something. My vision bores down into a tunnel.

She's a rat; I'm marked.

"You better get her before she makes that call. Wouldn't this be a horrible place to get arrested?"

I make a run for the back, tripping over myself but steadying and running firm through the hallway, confused when I reach its end. No phone or waitress. To my left, there's an office. Somebody hums inside. Papers shuffle, and I hear the click of a landline phone, the kind that nobody uses anymore.

When I kick in the door, the waitress spins around and shouts once before I can slam it shut. She's not alone. The man at the computer isn't scared, but his eyes look down before he rises.

"I don't know what you just told him, but I can't let you call the police. I...I didn't do anything; I didn't kill him; he did that himself, so I ran, which I shouldn't have, but I did." I pull my knife from my boot; it wobbles in my hands, and I wave it at them like a cornered animal. The knife isn't mine anymore.

The old man speaks first: "Son, I don't think you know what you're doing. You're from Texas, aren't you?"

"Yeah...yes sir. Born and raised in Lubbock."

"Then you know that, like most Texans, I have a pistol strapped to my side here," he motions toward the hulking mass on his hip, "and I'm in no way afraid to use it. Please, just put that thing down, boy." I'm done. Whatever resolve that props me up is not mine, and I am stuck pondering death in a diner. But then, everything else in the room comes back into vision, and I'm no longer stuck looking down a tunnel.

I'm staring at two people who have that aforementioned American vengeance about them.

Obliteration. No sense of the knife or myself.

"I'll put it down when I know you aren't going to try and put me in jail for something I didn't do!"

Collin now rests himself with both palms flat on the desk, taking an overview of the situation. He shakes his head at me and laughs, cackling.

"You aren't going to let this redneck shoot you, are you? Holy fuck, you're an idiot. Is this really how you want to die? I guess it's better than going with the suits in the parking lot."

"Shut up! Shut the fuck up! You put me here! You are that bullet, and you're laughing...oh god...you fucking junkie shit!"

"This just makes you look insane."

The older man cocks his head at me, but his tone softens.

"Son, this is the last time I'm gonna ask you. Put it down, or I will shoot you."

In my own blindness, I didn't notice that the man already has the hammer back and ready.

There's a hint of chicken fried steak; my brain runs through some kind of checklist.

Collin, my life, every single shitty thing I've done, that makes up my composition. Hundreds of bags of blow. Two beers in two diners, one with and one without Collin. Chasing an old woman like a raging devil down the New Mexico highway.

I almost capitulate, but hit a wall when, again, I see Collin perched over the man's holster-side.

Sullen now, no hope in the awkward frown that holds his face together. Above the frown, he

raises a key to his nose and falls back, dragging cords and family pictures away from the desk as his body slumps into a kidney-shaped miasma.

The old man's wrinkled forehead grows lower and lower, ready for quick movement. He's poised; I'm shaking and faltering, my vision going in and out while Collin flashes dim and then bright at the far corners of my mind. I focus on the man's face and force the knife back down into my boot.

"Please. Please just fucking shoot me."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story was to be an exploration of what I thought my friendships were like when drugs were involved. I wanted to show what loss can become when it morphs into paranoia or fear, and with the cultural conversation we are having about drugs and drug-related deaths, I felt these were especially important things to try and make sense of. You can feel the void Collin has created in the narrator, especially in the scenes without him, and I thought it was important to emphasize that in a story of loss and drugs. In terms of influences, I would attribute those to the Gonzo style of Hunter S. Thompson, Ernest Hemingway, Donna Tartt, and Jorge Luis Borges.*

BIO: *Turner Odorizzi is a writer from Austin, TX who graduated from the University of Texas at Austin English and Creative Writing programs. He is as of yet unpublished, but has been writing for a number of years now. In addition to graduating from UT, he worked as an Intern for the managing editor of Bat City Review, UT's main literary journal.*

A REAL GUY

By J. C. Smolen

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author ZACHARY HAY writes: “A Real Guy” reads like it came from a few generations ago when plots were tight, words meant everything, girls were worth dying for and heroes—even the ugliest and unlikeliest—saved lives. J.C. Smolen’s story about a one-armed, legless beggar finding redemption is a rare breed these days: exceptionally masculine while heartbreakingly vulnerable. Its prose cuts deep enough to take your arm off, its pacing could conduct symphonies and the characters take on more flesh and blood in 3,000 words than some authors can muster in a career. Quote: The hand at the end of El Brazo could push just one of the little silver buttons and Peen would drop and splat the hard ground like a little, mal-formed hatchling; a reject. That was Peen – a purposeless scrap, a reject. In his hopelessness and helplessness, Peen felt himself choke and start to sob and shake. Peen just hung there up-side-down like a quivering bat, and suddenly he knew Fidelio’s pain, while his miserable tears drained down through his eye brows and into his hair. Why do I like this story? Because Smolen’s grit and humor may save the American short story, or at least keep its blood flowing another day. Five stars.*

A Real Guy

No cell phone, no dog, no girlfriend, no smokes, no energy drink, no sign, no legs, no left arm, Peen picks the spots where nobody else works it. He works the twenty-lane, impossible intersections where the traffic roars and semis slam and the dust devils, where there’s no protection, not even any shade, but for Peen – humming her song, humming “Norma Jean. That’s my love” - an hour tied to his skate board a day and he’s done. Some days he stuffs over a hundred bucks into his money belt.

Here's a flame-yellow pick-up truck sparkling alone in the morning sun at Peen's light. By himself in the cab, big diesel looks over at Peen, deciding. No place to pull over, the truck powers its curb-sides right up on the sidewalk. A smiling movie-hero driver in filthy work clothes jumps down with something in his hand, bounds toward Peen. Peen rolls his way. Peen reaches for the tenner the huge, clean hand offers him. With the bill, Peen starts to spin away back to his spot, but the towering dude is grinning white teeth, blabbing something that doesn't make sense - something that Peen barely hears as he spins away back toward his money spot. The blindingly yellow truck bounces back down onto the road, roars off.

Back when he was even littler, Peen used to wonder what it feels like to step on the gas and drive in a car chase - to be a hero. But a Dad now, no return address, Peen mails regular money orders away home to her - if he doesn't get robbed on his way to the store or back to this week's RV park. What's left of Peen weighs just a hundred and two pounds. Yes. Sometimes he does. He gets robbed - unless El Brazo gets them first.

Today, like out of an ATM, Peen gets ninety-eight bucks in forty-eight minutes. He might just bag it for the day. Besides, Peen's not used to people looking at him - I mean, not right in his eyes anyhow. Usually, the drivers watching their traffic light, they're reaching public tender blind across to Peen through their passenger side window. They don't want to nakedly look at him, so they don't. But that's where the diesel-powered hero looked - standing right next to him - right in his eyes. Shook Peen up.

Ninety-eight bucks in forty-eight minutes. Peen works the corners bare-headed. In his best pan-handle trim, sun burn lightens his blonde hair and peels his cheeks. He's pretty sure he looks more pitifully cute that way. Today, he decides to just bag it. Besides, kitty-corner across the intersection, coupla hoodie locals are vultching on him.

When he was four and a half, in a hay field down near Bakersfield, a combine pruned him – pruned little Peen. Back before that, a little brown Madre begged her husband Rancilio to give puny Peen tortillas – and after her tears – to take Peen in, then buy him his last little pair of shoes. Peen was nothing but a homeless toe-head runt orphan, but he and Fidelio grew up together.

Peen was little. Cut way back to stumps now, he would always be little – and a target.

So Peen watches the two leggy hoodies walk behind a law office parking lot hedge, then disappear as they duck out of sight. He can feel them watching him through the hedge.

Town-to-town, Peen lives in his brother Fidelio's RV – in exchange for Peen's disability check. Fidelio still eats out his six-years-ago broken heart. Fidelio had a big heart, but since Lupita broke it, he chews it in front of the TV – everyday. Fidelio has a sixty-six inch waist now and fingers like sausages. Peen doesn't tell Fidelio about the cash he hustles.

Peen feels vulnerable today. He figures, from some place hidden, the hoodies've been watching him all week, ever since he and Fidelio rolled into town, like the hoodies know now how much Peen's got on him, like they're guessing how it's money-order day. It's as if, clear kitty-corner across that twenty-lane intersection, Peen can actually hear the sniffing of those hoodies, hear it right through the traffic roar and exhaust - sniffing out blood. Ever since, five years ago, he had to look at great big knives and give up his cash or his blood, Peen has been feeling his ability to hear the blood-sniffing grow in him. He can tell it's growing by how his fear and his anger are growing – anger that somebody might try to stop him from sending her money – fear of what might become of his son if the money stops. She told Peen she was sorry and he knew she meant it, but right after Peen got her pregnant, Norma Jean started twining her legs with Cecil's.

But that was a long, long time ago. Today, Peen's gotta dodge the hoodies. When you use the same arm and hand for everything, you don't take the long way there and you don't dink around. So he decides he has to make his move. When he gets the light and skates across the highway, in his peripheral vision, he can see the hoodies've moved out from behind their hedge, but there're still five lanes of forty-five-mile-an-hour traffic between Peen and the hoodies' law office parking lot. He sees one of the hoodies banging the crosswalk button impatiently. It's maybe six blocks to the Prairie Mart. Peen takes off.

Sticking to the right-hand side of the new sidewalk, Peen grabs the clean, concrete edge, and his arm – El Brazo – rapid-fires in fast, powerful yanks that he knows can take him up to maybe fifteen miles an hour – fast as a lotta people can run. But that's what they're doing – the hoodies are running. He can hear them now behind him – their feet thudding the pavement, gaining on him. He was right – about the sniffing. He feels afraid and in his mind, he whips El Brazo just like you would a sled dog, and El Brazo's super-power makes Peen's skate board lunge along the sidewalk in big leaps, then into a slight down-grade.

Peen hasn't been to this Prairie Mart before. He only hopes they sell money orders. He just thinks he knows where the store is - what the basic lay of the land is – from back when he and broken-hearted Fidelio first drove up the winding, steep grade into town. At first, from the freeway, they spotted the big Prairie Mart sign up on top of its hundred-foot, white pole. Peen knows the town is built way up on a mesa, the freeway running far below on the plain, along the western base of the plateau. That's all he knows. But when he sees up ahead the sidewalk come to an end and the road curve left and out of sight and that there are no houses or businesses in the curve, with a stab, he realizes he screwed up. He realizes the hoodies are going to try to get Norma Jean's money soon.

Under his sweat shirt, when he's skating, Peen always wears a heavy belt around his waist with two nylon lanyards coming off it – one clipped at his right hip and leading towards the front of his board, another the reverse. His leg stumps grip the board's rails and his nuts and lizard in their heavy leather pouch dangle through a custom slot.

The hoodies are very close now; Peen hears them laugh. El Brazo ignites. Peen rockets off the end of the sidewalk. Accelerating, his board's trucks slam onto the street. When he hits, he feels his board flex and the pavement flying under him graze his nuts. Peen is isolated in the curve. He hears one of the hoodies yell, "Get him!" and there's the loud slap, slap, slap of sprinting feet and just for an instant, fingers snatch at his shoulder and he feels hot breath, right down his neck. But on Peen's left, a hidden street opening zooms into view. Jamming the board's left rail down hard, El Brazo yanks up on the right. The perfection of El Brazo's carve into the turn takes Peen's breath away. El Brazo rides again! The tension of the turn feels beautiful, organic as behind him, somebody thuds the pavement and tumbles and swears in pain.

The narrow road dives. The speed is incredible. Peen hears the rush of the air past his ears, his eyes watering as the accelerating wind hits his face. The hoodies' running feet are gone, but so is Peen. Just at the sublime instant when all the tension in the smoking trucks of Peen's board releases, just when Peen feels his board go out of control, and he becomes bug-eye terrified by his velocity, the narrow road ski-ramps Peen sickeningly into space. Without Peen, the road curves suddenly sharp right.

Peen airborne, he can't breathe. His awed feeling of flying very high over the planet darts intensely. A glistening, floating mylar balloon in the shape of a blood-red, lost valentine shoots by. Peen's terror becomes unimportant. Instead, his mind is filled with Norma Jean – her face, her curls, the profound depth of her dark eyes and their rapture and her words and that fact that

she didn't laugh when he told her Fidelio said once that, below the belly button, naked Peen looked the way a machinist wouldpeen the sheared end of a steel rod. He hasn't talked to Norma Jean in eight years and even the way he learned he has a son was a grapevine kina thing, but Peen loves her and doubts she loves Cecil. It wasn't just kinky – what Peen and Norma Jean had. A leafy tree top rushes at Peen, slaps him across his face. El Brazo's elbow throws up over his eyes. Like, for the second time in his life, getting harvested and scrambled by a huge machine, Peen feels himself bounce and tumble branch to branch as he falls a long time.

* * *

Watching a little brown and orange bird peck along a pipe-stem branch a couple of feet away, Peen realizes he's awake and his eyes are open and he's hanging from his skate board which has this five-foot-long, splintered-off vertical tree trunk about thick as a baseball bat handle threaded between his board and his bare belly. There should be, but there isn't much pain. In the distance, Peen can hear the rush of the freeway far below on the plain. It occurs to Peen he's a human button being sewn onto the great memorial quilt in the sky – that he'll die right where he is, and with him, his son's chances. Panicking, Peen clutches for his money belt, for her money. But it's gone! - just like his legs and his left arm.

Very close, Peen hears a raven's hollow, echoing caw. He twists and looks toward the sound. Big as seagulls, a pair of birds are watching him, their armor-like black feathers shining in the sun. They're so close, he can see their glittering eyes blink with interest. It's Spring. They'll have merciless fledglings to feed. Where he's dangling, nobody will see what happens to Peen. Flat nobody.

But what's new? Nobody ever did see him – except, squirmingly, the yellow truck hero. Peen didn't much appreciate it - getting nailed that way – as if that great, vital, bounding giant with

two arms and two long legs and two watching grey eyes could total Peen's hidden pennies at a glance.

But shit! He did. He looked directly in Peen's eyes and he smiled and said, "You look like a real guy!" A real guy. What the hell? Peen was incomplete and he knew it. How could anybody call him a guy? Now that he thought about it, the hero kina bowed and sorta saluted to Peen, too. But Peen was nothing but a scrap. He knew that. Norma Jean knew that. A scrap. Love at first sight or not, she wanted more and Peen couldn't blame her.

Their hugely-beaked heads bobbing in excited agreement, the branches they are standing on bending, both black birds in a strange, rattling chatter, estimate Peen. It's creepy how, no question, they're predicting Peen's death.

Peen could tell he was still high in the trees - twenty, thirty lethal feet up over the steep ground. At the board ends of the lanyards on his waist belt - the only things that held him to his board - dangled him from the sky - were two push-button quick-release shackles. The hand at the end of El Brazo could push just one of the little silver buttons and Peen would drop and splat the hard ground like a little, mal-formed hatchling; a reject. That was Peen - a purposeless scrap, a reject. In his hopelessness and helplessness, Peen felt himself choke and start to sob and shake. Peen just hung there up-side-down like a quivering bat, and suddenly he knew Fidelio's pain, while his miserable tears drained down through his eye brows and into his hair.

That's when, below him, he heard a man's voice - ugly. He heard it clear. No question what the man's voice said from straight push-button down under Peen. The voice threatened, "Go ahead. Just open your mouth. I'll cut your tits off." Peen heard, too, the other part - the terrified whimpering - and her begging, "Oh, please - no."

The bind Peen was in got worse. The main reason Peen knew the man's voice was plumb-bob straight below him was he could see them straight down through an opening in the big leaves – the back of the man's shoulders and his head – and under him, past the back of his neck – a girl's face. With a shock, Peen realized she was looking up at him – at only Peen – appealing right into the private despair of Peen's eyes – invading just like the hero did, right into Peen's eyes, right through into Peen's heart where she had no damn business. Peen closed his eyes. He shut her out. Her face reminded him of Norma Jean's – that first early summer glimpse of each other at the skate park. Norma Jean saw only the hard cordage of bare El Brazo clinging to the top of that half-pipe and above El Brazo, Peen's chiseled face and Peen never forgot that moment. He didn't know how he knew. He just knew Norma Jean was disarmed in that glance – that she was right there in that instant in love with Peen. When El Brazo swung Peen's skateboard over the top and Peen shredded down in a perfect carve and stopped in front of Norma Jean, she saw what little there was of Peen to see, but she stayed in the same mood. Peen had something Norma Jean wanted. Peen never really knew what it was, but he gave it.

Peen opened his eyes. This time, Peen knew exactly what it was, so he just gave it. His life wasn't all that much. It was going to be easy to die for a girl. With the tip of the thumb of the hand at the end of El Brazo, Peen pushed a shackle release button. The shackled didn't jam. It released perfectly. Hard, he twisted his shoulders. In the fall, Peen and his board and El Brazo rotated in a perfect crooked-grind, and then, just like they were descending into a half-pipe carve, El Brazo gripped the board's right rail and Peen's front board truck hit the man exactly in the back of his neck right at the base of his skull.

* * *

Peen realized he was still alive. It was a startling disappointment. But maybe twenty feet away, Peen saw her sitting figure. She was in part of her underwear in the dirt with her arms hugged up to her bare chest. She was muddy and shivering. But she was waiting – watching Peen – until his eyes opened and he blinked and looked back at her and El Brazo grabbed a bush and pulled him up sitting. Several minutes, she looked fearlessly into Peen’s eyes, then she stood up and started alone down the slope through the brush. She didn’t go far, though, before she stopped and turned and looked back at Peen and while she stood there a long time, Peen held his breath. Finally, she turned again and left.

Peen found his skate board and the man with his motionless head twisted at an odd angle. He took the man’s knife. Amazingly, like at the end of a rainbow, Peen found his money belt, too. Wishing he could tell his broken-hearted brother Fidelio all about it, he let El Brazo start to drag them both back up the hill. But because Peen was never going back, Fidelio would never know. Dragging himself, Peen’s mind was filled with only her ashen face and blue eyes. It was almost the same feeling as that early summer day a long time ago with Norma Jean at the skate park. It was like lightening. He knew. He knew he would never forget it. He didn’t know how he knew. He just did – that the naked girl in all her terror was disarmed by what Peen did, and also something she saw in his face and that she was in love with him, more than Norma Jean ever was, and that she would never forget him - either.

It was pretty good. Through his tears, Peen smiled and turned around and started back down toward the freeway. He decided he would keep the money in his money belt. Just this once. He decided he would find a new store in a new town and buy some new clothes and wash his face. He knew he was pitifully cute and even though they didn’t have shoes or feet in them, he and El Brazo would go anywhere they wanted.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I actually met Peen on the street. I actually powered my curb-sides up on the sidewalk, got out and handed him ten bucks - just for his obviously remarkable huevos! But next I knew, my heart wanted him to be a hero, so I wrote A Real Guy.*

My approach to a story is never issue or theme; it's always bad planning and disorganization. Why would I want to chew clear to the bone of a story when I've already thought through what I think about the person who inspired it, or how it ends?

I want to say I have out-grown all my influences, but I often still feel F. Dostoyevsky's frenetic nervousness happen. Just for the high of it, I listen to Grace Slick's White Rabbit at Woodstock. I can't forget Jim Hawkins cowering from Billy Bones and his rum at the old Admiral Benbow Inn.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Months before he graduated from Seattle's O'Dea High School in 1964, J.C. Smolen found himself Seaman Recruit, U.S. Navy. Joe says, "Yeah. I don't get it yet, but there's an important reason I didn't go over there and get shot. I came back from Japan, and I went to school on the G.I. Bill."*

Joe received the B.A. English from the University of Washington, 1973. After Commencement, he was fairly consistently employable – as Ocean Shipping Owner/Charterer's Boarding Agent, Lumber Company Rail Traffic Manager, Municipal Bus Operator and Bus Training Supervisor.

He has written his own personal U.S. Navy Report(s) of Fitness of an Officer, and Enlisted Evaluations, hundreds of Bus Operator Evaluations, and twenty-five brief, internally-published articles involving practical Bus Operations Policy application. He also wrote Bus Operator training materials.

Since 2015, Joe has been having an over-the-top blast writing half a dozen short fictions and two novels. His work, including his tendency toward the type of blatant exaggeration found in this Bio, is overseen by the Waldport, Oregon writing group "Tuesday".

In 1982, Joe was finally struck by lightning. He says, "What else was I going to do then, but ask her, "Do you think we should get married?" Today, he and Sherrie live on the Oregon Coast in a house they designed and built themselves, with the well known black Standard Poodle Rico Suave.

EDITOR'S BIO: : *Zachary Hay was born in Detroit, MI in 1994. His work has appeared in The Arlington Literary Journal Online, Crab Fat Magazine and The No Extra Words Podcast. His story **The Boy Who Killed No One** was published in Issue 5.*

BLOOM IN BLOOM

By Larry Lefkowitz

WHY WE LIKE IT: *This is probably the most ingenious submission we've received to date. If, after you read it, you haven't a clue to what's going on it means 1) you're not alone—we're not sure we do, either; and 2) the author's literary prestidigitation is off the charts. But you can love something completely without completely understanding it and we love, love, love 'Bloom in Bloom'. This satirical arcane comedic short—jests with a taxonomy developed by the brilliant educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom, in the 1950's. It consists of a hierarchy of models divided into categories like knowledge, application, synthesis, organizing, perception, adapting and so on that deconstruct and codify information clusters in the name of enhanced learning. Bloom's model is a closed system but author Lefkowitz employs it to create a taxonomical app for a poem by Walt Whitman, with Greek literary classifications replacing the English psychological objectives. Very, very funny and very, very smart. Five stars.*

Bloom in Bloom

Harold Bloom, Harvard professor, literary revisionist, synergizes Freud, Gnosticism, and Cabalism in the service of poetic exegesis with respect to the poem, "Song of Myself" (hereinafter "song") by the American pantheist poet, Walt Whitman.

Although Whitman had a low opinion of the Greek classics ("those overpaid accounts") and presumably was less than enamored of the Greek language, Bloom embraces it to elucidate Whitman's song in the form of the following classification:

Sections 1-6 *Clinamen*, irony of presence and absence

7-27 *Tissera*, synecdoche of part for whole

28-30 *Kenosis*, metonymy of emptying out

31-38 *Daemonization*, hyperbole of high and low

39-49 *Akesis*, metaphor of inside vs. outside

(The suspicion grows that the inside or outside formulation of this category and the high and low of the immediately preceding may have epiphanized during viewing of a carefully pitched Gnostic baseball game. Whitman, himself, was a devotee of the game.)

50-52 *Apophrades*, metalepsis reversing early and late

Let us now turn to an application of Bloom's categories – and here I wish to emphasize that the applications are solely my own – my limited Greek having prevented me from reading his book and comprehending his applications. But if Bloom can appropriate from Freud, from Valentinus, and from Moses of Leon, I can appropriate from him. Such emulation, likewise, is entirely complimentary.

Section 2 of song contains the line

"Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?"

This jolted me so much that I jumped clear out of *Clinamen* and found myself wallowing in *Tissera* which, you will recall, is synecdoche of part for whole.

Section 20 contains the line

"Who goes there? Hankering, gross, mystical, nude"

Clearly synecdoche for, yes, Whitman himself. As confirmed by a later line in the same section:

"I wear my hat as I please indoors or out"

Although this sounds suspiciously like *Akesis* (inside vs. outside), it may very well be synecdoche for "I wear my pants, my shirt, etc., indoors or out." Why? Because in being clothed Whitman avoids becoming the hankering, gross, mystical, nude of the previously quoted line.

Section 24 contains the line

"Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son"

"Of Manhattan" is clearly synecdoche for "the Bronx," "Brooklyn," "Queens," and "Staten Island, as well, and the whole ("New York") synecdoche for the kosmos itself (and note the Greek k spelling, antedating Bloom).

This section also contains

"Unscrew the locks from the doors!

Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!"

Synecdoche for "Unscrew the whole damn house!"

Kenosis, metonymy of emptying out, seems to be confirmed by Whitman's line in section 28: "Straining the udder of my heart for its withheld drip."

With regard to *Daemonization*, hyperbole of high and low, we have in section 31 an example of low hyperbole

"In vain the ocean sitting in hollows and the great monsters lying low"

Section 33 contains an example of high hyperbole:

"I skirt Sierras, my palms cover continents" and also "Speeding through space, speeding through heaven and the stars." Bloom is definitely onto something here.

Akesis, metaphor of inside vs. outside is confirmed by section 40

"Flaunt of the sunshine I need not your bask – lie over!"

Definitely an outside metaphor (with syntax perhaps borrowed from the Yiddish), probably for "beach" where Whitman liked to bask between stanzas.

probably for "beach" where Whitman liked to bask between stanzas.

"Every room of the house do I fill with an arm'd force"

An inside metaphor.

So far Bloom is vindicated. But then we come to section 41

"I heard what was said of the universe"

A puzzler, this. The universe is outside metaphor, but *where* did Whitman hear it, sitting on a tree stump (outdoors) or inside his lean-to (indoors). The next line only deepens the mystery

"Heard it and heard it of several thousand years"

I cannot accept this literally and suspect we are back in *Daemonization* in the person of a particularly high hyperbole unless it is *Tisseran* synecdoche for an even larger epoch. One is sorely tempted to throw up one's hands and move on to *Apophrades*, which I did.

Apophrades, you will remember, is reversing early and late.

Section 51

"Do I contradict myself?"

Very well then I contradict myself"

The first line obviously comes in time before the second so that here there would seem to be no reversal. If the lines had read

"Very well then I contradict myself.

Do I contradict myself"

I would subscribe to Bloom's formulation. Alas, I cannot. The same difficulty arises with respect to the line

"I depart in air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun"

I contend Whitman departed before he shook, and not the reverse.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Once I saw the Bloom's categories, my humorous instinct considered them overblown. I couldn't resist taking Whitman's poem and subjecting it to a humorous categorization and*

evaluation according to Bloom's Greek format. The late Professor I admired, but for a humorist anyone and anything (almost) is fair game.

BIO: *Lefkowitz has had published approximately 140 stories, as well as poetry and humor. His litera*

MONOLITH

By Brain Brunson

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Fiction as Reality TV. A roving camera dispassionately documents the lives of workers within a concrete hive. Patterns and personalities being to emerge as the story progresses. Office politics, inter-departmental relationships, personal idiosyncrasies, food preferences, fantasies and individual mindsets are explored in ever increasing detail as the lens sharpens. What amazes is that by the end of the story it's like you're part of the experience. We feel we know the characters on an intimate level because we've all met or worked with people like them. 'Anna Mae doesn't work for the first half hour. Instead, she walks around saying hi to everyone, asking them how their weekend was, how their kids are.'* What astounds is that none of the characters are clichés no matter how close their behaviour (Cdn. sp.) resembles a too common familiarity. The time is the immaculate present and the voice platinum melt—just the right degree of detachment. No trouble to imagine this spinning off into a HBO series along the lines of those deathless classics 'Friends' or 'Sex in the City'. To say we love this guy's writing with something like Platonic lust is saying we're just agape with agape. Quote: 'A young homeless man, oblivious to everyone, sits or stands, sometimes lies, on the side of the building, rotating around it to catch the shade throughout the day.' And, "Well, I was out at the creek prospecting for silver," Keith starts off saying when he supposed to be fixing a monitor. "Silver, not gold, the reason why is that silver has a much better future because all the gold is found. It's all found, none left. So, out on the creek, panning for silver is easier than panning for gold. The reason why is you can see it better. Gold isn't very shiny in nature. Silver is . . ." And lest we forget...

'A sign shows up on the door of the unisex bathroom: Lock door when occupied.

This leads to speculation as to who walked in on whom.

The next day handwritten under the printed message is: Knock before entering.

The day after the sign is moved inside the bathroom.

The day after that it is gone.

No one ever knows who walked in on whom.

Best of the best. Five stars.

Monolith

Concrete, reminiscent of soviet architecture, rises up from the desert floor. Tucked away in a neglected corner of lower downtown, is a tall thin building with narrow slits in the beige façade for windows that don't break the monotony of the slabs built so tight together that it looks like one giant block that wasn't constructed, rather placed on the ground like a queen positioned on a

chess board for checkmate. The building resides on its site indifferent to its surroundings, resolute in its permanence.

The parking garage stretches for two blocks, like a beached aircraft carrier. Two entrances, east and west, funnel the morning traffic to work. The cars flow into the east from two directions, north and south. The northbound traffic backs up making a left hand turn into the garage. Through traffic gets up caught up in this congestion and cars squeeze through on the right. Sympathetic, yet misguided, drivers waiting to turn drift into the oncoming lane to give the traffic behind them room to pass on the right, which clogs up the southbound through traffic. The southbound traffic continuously uses both entrance lanes which causes the congestion in the northbound traffic. There are too many cautious drivers, those who don't zip into that first available lane. Some are too slow with their decision making and get caught right in the middle of the lane, which completely clogs up the southbound traffic. Pedestrians arrive to complete the gridlock.

The west traffic arrives only from the north. The queue is much smoother, though sometimes the cars line up in the left lane, the first available lane, leaving the far right inexplicably unused.

Like a string of pack mules, the commuters wind their way up the levels searching for a spot, hoping to not be on the top uncovered level.

The reserved spaces on the first level remain empty until late in the morning as the rest of the garage fills up. Spaces in prime locations, near the elevators on the second level, are taken well before the masses arrive. The carpool spaces on the first level are only ever half used.

They come in waves and clusters and bits to the entrances.

They, Peter and Sandy and Marty, travel even-file up the stairs to the main entrance and through the doors. They flash badges to pass security, scan badges to gain access to the back entrance, and punch codes to unlock solid metal doors to find their seats in the rows and rows of identical gray cubicles.

In no particular order, they, Phil, Teri, Chuck, get coffee, either from the office pot or the small kiosk on the first floor, they start computers, they gossip and goof around, they gather supplies, they check email, they check regular mail, they check voicemail, they work, they check the internet, they go to the bathroom, they search for food, hoping that someone brought donuts, they store lunches in the refrigerator and hope no one steals them.

The work is at a computer, with a keyboard and mouse, on the bits and bytes stored in mainframes and hard drives. Double clicking, single clicking, an occasional click and drag, typing, ten-keying, a lot of tabbing through fields, finding the blinking cursor, minimizing and maximizing windows, scrolling down, then scrolling back up, then back down, copy paste, print and select, save, repeat

They have various schedules. Flex schedules, Denise, John, Peter, to four-ten schedules, Keith and Sarah. Some have half-hour lunches, others a full hour. Some come in at 6:30 so leave at 3, others are standard 8 to 5.

Phil is notorious for coming in five minutes late, never more than five, almost never less, thus never on time. The 8:05 to 5:00 work schedule became the office joke. Phil has the 8:05 schedule.

The workers traverse a gauntlet of beggars stationed along the street leading up to the building, aggressive angry ones, sad and quiet ones, cheerful grateful ones.

It's truly inexplicable, but Roger sounds like he is vomiting when he greets everyone in the morning by quickly saying 'good morning'.

Karl spends five minutes every morning breaking up the ice in the break room.

Anna Mae doesn't work for the first half hour. Instead she walks around saying hi to everyone, asking them how their weekend was, how their kids are. Management found that it is futile to try to dissuade her from doing this. In fact, HR uses her as an example of how people just work differently and we all should be aware of that.

The single moms are always coming in late or leaving early to deal with their perpetually ill and needy and growing brood.

They, Betsy, Bob, Judy are an unhealthy bunch. Overweight. Sickly. Coughs and sneezes ring throughout the building throughout day. They limp around the office like Frankenstein's Monster. They wear braces on their wrists and orthopedic shoes on their feet. They have bad backs, bad joints, bad circulation.

They wouldn't know each other if not for this place. So many wouldn't even want to know each other. But the job has brought them together. They get invited to weddings. They go out for drinks after work. They date each other. They hang out on weekends and holidays. They go to their funerals. They get married to each other.

Others, Brad, Karl, Rosalie, make it a point not to befriend anyone. Co-workers remind them of work. They sever all ties to this place once they step outside. They need the outside world to remain so.

Dan is a downtrodden man. Nice as can be, but it's like working with Eyore.

The sounds of the office are pervasive: monotonous blaring work phones, the blips and bleeps of computers with the volume turned up, clapping after a quick unit meeting in the hallway to give out an award, the loud cutting edge printer/copier, the various tones and beeps of personal cell phones, the various laughs (cackling, obnoxious guffaws, shrill, snorting, a few pleasant and cute), music to ease the monotony, the power stapler, the time stamp, the voices of the couple

loud workers carrying throughout the office, the not quite synchronized amber alerts blaring out all over the office, the click of high heels on linoleum floors, the crash of somebody dropping phone, the thud of somebody dropping a ream of paper, and the always horribly sung happy birthday.

Bob is the personification of continental drift. Slow, Massive. He clogs up the foot traffic in the narrow aisles.

Maintenance works on the HVAC system.

“I survived an earthquake once,” Keith says, blocking the hallway. “Just missed the bridge collapse. If I hadn’t had that fishbowl in the car I would have been on it. Instead I was only just about to get on it. Had to help out a girl from her car. The thing about earthquakes is . . .”

It is imperative for Brad to find a secluded place to take breaks. Unused conference rooms. Some useless nook leftover from a remodeling. The far corner of the break room. Anything to get away from the work. And co-workers are work

The smokers congregate outside, as close to the doors as they are legally allowed. They are an unattractive gang. Old and wrinkled. Unhealthily thin.

Chuck isn’t always eating, he isn’t even overweight, but he does love office potlucks and birthday parties and is constantly on the prowl for free food. When somebody brings in donuts, Chuck knows before anyone else. Whenever there are leftovers from any lunch meeting Chuck leads the trail to them, inevitably followed by a line of overweight middle-aged women. Chuck will organize a potluck in celebration of any minor or major holiday, Fourth of July and Thanksgiving and Christmas and Cinco de Mayo, but also St. Patrick’s Day and Columbus Day and once, the summer equinox.

Doris forwards stupid ass, purportedly funny, emails to everyone.

Peter, the lonely old eccentric elder statesman, though not because he’s that old rather because he’s just been around for years and years, starts each morning by checking on Esmeralda, an attractive younger woman. He never asks her out. He just talks to her. Though it’s obvious that he is in love with her. He couldn’t ask for anything more. Peter is surely aware of this.

There is a faint squeak emanating from somewhere, a vent, perhaps an overworked computer processor, a dirty roller on a printer. It sounds like the guitar solo from Prince’s ‘Let’s Go Crazy’.

Marty is loud. He talks loud, eats loud, walks loud, sneezes loud, clears his throat loud, and especially laughs loud.

They decorate their cubicles. The walls, the cabinets, the drawers, inside and outside are plastered with photos. The shelves are lined with knick-knacks and doo-dads. The work can hardly fit in. They bring home to work.

Bobbi and Jenny don't get along.

Their animosity is eighty percent misunderstanding that started from over sensitivity and just grew as their distrust and spite created a vicious circle of squabbling, an invidious vortex of incrimination.

The other twenty percent is comprised of their natural bitterness.

To her great annoyance whenever Sarah doesn't feel well and goes home for the day the other women in the office, mostly the soon to be middle-aged, gossip that she might be pregnant.

"There are two things that you can never satisfy everyone in the office with: room temperature and dress code." Mitch ends every meeting, always leaving someone disgruntled, with this caveat.

They have terrible written communication skills

Garrett will just get in these moods where he acts like a total jackass. Not a mean jackass, just a damn obnoxious goof off.

The REPLY ALL feature is used egregiously. Columns of emails stack up in the queue, a chain from what started as a pertinent message devolves into a back and forth mess of needless comments, stupid jokes, and other tomfoolery. A string of 'Thank you' and 'you're welcome' (usually misspelled 'your'). An 'LOL' throw in. Spinning off into some tangent only relevant to two people but shared with dozens other. The notification preview pops up in the lower right corner of the monitor then fades away. The notification icon on the menu bar comes and goes as one useless email is deleted and another one takes its place.

The public has little idea what they do. Just enough to create false expectations of them.

Glenn reverts to baby talk when he goofs around. His voice becomes high-pitched, his grammar regresses to pre-kindergarten levels.

John tells people, "You're not doing your job unless you're harassing your boss."

The fifth floor recommends a rearrangement of the second floor.

The seventh floor reorganizes the third floor departments.

The tenth floor replaces a fourth floor manager.

Bob wanders through the aisles just checking out who's there, who's new, who's doing what. Even through departments he barely knows. He rarely greets anyone, just the people he is already well familiar with. Just looking he is.

"I was a stage hand in a theater in Illinois years ago," Keith says instead of working, "Got to work with Bill Shatner. Real nice guy . . ."

IT reminds everyone to delete old emails and files so as to conserve server space.

Dale is hounded by a woman who expects him to correct a trivial bit of information being published by an outside agency. He says he can't do anything about it because it wasn't their doing. She scoffs and says, "You're passing the buck." He says, "Yes, it's not my job. We don't have the authority, and thus don't have the resources to do anything about it."

Everyone takes a personality test, something like a Myers-Briggs. It identifies the supposedly four ways that people interact with their environment: the logical way (green), the relationship way (blue), the action way (orange), and the organization way (yellow). So now bumping into a high organization (yellow) low relationship (blue) person (identified by the small color coded badge all now wear) everyone knows not to act chummy with him or her and stick just to the letter of the law. Thus they all could get along swimmingly and no conflict would ever arise again.

Mitch, a high gold and orange, a smattering of green, and nearly no blue, informs them that they don't just need to be at work by their start time, they need to be ready to work at their start time, i.e. computer turned on, programs up by 8am. And that they should still be actually working until the end time, i.e. not closing down programs and turning off the computers and monitors until after it reaches 5pm.

Proverbs for cynics, courtesy of Hal:

For every action there is an equal and opposite criticism.

A young homeless man, oblivious to everyone, sits or stands, sometimes lies, on the side of the building, rotating around it to catch the shade throughout the day.

A dissatisfied, turning to disgruntled, man trying in vain to get away with something threatens to sue Dale and the agency for not giving him what he expects and demands and hopes for.

The seventh floor sends out a memo reiterating the Internet and email usage policy. There is a temporary slight drop in illicit usage of the Internet, though no change in the use of email for personal reasons.

They dare not bring cups into the bathroom, rank with germs and filth, instead they leave their cups and mugs and glasses on the drinking fountain just outside, or on a table in the break room.

Somebody, possibly Karl, yells out, “Good fucking damn it, this day is dragging.”

Denise, nearly all green and yellow, announces that she will become more engaged, more active, with her employees. Broadening her comfort levels as she says. No longer does she sound aggrieved when making any strong point, which always exasperated the tensions that her poor communications skill helped create in the first place.

Sandy makes a lot of mistakes that she never knows how she made. Bizarre mistakes, that Brad must fix and also can't fathom how she created.

Roger writes pornography when he is bored.

Snacks, newspapers, magazines, books, hats, empty cans, cartoons, boxes of tissues, supposedly amusing jokes, novelties, schmaltzy crap, clothing, greeting cards from holidays and birthdays long past, medicine and drugs and lotions and disinfectant, coffee cups, stuffed animals, magnets, coupons, advertisements, menus, purses, loose change, scattered bills, and jewelry clutter their workspaces.

There is no end to the work. There is no product. There is no goal beyond many discrete tasks that take mere moments: analyzing a constant inflow of information, breaking it into clusters, repackaging those to send out to the next level.

The department on the fourth floor is in veritable revolution over the new Fabric that runs and dictates everything they do with the Database.

The fifth floor loves the new Fabric. They don't actually have to use it. It just makes them look progressive and cutting edge.

The seventh floor has only a vague understanding of the Database and less of the Fabric. And they like it that way.

The tenth floor isn't even aware of the Database, yet alone the Fabric.

They barge into a cubicle and interrupt others on the phone. Their sheepish apologies as they slink out of the cubicle, the person on the phone just smiling and shrugging, unable to respond beyond motioning to the receiver at the side of their head, is hilariously awkward.

Maintenance works on the HVAC system.

The fifth floor sends out a memo reiterating the dress code and policy. There appears to be no discernable effect.

Peter shakes his head on his way back to his desk, muttering to himself that they need not bother him with these problems.

A man refuses to fill out mandatory forms on religious grounds, though Dale suspects he is just trying to get away with something

They are forced to have a turn at cleaning the refrigerator. Even those who never use it. At the end of every week, everything not labeled is thrown out. Entire jars of food are discarded. Three-fourths full cartons of juice, trashed. The alternative is public health hazard levels of filth piling up in the fridge, forgotten, ignored.

The tenth floor institutes a new policy that no longer will the employee's word be taken to get the discount on their health insurance contribution if they don't smoke. Now they have to get swabbed by a nurse to prove it. There is general discontent amongst the smokers, claiming it's a violation of their privacy. The non-smokers find it just and fair.

Proverbs for cynics, courtesy of Hal:

Confidence is only what you feel before you understand the question.

They all find that customer service is much better through email than the phone.

John has several pet projects that Mitch tries to dissuade him from continuing. John ignores him. It's the only thing that make the job tolerable, both the pet projects and the ignoring Mitch.

The Christmas decorations for the second floor take up 53 cubic feet when in storage.

There is a trail of coffee stains on the parquet floor leading from the breakroom.

Cold and flu season comes around and office reacts as if attacked by biological weapons. They wear masks. They spray disinfectant. They wash their hands repeatedly with hand sanitizer.

They still get sick.

The days around major holidays are the most productive, despite many hours being spent on non-work related activities, some of them even management sanctioned.

There is a baby shower for a new grandmother. The third such shower in two years to go along with the five regular baby showers.

Chuck tapes a note on the vending machine in protest to the price hikes, stating that he will no longer use the machine because of these outrageous prices and urging the rest of his co-workers to do the same.

They either slack off by surfing the web, chatting with their cubicle neighbor, going to the bathroom over and over again, doodling in a notebook, or if they can't get away with that, zone out, staring blankly at the computer screen. They need their goof off time. Not to ease the

tension, but to refresh. Working non-stop leads to a steady decrease in efficiency as more effort is spent trying to maintain focus amidst the increasing boredom.

Though those who don't need this will never understand.

Proverbs for cynics, courtesy of Hal:

A clear conscience is usually a sign of a bad memory.

“Well, I was out at the creek prospecting for silver,” Keith starts off saying when he supposed to be fixing a monitor. “Silver, not gold, the reason why is that silver has a much better future because all the gold is found. It's all found, none left. So, out on the creek, panning for silver is easier than panning for gold. The reason why is you can see it better. Gold isn't very shiny in nature. Silver is . . .”

Rosalie has been at the same position for seven years, doing the exact same thing every day, an unending string of data processing, which she performs tremendously, her production 30 to 50 percent more than the other data processors and nearly error free. All the other data processors get worse the longer they last, as the boredom in the face of such repetition drains their effectiveness.

Glen: “I love it here. This is family.”

A sign shows up on the door of the unisex bathroom: Lock door when occupied.

This leads to speculation as to who walked in on whom.

The next day handwritten under the printed message is: Knock before entering.

The day after the sign is moved inside the bathroom.

The day after that it is gone.

No one ever knows who walked in on whom.

Dan slowly moves his workspace from his cubicle that has limited counter space to one of the seldom-used meeting rooms. It becomes his de facto office. He grows a beard and is rarely seen, except when they walk pass his 'office' and peek inside to see him hunched over the conference table, the only surface big enough to contain the files spread out all over it.

Jenny finds out that Roger doesn't believe in God and sets out to convert him. Roger humors her because she has big tits.

Ursulla has her phone confiscated because her deadbeat relatives constantly bother her. Calling her up and trying to convince her to not work and just live on public assistance like them.

Human Resources sends out an email requesting leave donations for Phyllis, who has used up her vacation time, her sick time, and her long term leave time on her prior illnesses and conditions and now she needs her co-workers to donate their vacation time to her so she doesn't go broke for the two more weeks she needs off to recover from whatever it is that she needs recover from.

Two men get fired for surfing for porn on the Internet several hours a day. Those sites are supposed to be blocked, yet they track them down anyway or just stumble upon them and then couldn't resist going back.

Proverbs for cynics, courtesy of Hal:

Depression is just anger that hasn't found an outlet.

The IT department insists that everyone delete their old, especially non-work related emails and pictures and files and such.

Monica puts a sign up on her cubicle: Do Not Disturb

Underneath somebody writes 'Don't Feed the Monkeys'.

Monica is black.

Two days later it is determined that Margaret is the culprit. Margaret's termination is not officially announced or commented upon. Her empty cubicle will explain the what, and the diversity workshop and office protocol presentation will explain the why.

Nobody really thinks that Margaret is racist.

Karl unexpectedly dies over a weekend.

The spoons to stir sugar and creamer into coffee keep getting stolen. Eventually just a split wooden stick, perhaps an old chopstick, is all that is used.

John picks apart every suggestion by Mitch in the staff meeting. Everyone else finds it insufferable, but they endure it.

Dick is fired for sexual harassment. It's never officially commented upon.

Mercifully, they are not forced into another workshop.

There is a pernicious lack of consistency. Everyone answers the same question differently. And then each of those persons will answer it differently another day. It is the nature of the business, when the nuances are colored by whatever mood one is in leading to shifting sands of policies and standards.

Teri asks Peter a question about a file he worked on. Peter knows that Teri knows the answer. It isn't anything she isn't familiar with, but she knows that there are things she doesn't know, so she questions herself to the point where the routine becomes complex.

Dan is recognized for 30 years of service and is genuinely pleased about it.

Mitch explains the Manager's Dilemma to those rare employees who complain to him: encourage the employees to share information and knowledge and helping one another, which can lead to a diffusion of the message, like several games of telephone all at once or have things grind to a bureaucratic halt when all activity has to be led straight from the top.

The third floor is reconfigured. For a month they must traverse a labyrinth to a vacant space in an annex under the parking garage. When they return to the third floor everyone has a new improved cubicle.

The rubber bands, the paper clips fall to the floor and remain there on the thin blandly patterned carpet.

The greeting cards go around the office. Nearly a constant stream of them, like chain letters. Birthday cards, get well soon cards, sorry for your loss cards, happy retirement, etc.

Judy has no great skill set beyond a her work ethic, which had served her well for fourteen years at a position that required nothing but effort.

But then she accepts a new position running a department that is a junction of the entire organization. With connections to all departments came the expectations to know a little about everything and thus is inundated with requests and demands from everyone. It requires extreme attention to detail, great organization, advanced multi-tasking skills, and the ability to endure harassment by impatient and often angry people. It is high stress.

Judy cannot handle it. She gets the job done, barely. The stress wears on her.

And she didn't really seek out the job. They didn't exactly force it upon her. They offered the job in a very encouraging way. She didn't resist. She was bored with what she had been doing all those many years.

It kills her.

Chuck becomes visibly upset when the department stops the birthday celebrations with cake.

John insists that his needless points of contention are just being thorough and conscientious. But really he's just a malcontent.

Brad is recognized for 5 years of service with a pin, and is dismayed that he has lasted this long.

Mosquitoes. Somehow mosquitoes have gotten inside.

Hal's proverbs grow trite:

Why are wise men and wise guy opposites?

Bobbi and Jenny get into a comically ridiculous argument over yogurt that isn't either of theirs and that neither ate anyway. The office finds it quite entertaining.

IT strenuously insists that they delete old emails, etc. It is sapping precious server space.

Peter is slowly being lost under the fire hazard of paper, files, and boxes piling up in his cubicle.

There is a sound, a squeak, like a baby pterodactyl. No one questions it.

The fifth floor is reconfigured.

Each and every meeting devolves into a sea of complaints over the usual, long discussed and known concerns repeated slightly reworded by the same few employees who just cannot get over it.

The seventh floor is meeting with the second floor. The second floor has a meeting just to figure out the agenda for the meeting with the seventh floor.

The departments are reorganized. Units are folded into other units. Merged into another division. Split in half. Dispersed throughout the monolith. Or disbanded completely.

Oscar, a hunchbacked, slightly dim, older man, nothing more than an extraneous file clerk from pre-computer days, is forced into retirement.

A belligerent elderly woman yells at Dale, not giving any credence to his opinion on her issue. "I'm not going to argue about it," she tells him. "But . . ." he tries to tell her. "You're out! You're out!" she yells to end the call.

People, mostly the managers, bring donuts on Friday donuts. For various reasons there a no donuts for a couple weeks. Then several people bring donuts leading to massive donut overload. They still manage to eat them all.

Brad is forced to endure Denise's, his supervisor's, interest in his career development. She wonders how to make it more appealing, how to allow him to succeed. All he can think about is how futile it is to find a way to make non-fulfilling work, bearable. And he dreams about what changes he would make if he were in charge. How great it would be he thinks, then he remembers that he has no desire to be in charge.

They are fearful of being fired, laid off, let go. The men are angry about it. The women are a nervous wreck.

John: "I hate working here. I like to think I do good work. But I you can't do it here. It's embarrassing."

Anna Mae, after years of declining functionality, retires.

"The reason why," Keith says, before and proceeding to go off on some farfetched tangent of bullshit.

There is occasion to recall the past workers. Sometimes not even recalling them, rather just at the moment becoming aware of them. Unearthing their mistakes that have carried over to the present. Perhaps a handful still remembers them, workers from long ago, years before most of the current workers came on. Some not remembered by any because they were only briefly here, only a Human Resources record, long filed in the recesses, or as bytes no one will ever search for, attest to their employment.

Brad becomes constipated because Denise accuses him of staying too long in the bathroom to text his friends.

Glen gets up from his chair at lunch and tells Mitch he is out of here. He never comes back.

The words on the screen blur, coalescing into dark blots, highlighting the white between, which emerges into forms, first irregular shapes then into patterns: continents, structures, even bigger hidden words in a foreign yet to be deciphered language within the original text.

The barely remembered remnants of old processes and policies linger, now no more understood than the origins of obscure words and phrases, but, like 'cold as a witch's tit' or the habit of knocking on wood, still used, even defended as the way it must be.

Hal hangs one last sign on his cubicle:

For Rent. Inquire within.

He then resigns after 30 years of service and is given a big party as a send off.

There is turmoil on the seventh floor. The tenth floor is barely aware of it. The fourth floor feels it. The fifth floor is forced to replace the manager on the third floor. The employees barely know what is going on.

John resigns suddenly, several years before he would like because he can no longer handle Mitch's interference and quibbling with how he does the job.

Maintenance works on the HVAC system.

The time is not theirs, no matter how much they might try to make it so.

The second floor is reconfigured.

The End

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story was inspired by my many years working in an office much like *Monolith* depicts. I wanted to show the unique personalities and experiences that inhabit and ultimately make up such a regimented and impersonal world that is the modern office workplace. I'm never sure what influences me, probably many things, but I suspect in this case it was the work of David Markson that shows through in the short often one-sentence paragraphs bouncing from perspective to perspective.*

BIO: *I am a writer living in Phoenix, Arizona. I studied history and philosophy at the University of Oregon. My short stories have been published in *The Doctor T. J. Eckleburg Review*, *Otis Nebula*, *Belletrist*, and *X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine* among others.*

BAIL DENIED

By Chitra Gopalakrishnan

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A deeply moving story of a woman's struggle against India's chronically impaired justice system and the toll it takes on her life and those dear to her. Through exquisitely fashioned prose, luminous insight and a delicacy of emotional shading, we are drawn deeper and deeper into her ever more complicated drama. Bit by bit characters emerge into people of convincing substance and details of setting are burned into our brains. We breathe the smoggy air, hear the spices sizzling in the cooking oil, feel the weight of a mud-soaked sari, shield our eyes against the sunny field with sprouting vegetables and curl our noses at the foul-smelling satparni tree, a malevolent symbol that may also offer 'the devilish temptation of hope' and give what is most needed: the healing power of moral grace. A traditional, plot driven, linear story that simply cannot be improved upon. Quote: I know my anger will soon get the better of me. In my wounded condition, I feel I cannot understand anything or anyone, least of all myself. I am ashamed of being unable to reciprocate the friendly gestures of the gardeners, to the sheer humanity in their underbelly lives, or show gratitude to Ram Khelawan who escorts me unfailingly and without complaint to help me meet with my husband in jail and court. Or acknowledge to him that I know he spends his own money to do this and goes hungry while waiting in line with me." Five stars.*

Bail Denied

Meera feels the earth pulse at her feet and its hot, fetid breath wander over her body.

Standing in the middle of a two-acre, thick-with-green field, on the outskirts of New Delhi, one lined with carrots, cabbages and cauliflowers, she idly watches the tiger stripes left behind in the sky by a retreating November sun.

Though the geographical terrain here is the same as that in her village Bandra Mau, in Rae Bareilly district that lies at the very heart of the neighbouring northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, she feels displaced. Removed from everything familiar.

She misses little things about her home. The shade of the overflowing *pipal* tree in her courtyard, the hollows in her brick courtyard walls where every evening she lights earthen lamps, the wooden cots woven with jute for the family and visitors to sit and her well-used mud stove, carefully coated carefully with clay every day. But essentially, and for the most part, she misses her five children who shape her life, with whom she begins her mornings and ends the day.

Sonu, who has just been with her a moment ago in the vegetable-laden field, has warned her about the niff, saying, "I have watered the field with a mixture of rotting mustard seeds, worm castings and moist leaf bedding" and shown her his calloused and reeky hands as proof. But Meera doesn't mind the stench.

She is oddly comforted by this tepid overlay of smelly heat over her person as she is thankful for the disagreeable pall of grey smoke that covers her. The smog which catches some

people in their throat, and gives them the feeling of swallowing glass shards, makes many others sick and a handful to die, is of no consequence to Meera's well-being. If anything, it is consolatory. At least for now.

It is strange, she thinks, that she should use this noxious, acid-tasting blanket of haze, one that has shot past the scales of measurement, as insulation from an alien world. As a cloak her from her present realities, from the outside world of consequence that evokes deep, unsettling emotions.

A week ago, a news anchor on a Hindi television station explained the smog over India's capital to be "a mix of rural and urban pollution", a pungent combination of ancient farm techniques and careless urban living, which makes itself known every October and November when the edge of winter can be felt. The well-spoken anchor blamed the resulting poor air quality in the city both for the deterioration of public health and the increasing pileups on national highways as poor visibility caused cars to crash into one another.

It is not this as much as the distracting fragrance from the single *satparni* tree within the property of the home that perturbs her. She knows this tree comes into bloom between October and December here and challenges everyone's olfactory organs to the extreme.

Though far away from the field she is now and invisible to her from her living quarters, its distinct balminess calls out to her over the distance. It speaks to her from beyond the

frangipani-fringed lawns that enclose the home, a terracotta-tiled structure, which lies beyond the field.

In fact, it has summoned her since the day she has been here. Each of its oblong leaves, spread over seven green portions, and its creamy clusters of greenish-white flowers seem to call out to her every day and mock her misery. The weary grief that has settled deep within her, one the stench and smog keep cloistered today.

She reluctantly admits to herself that there is something about the grandeur of its presence, its umbrella-shaped existence. Yet the distress it causes her by demanding she shed her misery is unbearable.

"Devil's tree," is what the gardeners, who work with her husband in the field and gardens of this home, call it. This when she asks for its local name in this part, in the far end of the city. "It is a tree that throws temptations in one's way and every winter Delhi sleeps soundly in the shade of the devil," adds Ram Khelawan, in harsh sibilants, without being asked. He is her husband's best friend.

Trying to forcefully disregard the smell of the *satparni* while wittingly cradling her lingering grief, she tunes all her senses to the melody of the pundit's prayers. To his hymns that waft through a loudspeaker from a nearby temple. She rocks herself involuntarily, huddling her plump arms together as she walks, and listens intently to the holy man's song-slides, this as he shifts from one devotional chant to another.

To deflect her faculties further from the flowering tree's insidious aroma, she thinks of her husband. A man of the soil. A man given to rising early, working long hours and taking on planting and small building projects around the farm areas of the capital. A man managing his labour force quietly and diligently and being there for them in their hour of need and as much for his employers. Particularly so for them as they allow him to stay free of rent in the gardeners' quarters.

Yet there now appears to be a side to him, an unruly one, which she never has known to exist. A carnal side, dissatisfied with what she had to offer. Or satisfied only so long as he was with her.

While their partnership has always been strong and sexual encounters pleasing (proved amply during his annual visits to the family village home over thirty years and other times when he landed up unexpectedly), should it not have occurred to her, she wonders, in all these years to think and ask how he satisfied his sexual appetite in her absence.

Should she not have emboldened herself more, broken their old-fashioned intimacy, to insert herself forcefully into his everyday city life away from her? Should she not have foreseen to traverse the distance often, covered the miles to curb what the village women referred to as *mard ki fitraat*, the nature of the male? Should she have not let her body get full-figured and should she not have tidied up her middle-aged look?

At this point, in her unaccustomed surroundings, when questions such as these swirl in her mind, his fathering of her five children is inadequate proof of his love. Anger sweeps over her, over what she sees as her foolish naivety, her silly belief that she is the only one he has ever held close.

It disturbs her when Ram Khelawan speaks plainly of her husband without any of the delicate euphemisms normally used by men of her community when such issues are discussed. "Your husband has given in to the temptation of a dangerous kind, choosing the arms of a young, fleshy, woman over you. A city woman knowing in her ways of both pleasing and extorting."

As for her, social mores within her community expect that she as a wife control dissonant sexual cravings of this kind. There are unwritten rules that she be a closed book, never explore certain territories within and without. She has always adhered to this and never thought to question why such diktats do not see the immorality of men as an offence.

Meera lifts her sari above her ankles and steps delicately into the field furrows so as not to disturb the vegetables sprouting on the mounds. She continues on her walk in the field and this time she allows her mind to wander to the married woman who has afforded pleasures of the flesh to her husband, to the woman who has overstepped all expected social boundaries.

Though she has never seen her, she rages against the gliding images that come to her mind, based entirely on what Ram Khelawan has told her. Pictures of a young, diminutive but

voluptuous, woman waiting for her husband on her bed, her eyes half-closed and her nose pin strobing in the sunlight. She envisions her rearranging her sari at her narrow waist, her breath shallow and head thrown back. And then she imagines this woman, with her red, round *bindi* winking, forcing her husband to repeat her name over and over again. Maya, Maya, Maya!

These floating impressions nibble dangerously at her peace.

It is the tap of hunger and the aroma of lentils, rice and fried cauliflower, cooked over the slow, steady heat of the wood fire in the outdoors, which draws her back. She walks towards the cooking area just outside the room she shares with her husband's co-workers. She has been living here for the past two weeks.

The men have finished cooking and all that remains is for the lentils to be seasoned. She watches Sonu pour oil into the large, blackened copper-bottomed wok and throw in cumin seeds and long, dried red chillies just as the peppery mustard oil begins to simmer. With practiced ease, he makes sure not to sear the crackling whole spices into a charcoal black and pours the hissing, spitting mixture into the aluminium utensil that holds the cooked yellow lentil just as it begins to turn a shade of dark brown. The coals and the wood start to transition from black to grey and the hot, licking fires begin to die down.

"Living with these five men is very limiting as an experience and managing my private tasks as a woman is effortful but it is nothing compared to my humiliation, my anguish, of learning

that my husband is booked for beating and raping the woman he had chosen to fulfil his sensual delights," she confides softly to a shocked Savitri, the maid of the house.

Savitri has just returned to the house from her annual leave. She is the only other woman around in the entire premise and is beyond shaken by the train of events that have occurred in her absence and Meera's trauma in particular. She is upset to see how the light has left her body and the soul-emptiness that she carries with her.

"My gardener husband who has the love for the earth in every crease and ripple of his body is the gentlest being I have known all my life. He could never do what he is accused of. Maya has filed a *farzi* rape case against him either to extort money or settle scores with him. In my meeting with him at the prison, while he admitted to consensual physical intimacy he swore that he did not violate her in any way. I believe him. The marks she bears have been in all likelihood inflicted by the husband in a fit of rage. Ram Khelawan says that she wanted to be part of his life and has done this to exact revenge. I don't know the truth and maybe I never will, yet I can tell you, in the thirty years of being married to my husband, I have never been hurt, not even by the brush of his fingernail. Yes, I am furious with him for straying and putting me in this situation but for him to be arrested for rape that never happened and that too indefinitely without any sort of clinching evidence is evil," Meera weeps.

Bringing her hand to her cheeks to roughly wipe the tears, before the men see her, she tells Savitri, "Leaving my three school-going children and two grown-up daughters in the care of

indifferent relatives at our home and our fields' unattended to feel like huge crimes, follies that I am responsible for."

As her thin silver anklets and red glass bangles tinkle, she pulls her limp blue sari closer to her body, winds the loose, extra fabric tightly around her head, and continues, "Emotions of anger, fear, denial, weariness, bewilderment and shock come upon me daily, one upon another. Sometimes occurring all at once or in varying orders at varying times. I don't know how to deal with them. Or what to do. I can't believe what is happening to us. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine my husband would be accused of rape. I understand what a woman violated goes through but I do not think my husband is capable of breaching a woman's sacred spaces. And it is unfair for the authorities to take just her words as proof and not my husband's."

"I do know that this woman who has wrongly accused him will soon become the shadow of the seductress who first enticed him. She may not even have the tenacity to continue with the gritty tangles of the court. And I am certain my husband has learnt his lesson and will never approach a woman again for sex. But I ask you, will our lives ever return to normal? Will our relatives and our neighbours ever look upon us without distrust? Will we be able to ever break out of the social isolation that I know will become a way of life when I return to the village?"

Savitri struggles to find restful answers that will soothe Meera. She feels guilty about not being able to offer to share her room with Meera. Her quarters are deep within the house and too small to accommodate another person.

Her regret is deep as she is aware of how cheerless Diwali, the festival of lights, gone by last month, has been for Meera and her family. Continuous rainfall in the months of September and early October, when the monsoons should have receded in their village, had left Meera with spoiled crops, deep mud in the fields and practically no money to run the household. Or spend it on food and festivities at Diwali. And a day before the festival, Meera learnt of the rape charge lodged against her husband by Maya at the local police station in Fatehpur Beri village of the Mehrauli district, forcing her to get on the bus and come alone to New Delhi. Something she has never attempted before.

Savitri also now knows that the recent violent scuffles between the Delhi police and the lawyers in Tis Hazari district court, on the second of November and later on the fourth of November in the district court of Saket, and the sit-in protests by the lawyers post these skirmishes, has spelt acute complications for Meera. The arson and bullets fired has meant that she has not been allowed to meet her husband in jail and the clampdown on courts has meant the missing of one court hearing and the postponement of the following one.

Savitri's reverie breaks when Meera speaks again.

"For an uneducated, unexposed woman like me, the law and the police are too much to handle. I writhe every time I have to make a trip to Tihar jail sitting astride on a motorcycle with Ram Khelawan as it is unacceptable for women in our community to travel unaccompanied with men not related to them. I sputter with shame, as much as his motorcycle does, all through our hour-and-a-half journey to the other end of the city. I feel watched while standing in the long queue outside the jail and court and avoid conversation for fear of being asked what my husband is in for. And the jostling outside each of these places is demeaning for me as a woman and I cannot bring myself to reveal to you the horrors I face. There is also indignity in the fact that I cannot find a usable women's toilet in these places," Meera tells her.

In a low, broken voice, she continues, "I cringe each time a particular policeman sizes me up at the waiting line outside Tihar jail. He looks over me insolently as my identity card has my name as only Meera. 'What is your husband's name? Why is his name not attached to yours in the *Aadhar* card?' he asks each time I visit."

"Our beady-eyed lawyer is worse. He waits for an opportunity to throw legal jargon in my face. He tells me the section under which my husband has been booked is the most damaging of all sections in the law. He calls it Section 376. When I ask him why he has missed the single court date that I understand we have been given, he brusquely tells me that this has happened due to the lockdown in the court and that from now on I need to keep track

of when my husband is to be produced in court so that he can follow-up. Being unlettered, I have no knowledge of what is in the first information and medical report that he refers to. And he orders me to fetch innumerable papers. I have given him our land papers though I am not quite sure why he needs them. I fear I will never see them again. I have paid him Rs. 25,000 as fees after borrowing from relatives and then as much again for what he calls 'settling issues with the police'. I don't know what he means by this. I have been advised several times to approach the free legal aid cell within the Saket district court but fellow villagers say that the lawyers who work here demand a bit of money and don't show up for hearings. Now all I know for certain is money is the metric for everything at the court and that law and justice are two different things."

In the same faltering voice, she says, "The worst thing right now for me is to see my husband broken, to watch him worrying endlessly about our family. We have been threatened by his uncle early this year over a piece of land that the family jointly possesses and he even warned us that we may lose our son if we don't co-operate with him. I fear my husband is falling into himself as he is becoming sparse in his words. I am unable to reach out to him in the manner I want to. My meetings with him are always insufficient and unsatisfactory. The cramped, confining spaces of the jail's meeting room, the separating glass barricades, the timed conversations on the phone and the searching, intrusive looks of other visitors who lean shamelessly into our private exchanges do not allow us to have explicit conversations. Our disconnection bothers me."

Savitri also knows that it does not help Meera when Bablu, the driver, recounts that less than a third of people in Tihar jail are actually convicted yet the fate of under-trials hangs in balance for anywhere between a year and three. Having worked for a city judge earlier, he says that he has it on authority that “nine of every ten under-trials are between eighteen and fifty years of age and they comprise the most economically productive group.”

Of rape cases, in particular, the judge has told him, says Bablu, that if the victim files a rape charge with the police after a time-lapse, say even after five or ten days, her medical reports are often inconclusive. While rape cannot be proved, it also becomes difficult to ensure her willingness and consent.

Meera’s face turns ashen as a ten-day time lapse does hold true for husband’s case. It seems to her Bablu stands both in appraisal and judgement of their case.

Seeing this, Savitri urges her not to bottle her feelings. “You need to unburden yourself to me, lighten the weight you are carrying inside of you,” she cajoles her.

Meera allows herself this luxury, tells her of the preoccupations of her inner mind, the intangibles that bother her. “I have been visiting a religious *baba* hoping that my faith in religion will soothe over my earthly woes. The gardeners tell me that my husband was made to prune a *bargat* tree by the homeowner the day the police came to pick him up. Cutting this tree may not bear the blame for what has happened but it is inauspicious. I am trying to atone for this action and for his other sinful actions. But I fear it is not helping.”

After a pause, she carries on, "I know my anger will soon get the better of me. In my wounded condition, I feel I cannot understand anything or anyone, least of all myself. I am ashamed of being unable to reciprocate the friendly gestures of the gardeners, to the sheer humanity in their underbelly lives, or show gratitude to Ram Khelawan who escorts me unfailingly and without complaint to help me meet with my husband in jail and court. Or acknowledge to him that I know he spends his own money to do this and goes hungry while waiting in line with me."

Hearing her talk of them, the five gardeners file into the room in a steady line. They squat on the floor, shift their positions uneasily and look at their soil-stained shirts that hang above on a long clothes peg. Like all men in their community, they will not make eye-contact with the two women sitting with them inside the room.

"How can they arrest my husband without proof, on spurious charges? Does the law not see that men can be wrongly accused as well? Is it not time to spare innocent men of anguish? Is it not unfair to keep him in the worst of jails for so long?" Meera rages

"I have been following the Ayodhya temple dispute on television closely as this shrine falls within my state and I have visited it several times as it just over a 100 kilometres from where we live. Over the last week, I have seen how the Supreme Court has managed the impossible. It has arrived at a solution to the festering Ayodhya crisis and settled the fears of both the Hindus and Muslims, who have been warring for centuries over the possession of 2.77 acres

of land. While one sect wishes to build a temple the other is keen to retain a mosque. If the highest court can arrive at a solution for a crisis that has been displaced out of its context and cartography in the extreme, cannot the lower court arrive at a reasonable time frame to hear my husband's case? Cannot this creaking subordinate judiciary, my first and only contact for justice, be made to step up, made to be humane? This is what comes to my uneducated mind," Meera says.

The men have no answers for her reasoning, her unrelenting questions or barricades to break her anger.

Ram Khelawan's cell phone rings. It is news from the lawyer. He never calls Meera always Ram Khelawan. He says he is ready for the bail argument the next morning.

At the Saket district court next morning, the scattered sense of order, the overriding confusion where no one seems to know what is happening, the overcrowding of litigants and the evil menace that the lawyers carry with them in their flapping, black robes unspool Meera's insides. To her, this world seems to pivot on a different set of rules, laws unknown to her.

As she waits outside the courtroom allotted to them with Ram Khelawan and their lawyer, her despondency sharpens as she overhears a man standing next to her talking to a family member. "This judge will have anything between thirty to sixty cases listed before him for

today. I am sure he will adjourn at least forty of them. Our case has had six adjournments so far. I have heard some cases are over six years old."

Through a crack in the door, she sees the judge sitting on a raised platform and speak to a group of people but can hear nothing concrete. Snatches of his words reach her ears - "Mohan Vaid *hazir ho*" (Come forward Mohan Vaid), *jawaab do* (answer the question), *haan ya na bolo* (say yes or no) and *sunwai ki agle tareek agle mahine ki chaubees tareek ko hain* (the next hearing will be on the twenty fourth of the next month).

Meera is not even aware that her husband's case has come up for hearing until she sees him being hurriedly escorted before the judge by two policemen. She stands irresolute and the lawyer does not insist she come in.

The import of the judgement on his case dawns on her only when her husband is hurriedly escorted away before she can speak to him. She figures he has not made bail. She breaks down when she also realises that she has been unable to say a word to him or assure him of sympathy and support with the flicker of her eyes. Or a gesture of some sort.

Has his bail been denied because of the grim first information report the woman has filed? Or it is because the medical report proves something? Or because it is inconclusive? Or did the judge not have sufficient evidence to decide in favour of a bail? Or are there too many cases he has pending and this seemed to him the best way to settle her husband's case?

She knows she will never have these answers right away as her lawyer says he needs to rush to attend to another case. She will have to wait for his phone call tomorrow to understand, for something tangible and finite that will help with her incomprehension of these issues. Ram Khelawan's bewilderment is as extreme as hers.

An aching void settles within her. The motorcycle ride back to her quarters deepens her dejection. In the evening, a deep, brooding silence settles within the gardeners' room. The men don't know what to say to her.

As she sits with them in the stillness of the night, the scent trail of the *satparni* invades her nostrils. She can hear its challenge or rather its whispered warnings. It seems to say that being defeated this way is not permanent but giving up is what will make her loss enduring, it is what will entrench her misery.

She is silent for a long time and then finds her voice.

With indrawn breath, she says, "I am aware that my life has changed and that I don't have the means to keep my known and familiar world. But I will not allow my present load to break me. I will learn to carry it better. I know all of us are paying a steep price for my husband's straying but I know he is not capable of rape. We all seem to be fighting systems and institutions that are failing us as much as we are fighting a person and our remedies are small. Yet with your help, I can fight on till the end. I am not sure how many years, resources or adjournments it will take and how I will bear up to the testing of time. Yet I intend to put

his needs above others as I know he is innocent. I will continue to stay on here if you will allow me, my children, my home and my fields can wait. And I am okay for all in my family to survive on *rotis* (bread) salt until then."

In the dim light of the room, Sonu wordlessly hands her a plate of food and extends a blanket to her.

She sets the food on the ground, wraps the blanket around her and walks determinedly towards the *satparni* tree although it is pitch dark.

Despite the bad news, she feels alive. In the new rush of energy, she is ready to shed her misery and succumb to the devilish temptation of hope. Step out of herself to risk a change in her relationship to the world. Weather its uncertainties and contradictions. See the urgency as well the power of the moment she is in. As also the purpose beyond her suffering and despair. And she intends to view all these doings as godly audacity on her part.

She prepares herself for their lawyer's call in the morning. **THE END**

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Solitary and silent women have not fared well in stories as their narratives have almost always been taken over by the others.*

I have capriciously exploited the story of Meera, a poor hapless, unexposed, rural woman forced to abandon her children, fields and her home in a village in Uttar Pradesh and make her way to New Delhi's jails and courts to seek justice for her husband who is booked for rape, to find her voice, her language and her lonely struggle, one that moves between doubt and certitude.

While the story uncovers the inadequacies of the capital's justice system, the lack of professionalism and timely evidence-based justice at the police stations, the prison and the

courts, it takes you to the dark corners of her mind as it does to her resilience and wisdom in adapting to the willful ways of society and the justice system. The idea is to show how she opens the door onto new permissions in her life, quietly yet surely, without giving the feeling of raised flags.

I have been inspired many, many voices but the tonalities of Joan Didion, Margaret Atwood, Iris Murdoch, Jeanette Winterson and Diana Athill linger longer in my mind

BIO: *I am a New Delhi-based journalist by training, a social development communication consultant by profession and a creative writer by choice. I have authored several books on issues relating to social development and my short stories have been accepted by Celestial Echo Press, Black Hare Press, Me First Magazine, Terror House Magazine, Literary Yard, Truancy, Spillwords, Runcible Spoon and Friday Flash Fiction among others.*

I am intrigued by people living on the margins and I hear them better than I do most others.

CAT FOOD

By Robert P. Bishop

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We ask authors who we publish to wait 2 issues before submitting again. Some do. Some don't. Robert (whose story 'Seventy Grand' we published in Issue 5) didn't and we're really glad because we love love love this slap-back, wise-cracking, blackly hilarious retro-styled example of seriously entertaining crime fiction and if you like this kind of junk too, you'll be sending us e-candy (and that was one loong mother of a sentence, y'all.) The dialogue is whip smart (imperative in this genre) and the story is told with a practiced economy. It all looks easy and fun but this kind of moxie, boils and goils, only comes with skill and experience. Quote:*

In the beginning the lunacy was quirky but amusing because it involved lots of sex. The first time I suspected she might be mad was when she took all her clothes off and said, "I'm Lady Godiva. You're my stallion. Take off your clothes and get on your hands and knees."

I did what she said. She sat on my back with her legs on either side of my body, gripped a handful of my hair and pulled my head up. "Now gallop."

"What?" I tried to look at her.

She jerked my head back. "You heard me. You're a horse, now gallop through the goddamn village!"

About as good as this kind of writing gets. Just wonderful stuff.

Cat Food

by

Robert P. Bishop

The phone woke me. I didn't open my eyes but picked up anyway. "Yeah?"

"I'm going to kill you for what you did to me," a voice said.

"For God's sake, Sandra, give it a rest."

"This time I'm going to do it." Shrieking laughter blasted my ear.

"Sandra, you can't keep calling me in the night like this. You've got to stop it."

"Oh, I'll stop it, all right, after I kill you. Then I'm going to cut your wanker off and feed it to my cat." Shrieks of laughter stabbed into my brain.

"You don't have a cat."

"How do you know?"

"Nothing can live with you, not even a starving cat."

"I'll get one from the animal shelter."

"They won't give you one."

"Yes they will. I'm going to get the biggest, hungriest..."

I interrupted her. "Goodbye, Sandra." I hung up, forced my eyes open and looked at the clock; Christ, 2.32 in the morning. I got out of bed and poured a scotch. Sandra, my ex live-in, couldn't accept that we were no longer together. It's been a year and she still hasn't forgiven me for throwing her out.

I couldn't live with her any longer. She is mad and she nearly drove me to the madhouse to escape her lunacy but I didn't want to seek refuge there. The madhouse isn't much different than being outside the walls and living in what people call normal society.

Usually Sandra screamed and broke things when she threatened to murder me. I grew used to her tantrums. They didn't last very long. Like a lobotomized cat, she lacked staying

power and couldn't keep her anger focused. Sandra's tantrums usually ended with the complaint that I didn't love her anymore, which wasn't true then and isn't true now.

But I had to tell her to get out to preserve my sanity. She took it badly. It's not a good thing to end up on the sidewalk waiting for a cab with everything you own in two suitcases by your feet. I still love her, but I couldn't live with her lunacy any longer. She had to go. I miss her terribly.

This call differed from the other middle-of-the-night calls. Before, Sandra never laughed when she threatened to murder me. But tonight, she was positively gleeful, laughing and shrieking like she had removed the last inhibition preventing her from committing murder. Her laughter was terrifying. She sounded like she really meant to bump me off. It scared the hell out of me.

We didn't start out this way, of course. We started out when I got a job where she worked. She was an accountant in the finance department and I was an engineer in the production division. She was hot so I pursued her. We went on several dates and got along well. I didn't know she was crazy. She kept that hidden until she moved in with me. Then the madness erupted.

In the beginning the lunacy was quirky but amusing because it involved lots of sex. The first time I suspected she might be mad was when she took all her clothes off and said, "I'm Lady Godiva. You're my stallion. Take off your clothes and get on your hands and knees."

I did what she said. She sat on my back with her legs on either side of my body, gripped a handful of my hair and pulled my head up. "Now gallop."

"What?" I tried to look at her.

She jerked my head back. “You heard me. You’re a horse, now gallop through the goddamn village!”

I began to waddle across the bedroom floor on my hands and knees. It was awkward. Sandra swayed from side to side. I had to work to keep from falling over.

“You’re not galloping.” Sandra jerked my head again. “Go faster!” She hit my right buttock with a metal spatula. I didn’t even know she had the thing in her hand. The swat really hurt. Before I could react, she whacked me two more times, really hard.

“Ow!” I yelped.

“Move your ass,” she screamed and swatted me again.

“Ow!” I yelled again, stood up and dumped her onto the floor. “What the hell, Sandra?” I rubbed the spot where she had hit me.

“I was just trying to have fun and you’ve ruined it.” She rolled onto her side, wrapped her arms around her legs and pulled her knees to her chin. “You don’t love me. You never let me have any fun. This never happened to the real Lady Godiva.”

“You’re not the real Lady Godiva. You’re a lunatic. Come on, get up.” I helped her off the floor and guided her to the bed. She crawled under the covers and pulled them over her head.

“You can’t humiliate me like this and get away with it,” Sandra said from under the covers. Then she went to sleep.

We went on, living each day with greater degrees of madness swirling through our routine of sleep, work, and sex. We lived together and worked at the same place. We were never apart. Sex kept us together. It was a wild and uninhibited sex that served as a release for what we kept bottled up inside as we struggled to live with each other. Like addicts, we couldn’t do without it. Oddly enough, sex was responsible for the final indignity that made me throw her out.

“I want you to get naked,” she said that day then took her clothes off.

“All right.” I took off my clothes.

“Now lie down on your stomach. I want to tie you to the bedframe.” She held several pieces of string in her hands.

“Why?”

“I want to do things to you. Don’t you like how I make you feel?”

“You know I do.” I lay down on my stomach. Sandra tied my wrists to the bedframe with the string.

“You’re all tied up and in my power. Just lie there and let your imagination go.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Something you will never forget. It will be memorable.” She did something by the side of the bed. “Are you ready?”

“I’m always ready.”

She straddled my lower legs and massaged my back for a few minutes. It felt really good. “It’s almost time,” she said.

I waited.

Sandra got off my legs, did something by the side of the bed then got back on my legs. “Here we go.”

“YOW!” Pain surged through my right buttock. It was on fire. I smelled burning flesh. I jerked my arms, broke the strings and scrambled off the bed. Sandra fell to the floor. “What did you do?” I screamed. I didn’t wait for her answer. I ran into the bathroom and looked at my right buttock in the mirror. A raw wavy line about three inches long was burned into the skin.

Sandra had branded me.

I came back to the bedroom. Sandra lay on the bed. “I put my mark on you.” She waved a tool that looked like a soldering iron with its end bent into an S shape. “You’re mine now.” She threw the tool on the floor and held out her arms. “Do me.”

“Do you? Do you?” I shouted. “You’re getting out of here right now. Get up and start packing.”

That’s how Sandra ended up on the sidewalk with her suitcases. I called in sick the next two days, replaced all the locks on my doors then quit my job so I didn’t have to see her. A week later I landed another job and started life over. This time I was going to play it a little cagier. No more lunatics. I had a brand on my butt to remind me of that every day.

But Sandra still lurked in the shadows and let me know she was there, sending anonymous letters through the mail, calling and hanging up without leaving a message or saying anything. One night she left a six-inch boning knife jabbed into my front door so I installed a video system and had security bars bolted over the windows.

Another night I returned home but couldn’t get my key into the front door lock. I tried the back door. Same result; something was in the key hole. With bars over the windows I couldn’t even break into my own house. I had to call a locksmith. He charged me a bundle to make an after-hours call and drill out the front door lock. He said somebody had jammed a strip of metal into the keyhole.

When I got inside I checked the surveillance system and saw a person in a long overcoat with a Nixon mask hiding their face standing on my front porch, giving me the finger. I couldn’t tell if the person were a man or a woman.

Jesus Christ, a Nixon mask.

Sandra. Had to be.

I upgraded my surveillance system so I could check on my home at any time with my cell. Then I went to the police. They said they couldn't do anything without proof it was Sandra. I talked with a lawyer. He said the same thing.

"You're in the soup until you come up with something I can use to haul her into court," he said.

"That's what the police told me."

"You're pretty small stuff to them. They don't have a lot of time to spend on minor cases like yours, nuisance cases, really." He laughed. "But if she kills you, then that's a different matter. Murder is always a big deal to the police. It pisses them off. They think somebody is trying to get one over on them. They'll investigate for sure, and maybe even find out who killed you."

"That's great, that's just great. It's serious after she kills me, is that what you're saying?"

"That's about the size of it."

"All right." I stood, ready to leave.

The lawyer held up his hand to stop me. "Now think on this. You lived with her once. You admit you still love her. Reconcile with her, have her move back in. Maybe both of you have learned some things by now. Give it another chance. If it doesn't work out, you will know it's really over and you can boot her out permanently."

On the way home, I thought about the attorney's suggestion and how much I missed the sex with Sandra. But Sandra was a lunatic and wanted to kill me. Asking her to come back bordered on being suicidal. I wasn't ready for that. Not yet, anyway. Still, her body had its attractions. I groaned.

When I got home I found a 10-inch Bowie knife stuck into the doorframe. Sandra's threats were escalating. My phone's surveillance app showed a person in a large overcoat with the same Nixon mask over their face, giving me the finger.

I went to the police again. They said they would talk with Sandra then get back to me. They never did get back to me. I don't know if they even talked with her. Fuckers probably didn't. I was becoming a nervous wreck.

The doctor handed me a prescription. "This medication will help you deal with the anxiety you're experiencing. Have it filled and take as directed. I'll see you in thirty days."

I went home, poured a scotch, sat in the dark, thought about Sandra and took one of the pills. God, I missed her. No, I said, that's not true. I missed the sex. I poured more scotch.

An hour later I hadn't felt any effects from the pill so I took another. A few minutes later I began to feel pretty good. Things didn't look quite so dark and threatening so I popped another pill. After a few more minutes I was feeling practically euphoric. Life was going to be great after all. I drank more scotch.

The phone rang. Sandra's number scrolled across the screen. I picked up. Before she had a chance to speak, I said, "Sandra, I want you to come back. I miss you." I heard a sharp intake of breath then silence.

"Sandra? Are you still there?"

"Yes, Brian, I'm still here."

"I want you to come back."

"What do you mean, come back?"

"I want you to come back. I want us to be together."

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“When do you want me to come back, Brian?”

“Tonight. Right now. I want you to come back right now.”

“Oh, Brian, I’ve wanted to come back so many times.”

“Hurry, Sandra. I can’t wait.”

“I’ll hurry, Brian. I promise I won’t be long.”

I was feeling great. Things were looking better already. Those pills were wonderful so I took another one, drank more scotch and paced, waiting for her.

I put my arms around her when she came in and gave her a long, deep kiss. She returned my kiss.

“I’m glad you’re back. I missed you so much.” I kissed her neck.

“Oh, Brian, I missed you too.” She hugged me tight.

I kissed her again and felt something rub against my ankle. I looked down. “Why, Sandra, you brought a cat.”

End

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I’m interested in why people behave the way they do. I try to understand and explain their behaviors in my stories. Cat Food is based on the decisions two people made when love and passion went off the rails. Brian knew he was making a bad decision, but that didn’t prevent him from going through with it. Sandra told him what she was going to do to him. Why didn’t he hear her? Maybe it’s because Brian is human and does dumb things, like so many do from time to time, except most of us don’t commit murder. Unless we turn into a Sandra. There might be a little bit of Brian and Sandra in all of us. That’s a worrisome thought in the dark of night.*

I try to be direct and uncomplicated with my prose...have a story to tell, tell it, stop. Writers who have influenced my style and approach to story-telling include Charles Bukowski, Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemmingway, Elmore Leonard, Elizabeth Strout, and especially Jack London, whose short story To Build A Fire, is, in my opinion, likely one of the best ever written.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Robert P. Bishop, a former soldier and teacher, lives in Tucson, Arizona.. His short fiction has appeared in *The Literary Hatchet*, *The Umbrella Factory Magazine*, *CommuterLit*, *Lunate Fiction*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Fleas on the Dog*, *Corner Bar Magazine*, and elsewhere.

THE DELAHOUSSAYE CIVIL WAR

By Benjamin Soileau

WHY WE LIKE IT: *This is the first example of epistolary fiction we've published. It was a style that enjoyed great vogue during the 19th Century and into the fin de siècle. But belle-lettres faded with the advent of communication technology and is—a little sadly--seldom encountered these days. It's a challenging approach because the narrative lens is necessarily boxed in. But this is also an asset because so much can be implied by what's left out. All fiction of this type stands or falls on the voice of the speaker and *The Delahoussaye Civil War*, we are happy to report, stands both tall and proud. We get to know the brothers intimately through Douglas's pleading letters and a whole family history begins to materialize in our imagination. Tone plays a big role here and a spectrum of emotions-- from exasperation to resignation, from anger to self-deprecation, rise and fall as if summoned by gravity—in a voice that registers deeply. Minor characters spring to life on the page and details of setting and history are smithed with an enviable lightness of hand. If Soileau's effulgent prose doesn't tickle the neuron pathways in your brain you need your synapses tested, kiddo. Quote: 'Welcome is a peculiar girl. She thinks deodorant causes Alzheimer's. She's all about the natural way. I never imagined I'd love a woman with more armpit hair than me, but it actually makes me crazy. That Vidalia onion smell about her even. Lord. If you only knew the things she did to me in private, your head would explode. If you get in touch with me, I'll tell you. If that doesn't make you bite, then I guess it's a lost cause. Uncle Mackey used to say if your head cracked open it would just be a bunch of fish and girls spilling out of it' *Five stars.**

The Delahoussaye Civil War

A series of letters, contents of the manila envelope sent by Delmont D Delahoussaye, postmarked Baton Rouge; as read by Sheriff Gentle Tom Squamish

Dear Del,

How do you do? It's been a while, I know. It's pine needle season here. It's like each needle is alive, crawling in from the Fall to accumulate wherever I am, just like your pubes always did. Ha Ha. All I do is sweep.

I was thinking about those pine trees at the old house, how we used to put a ladder to them in a storm and hug those branches toward the top, laughing our asses off while we whipped around.

I just thought I'd write you an old timey letter to say I'm still alive out here. I know you don't do email or any of that social media stuff.

I sure hate that we're on opposite sides of the fence with all this shit. I hope it's only a fever. I hope that text you sent was only bluster. But I just wanted to say I'm remembering the pine trees. We have Doug Firs up here, too big for ladders, and they never run out of needles to sprinkle on me. But because it's mostly wet all the time, they stick to my shoes and track inside, and then they get up in everything.

OK, brother. Things have changed. I met a girl. I'm a different man now. Call me. Or write me back too.

Your brother, Douglas

-

Dear Del,

Maybe you didn't get my letter. I wanted to tell you I met this woman, Welcome. Seriously, that's her name. She's from California. Go figure. It sounds good to say. Welcome. I'm in love, really, is mostly what I want to talk about. Well, and some other things too.

I'm sorry about that phone call. I was blacked out. I must have said something bad for you to fire off that text. I suspect it was just rooster crowing, that whole bit about you having lost a brother.

Come on, now. I hope not too hard of any feelings. I want to talk to you about Welcome.

Call me.

Your Loving brother, Doug

-

Dearest Del,

Did you change your number maybe? I got your voicemail that one time, and talked until it cut me off, but ever since then it's just locust chirping like a fax. These letters aren't bouncing back so I presume they're either following you to a new address or you're playing possum. I'll go ahead and tell you. Me and Welcome are getting married. If you are stonewalling me then I sure hope my engagement breaks through.

I'll go ahead and say it. I'm sorry for whatever it is I said on election night. I was out of my mind and I'd probably had a case of beer before stumbling outside to call you. If I swung low, it was only to wound you. You can't take a drunk seriously. But I haven't had a drink now in 91 days. I want you to be the best man at me and Welcome's wedding. How's that for out the blue? I think it would be a good way to put this pothole in the rearview, brother.

I have so much to tell you. Now will you get in touch with me? We want to have the wedding soon. Give Mindy and Dwayne my love. He must be getting big. Is he girl crazy too?

Your humble big brother,

Douglas

p.s. I'll go ahead and just say it. I came into some money. I was at the casino playing The Price Is Right because I was going crazy trying not to drink and the machine starting clanging and sirens going off, like it was malfunctioning, old Bob Barker and his girls smiling bright. I went all in on craps too and was truly touched, but in the end, what I'm saying, is I won boocoo. Like four hundred thousand boocoo. I'm keeping the trailer and my job. I'm going to make that money work for me, but anyway, the first thing I did was charter a boat, and I paid for all the fellows at work to come, and that's how I met Welcome. We must have had a hundred of what they call rockfish and the captain of the charter told us about these girls that cleaned fish for the boats. So we get to the marina and these three girls in bikinis were in the fish house sawing up

those motherfuckers like gangbusters. Welcome and her two sisters call themselves The Slime Slingers, and of course those drunk cowboys pay out the ass for it.

Anyway, so one thing and another, and now I want you to be my best man. Hurry up and get in touch with me. All my info on here is correct in case you had the wrong address or number, but everything's the same as before. Well, sort of. Ha Ha.

Hurry,

Douglas Delahoussaye

-

Del,

What the shit? I'm between worried and red assed to be honest. I've apologized. I'm hoping you and Mindy are out of town.

We just eloped to the courthouse. I'd always wanted a big wedding with toasts and all that cake splatter stuff, but I never heard from you, and Welcome and her sisters are fighting, and we can't just wait around for the world to start acting right, so we stepped into our new lives alone. The guys at work were the only people interested, and what one's had them brought their significant to meet us after at Buffalo Wild Wings.

Married life suits me. Welcome is a peculiar girl. She thinks deodorant causes Alzheimer's.

She's all about the natural way. I never imagined I'd love a woman with more armpit hair than me, but it actually makes me crazy. That Vidalia onion smell about her even. Lord. If you only knew the things she did to me in private, your head would explode. If you get in touch with me, I'll tell you. If that doesn't make you bite, then I guess it's a lost cause. Uncle Mackey used to say if your head cracked open it would just be a bunch of fish and girls spilling out of it.

Doug

-

Delmont,

I contacted CJ. It took some work, but I found him. He said he saw you at Phil's Oyster Bar, and that you were having a time, drinking and carrying on. He said you still got the same truck with the same damn stickers on it. He mentioned you and Mindy weren't together. Are y'all are on the outs? I sure hope you're doing OK.

I hate that I have to track you down through old acquaintances, just to find out if you're alive.

We're all we've got left, so we can't let something like politics come between us. Still, I'll just never understand it Del, how you can lift up such a shit ass as that. I mean, y'all bought a lemon, and now I got to be drinking old lemonade for four years, so you can't blame me for being sore.

You wouldn't want Uncle Mackey being president, would you? Hell, this joker makes Uncle Mackey look like Gary Cooper. But I'm done, Delmont. I won't talk about it anymore.

I just want to be your brother again.

Douglas

-

Del,

I'm going to be the bigger man here. You can use these letters for your paper airplanes, but I'm going to my grave with a clean slate. Saint Peter won't be able to say I didn't try. I imagine you got in some stupid accident and you're bedridden and that Mindy has to read these letters to you, and she's just too broken up to be able to write me back. It makes it tolerable.

Remember that joke you used to tell about why the blushing bride was smiling so big at her wedding because she knew she'd given her last blow job? I guess I get it now. Ha Ha.

Married life isn't quite what I thought, but then again I never thought someone would ever marry me. Welcome won't let me wear deodorant, but I don't think she cares as much about my getting Alzheimer's as just not liking the smell. She buys the organic stuff, and even though it doesn't work, I use it just to make her happy. I'm learning it's about compromise. And picking your battles. I've learned not to engage with her about petty stuff like her talking on the phone every single minute. It's just not worth it. I guess you already know this stuff, but I would be grateful to have your counsel, you being the expert on such matters.

The laundry room is her little office. She put a lamp in there with her toe scraping tools, and she'll sit on the dryer and talk on the phone all day. I've found it best to leave her to it. I watch a lot of TV waiting for her to come sit with me. And if you thought Uncle Mackey was tight with money, look out! She won't let me touch any of it, not even for dinner and dancing. I don't see the point in having it if you can't spend it, but she swears I'll thank her ten down the line. And hey, we'll only be in our fifties then, and so can enjoy the juice of our fruits growing now. She's helped me get my ducky's straight. She's got a mind for it. So, I still go off to work every day, and everything's about the same as before, except for there's a woman home when I get there, and that's a good thing. Welcome has taken to being a house wife. She claims she's never cleaning a fish again. Fuck fish, she says. She has nightmares about fish. Isn't that funny?

The one thing she did allow we splurge on was a Roomba, and that thing skittles around twenty-four-seven, and it never runs out of pine needles to suck. OK.

Your Brother, Doug

-

Dear Mailbox,

I dig your cave, Box. Thanks for giving me shelter from the bad weather. I saw it on the news. I bet you don't believe global warming is a hoax, sitting out in the elements at the end of Dell's driveway. It's easy for old boss man Del to wave it away, him tucked away in the air conditioning, spilling Little Debbie crumbs all over himself in front of the TV. I'll bet you get lots of coupon books from Little Debbie, thanking Delmont Delahoussaye for his lifelong dedication. When Del was little, Box, he used to climb up in the pantry like a rat, sniffing the LD's that Aunt Tonk hid from him, and he'd sit on the couch all night watching Mama's Family, and he'd eat the entire goddam carton by himself, world be damned.

I just wanted to say Hi, Box. It's nice to stretch out where it's dry before the gate drops and Delmont's ugly mug blots out the light. You're doing your job, though, Box, getting me to the beachhead safe and sound under heavy fire. Alright, Bill! Coupon! Religious Pamphlet! Look alive, men! Some of us ain't coming back!

Yours Forever, Doug

-

Dear Del,

I'm regretting a letter I sent to you. It was mean-spirited and lowdown. I was not in a good place.

I wish I'd sat on it some more.

I feel ashamed and ask your forgiveness. And this to the universe too. Sorry.

Douglas Delahoussaye

-

Dear Del,

Say cheese. Say CHEEEEESE, Delmont. Ha Ha.

Happy Christmas dickface.

-

Dear Delmont,

How'd you like my Christmas card in its pretty yellow envelope? Where you moving, Del?

I know you're getting my letters and I know you got that Christmas card. And a For Sale sign in the yard? After CJ asked me in a nice way to quit bothering him, I hired some crazy old man named Booger to do it. He's the one told me to send the yellow card, and he watched you jog out the house in a bathrobe right after the postman dropped it. He said you ripped it open before you even got back inside. I guess there's a good sized hole in a bedroom window that you don't seem bothered to fix anytime soon? You're not selling a house like that. Who keyed your truck?

Mindy? If I was you, I'd at least spray paint over it or something. Who the hell leaves a truck parked in their driveway that says HERPES MONSTER on one side and CHEATER on the other for all the neighbors to see? Mister Booger said you just sit around all day and go out sometimes at night and that in the week he was watching, you brought two different women home and that one of them was old enough to have had you. My question is what kind of woman gets into a truck that has those things scratched on it? Not a nice one, is my guess. What's gotten into you, Delmont? Where's Mindy and Dwayne? I hope you're not having some kind of midlife crisis. That PI wants me to give him more money, and it's tempting I tell you. But I know enough for now. Call me or something. Write me back. It's good to get your thoughts down. It helps to sort things out. Easy does it. Just take it easy.

Your BROTHER, Douglas D Delahoussaye

-

Dearest Del,

Well, the el shitto has hit the fanno, brother. I've been on the couch for a week, ever since Welcome found out I hired an investigator, and he was one of the cheap ones. She liked to broke a gasket over it. She's still not talking to me. I've never seen someone so angry, except that one time when Uncle Mackey beat your ass so bad.

Anyway, I'm the one won that money and what I invested in was a noble thing. She'll come around. There's never any good news on TV, so I made friends with the Roomba. It makes a good pet, bumping around the coffee table, like it can't get enough pine needles to eat. Guess what I named it? That's all for now, old brother pal.

DDD

-

Del,

It's gray and gloomy, go figure. The summers up here are dreamy, but damn if I'll never get used to the long wet winters. They just stretch on.

But here's some silver. Welcome's ready to start forgiving me. She's fixing up a special meal on Friday night when I come in from work and it's turning out to be a real date. In my own house.

Ha Ha. I'm ready to get back into bed with her, but she says one thing at a time. I can't honestly imagine Welcome cooking a proper meal, but we'll see. She's pretty good at making Eggos and Boyardee, but she seems excited about trying something new and I want to encourage it. I guess I took Aunt Tonk's suppers for granted growing up. She could sling it.

I've made myself pretty cozy on the couch. You should see little Dell get after the pine needles. He hunts them, and then gets so excited humping a cluster of them. I laugh my ass off watching him. It's a true chortle, those pine needles flying up into his mouth like rain pellets on tin. It sounds like he's talking then, in his own way.

I also wanted to tell you I had the weirdest dream that you and I had a child together. He was young, about twelve, I guess, and he was the perfect person. I don't know his name. He had my brains and your good looks and charm and he lived at the farm where Uncle Mackey was training him to be president. We showed up at the same time for some scheduled visit and it was good seeing you. It was so real. It was the old Uncle Mackey too, before he hit his head. It was very pleasant and very real and when I woke up I decided.

I, Douglass D Delahoussaye, revoke my political affiliation, and hereby agree to register as a Republican. I will even send you the card to prove it. All hail, King Dummy. Shit, we can even make Uncle Mackey Vice President. Fuck it. Nothing matters anymore. I'm serious, Delmont. All you have to do is reach out and I'll do it and then we never have to talk about it again. (Little Del just found him a scatter of needles and while he was sucking them up it sounded like he was choking a little, getting worked up, like he's excited about this venture.)

I'm encouraged about how you will take this olive branch, brother. I'm ready to be your brother again. Wish me luck on my date tomorrow night. Today's Thursday. Friday seems like forever.

Your Brother, Surrendered,

Doug

-

Dearest Delmont,

I am grateful to be writing this letter to you. I've been twirling in a fevered eddy in death's harbor. I saw the devils or angles maybe, stirring in the shadows on that creaky old pier, scuttling with their ropes to tie up and dock me. I was ready to let them do it too, I was so goddam sick, but the powers that be saw fit to put me on an outgoing current, back into the open swells to sail another day.

Jesus, but I was sick. I only just got back on the couch from the bathroom where I lived on the tiles by the commode. I took my hydration from the sink in there, although, I didn't keep much of it down. It's hard to explain, but the bathroom I was in was like a time capsule. It was only four days, but it seemed like four years. It still feels like there's a sun-baked, squashed possum in my tummy, and a metal tang in the back of my throat, but it's ten times better than where I was a few days ago. Welcome says it was something in the ground pork she used for the casserole, but she didn't get sick. Then again, she's got the abdominal constitution of a pelican, her coming up on her father's slop. She's talking about making the grocery store pay for selling us spoiled meat, but I don't even care. I'm just happy to be alive. I'm looking forward to getting back to work on Monday. None of the fellows at work checked in on me, which goes to show that we're all we've got. When it comes down to it, I mean, family is all there is.

When I was down on the tiles, and I thought I was dying in there, the thing that came to mind was when Uncle Mackey beat you that time, which is strange because I hadn't thought too much about it in the last thirty-five years, but I have to tell you the truth now.

You know that back room in the barn we weren't supposed to go in where he kept that half a broke down tractor? I was in there rooting for whatever, and I found this cigar box tucked away behind these big cans of rat poison. It was all these photos, like polaroid pictures of Uncle Mackey with these kinds of frog women. I don't know how else to describe it. They were naked, but waxy or something, froggish, and Uncle Mackey was in the pictures too, wearing ladies underwear, laughing with them. Maybe he had a wig. I didn't look at them long, didn't want to. I slid the box back best I could and when I came out that room he was standing in the barn looking dead at me. The scariest I've been ever, that. I panicked and told him I was looking for some box you'd told me about, but that I couldn't find it. It just came out. He slapped me up pretty

good, making sure I hadn't really seen it, I guess, and I could've won an Oscar for my performance, because then he went off looking for you, I guess. I don't think I ever went into that barn again.

So that's why that happened, Del. It was my fault, but I think I might have used it for leverage against you. Like telling you it was for this or that reason. Like he beat you because it was your fault that Mama and Daddy checked out. I think I might have said something like that once. Jesus, I sure am sorry for that one.

I thought it might be good for you to know this. I believe it's what kept me fighting in that bathroom, my wanting to come clean about it, even though I hadn't really thought about it all these years. I feel a thousand pounds lighter already.

Things are on the up all around. Welcome came creeping down the hallway to check on me and laid down with me. It was good to have her so close and to smell her. I wasn't up for doing anything more than that though, which goes to show how tired I still am, but it was a tender moment we had. She feels bad about how our date night turned out, so she's going to try again tonight. I hadn't been able to eat anything more than Saltines, but she's determined I get something down. Light and healthy. Guess what she's making? Fish. She's sticking with the one thing she knows how to cook, even though she swore it off forever. I guess that's love, huh brother? She promised she won't mess it up this time and I believe her.

In other news, little Del got something caught in his throat, and quit working. He still comes on, but he just makes this awful sound and he isn't eating. I look forward to fixing him this weekend when I get my juice up. There's already pine needles stacking up and I haven't even been outside. It's a crazy world. From where I sit on the couch I can see the trees they come from swaying out the window. There's a bad wind storm building, supposed to throttle us all weekend,

and I can't help but imagine whipping around up in those treetops, away from all the strife down here. I got half a mind to snatch my neighbor's extension ladder and see if I can't make those branches up top. Pass a good time for a change. Ha Ha. Remember us doing that?

Well, the mailman ought to be here soon so I need to go put this in the box. I sure hope you're doing OK, Del. I hope you're sorting things out. My offer still stands whenever you feel like taking me up on it. All you have to do is reach out. Quit wasting time. This will all just be a bad dream down the line. Don't make me chase you, Del.

Wish me luck tonight on my date. I'm ready to get back in bed with Welcome, and get to getting my house in order. All I want is for everything to be the way it was before.

your brother

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story came about in the wake of the last election, thinking about how many relationships must have been damaged by its particular ghastliness. The story took an epistolary form when I realized that you can block someone on social media, but a good old fashioned letter will always find its mark. I quickly understood that all the correspondence would be from the same man, and it became a challenge to see what it might reveal about the silent brother.*

I always have Ray Carver somewhere near, and maybe I was inspired by his story, "Why, Honey?"

BIO: *Benjamin Soileau is from south Louisiana. His fiction has appeared in Prairie Schooner, Colorado Review, Opossum, Grist, Louisiana Literature, Bayou, Superstition Review and many other journals. He won the 2018 Rumble Fish Quarterly New Year's Writing Contest, and is a special mention in The 2020 Pushcart Prize Anthology. He is a stay at home daddy-o in Olympia, Washington. Reach him at bsoile2@gmail.com.*

SEE THESE STARS

By Adam Kelly Morton

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A woman dying of cancer (actually, the starvation imposed by her ravaged cells) reflects upon her life as lover, mother and wife and the three men who animated and stirred it. This is a cry from the heart that tears apart the fragile myths we construct to protect ourselves and we cannot help being drawn into her story and affected by her words. Her dying moment is one the strongest last lines in any of the fiction we have so far published. It's also a technical triumph: a three and a half page story comprised of a single sentence inspired by Moll Bloom's immortal soliloquy in Joyce's Ulysses. But in the author's capable hands, Candace's elegiac stream of conscious is not so much dreamlike as tragically clear-headed. The writing is so beautiful, the voice so layered, we really want to quote everything but will limit ourselves to: 'it broke through the skin surface, a lesion of bloody stuff that looked like coral.' And, '...and it's just Pierre and me, and there's just a simple, almost red kind of feeling, that comes in behind my eyes and takes Pierre away for the moment, loyal Pierre.' Five stars.*

See These Stars

I wish Pierre would stop shaking me—in my cherrywood, empire bed, warm duvet with rose pattern, May light making its way through the rain onto the yellow rug (that's been here since I bought the house with *him* in 1979) and my acidosis smell of rotten apple Cutex (which I won't miss at all)—because there's just no hope of stopping the cells from growing, first in my left, where Christopher preferred to nurse (probably because it was closer to my heart, the milk warmer) and now growing in other places I haven't told him because I want to protect him, though I know he'll miss me—my son the actor, just what I wanted—though there's no crescendo of applause at the final curtain, no white tunnel, no fade to black, no *Gone with the Wind* "Frankly, my dear," no "Tomorrow is another day," and if I am Scarlett, then I suppose *he* was

Rhett: plain old Larry Mill from Arnprior, Ontario, textile dyer, *his* chemical smell from the coloured yarn, his few wisps of brown hair and slate-blue eyes, oh how he swooned me with his small-town charms, and we were happy here, in our Montreal home, and I suppose he did love Christopher—all pumpkin haired with his father's eyes—who could have been Dr. Christopher Maigris-Mill, renowned actor and healer, winning his Oscar while curing his very own mother, miraculously restoring her appetite—because I never refused a good *filet mignon méditerranée* from the Caverne Grecque restaurant (where I had my first date with Pierre, the first of many) with a bottle of *Notre Vin Maison* red, then home to white from the four-litre box, never too much (just enough to be pleasant) in our beige-tiled kitchen, my scarlet bathrobe, watching Mae West on the little black and white television, "What a dump," just sipping, though I know when he was a teenager Christopher sometimes found me passed out in the kitchen, and helped me to bed, I know that upset him, but with Pierre snoring like an aircraft, why even that I'll miss, along with his moustache, (I dyed it black for him whenever it began to grey—Larry had a moustache too, maybe I was a little obsessed with Rhett Butler) and his wire-rimmed glasses (looking ever-so-much the mathematician, Larry didn't wear glasses, though I think he does now, for that redhead who looks just like me, though much younger, at eighty-five pounds I weigh less than her now *so there*) I'm sure Pierre already misses how I was gorgeous once, (and will be again once they burn me into a discreet, cherrywood urn, leaving nothing but fabulous photographs of me behind, and Pierre knows I don't want to be put in the ground) though I wish he'd stop shaking me, it's so humiliating—at the funeral everyone will remember me only by my Polaroids, oh, I was always ready to pose for a Polaroid, (they will remember my sultry days) my breasts were the envy of every girl on Esplanade, I was not afraid of *décolleté*, *non non*, scandalous in the 1950s, but they were the Mile End's main attraction, snagging Larry (the pig)

and poor Pierre, oh, how I wish he wouldn't cry, it's about to happen and he's helpless (so am I, I suppose) because it has grown so much; it's not even what is killing me, it's starvation; I just couldn't get anything down, no matter how hard Pierre and Christopher tried, (in the last few weeks only an Ensure *Café au Lait* or two, I won't miss those either,) oh I wish Christopher were here, I am so proud of him, now taking on acting—his true calling—though my proudest day was when he walked up in front of the McGill university great hall and handed his Bachelor of Science diploma to me, "This is for you, Mom," and the tears rolled down our faces, just like Pierre's now, (I wish he were downstairs working on his math problems so I could be peaceful,) I should have listened to him when I found the first lump, right above my heart, an old milk gland shriveled up, I thought, but it grew, then hurt, years I was afraid to have it checked, seven years: I sat in the kitchen and sipped and watched Garbo, "I want to be alone," it broke through the skin surface, a lesion of bloody stuff that looked like coral, and Pierre begged me to see someone so finally I went in and the first doctor told me, (he had a moustache too, there's an irony there,) by the time I told Christopher it had already spread; he may resent me for it but it was to protect him, I didn't tell him about it spreading to my clavicle, though he must have found out, coming to all my chemotherapy appointments at St. Mary's, I will not miss that room one bit—they try to make it nice with light streaming in through the big windows, and pictures of flowers and children, and apple-green paint for health and nature, but I wasn't fooled for a minute, all those sickly strangers, no privacy, it's all a show—even the handsome, moustachioed, Doctor Clark, taking me off chemo for a while because I'm not eating enough, fine by me; a few weeks off was what I needed, and the few weeks became a month, then two, now here we are—and Christopher left here this morning to meet some friends downtown, getting on with his life, (I wish I could have lived his life for him, I would have been a great actress,) but now it's happening and it's just

Pierre and me, and there's just a simple, almost red kind of feeling, that comes in behind my eyes and takes Pierre away for the moment, loyal Pierre, I will miss our movie nights in the den, I introduced him to Hollywood, and Oscar night champagne and strawberries, (though he always fell asleep before the end,) I will miss our ritual Friday nights of making love, Pierre so careful and gentle, I loved his great weight on top of me... but now the red feeling is bringing me, and it is upsetting Pierre so, but he will move on and meet someone else, (she will never be as charming, or as funny, or as endowed as I was, ha ha,) plus, I cooked him Sunday roasts and baked lasagnas and apple pies, and taught him the world of cinema, like I did for Christopher who will inherit our little house, (paid for by his father, he did *that* much right,) and my little savings, (from Pierre's rent over the years,) oh, my only son: I pray you will have wisdom, and God's blessing, which is all I wanted for you, ever since you were a little boy... I'll be seeing Mama and Papa soon, and they will hold me in their arms and be proud of me too, and Mama will say "You're home now, Candace," and Papa will say "My little girl, the star," because when I was his little girl I wanted all the world to see me, to dazzle the silver screen and sign autographs: Candace May, in red ink, I can see it now, it's just too bad I never made it to Hollywood, to the Chinese Theater, (Hell, I never even made it to the Rialto on Park Avenue,) Pierre is shouting at me but the warmth of the duvet slides down along my cold, thin bones and skin, right down to my feet... I do wish that Christopher were here for this... I wish he could see these marquee lights before my eyes, as he and I have always been together through everything... and I wish and hope the best for him, but most of all...oh, how I wish... I wish... he could see... these stars.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *My mom passed away from breast cancer in 2011, and I had to do some writing about it. This piece went through many incarnations before becoming what it is: a single-*

sentence monologue, inspired by the final chapter of Joyce's Ulysses (60+ pages of stream-of-consciousness from Bloom's wife). I wanted the story to celebrate my mom's phenomenal expressivity, as well as her flair for the dramatic.

BIO: *Adam Kelly Morton is a Montreal-based husband, father (four kids, all six-and-under), acting teacher, gamer, filmmaker, and writer. He has been published in Spelk, The Junction, Anti-Heroine Chic, The Fiction Pool, Open Pen London, and Talking Soup, among others. He has an upcoming piece in A Wild and Precious Life: A Recovery Anthology, to be published in 2020.*

WAKING HOURS (Fiction)

By Tina Cabrera

This story, together with ‘Waking Hours (Anti-fiction)’ posted below it in the TOC, are both from Tina Cabrera’s latest collection *Giving Up the Ghost (and other Hauntings)* published by Atmosphere Press, Spring 2020. Reprinted with kind permission. Atmosphere Press is ‘*an independent, full service publisher for excellent books in all genres and for all audiences.*’ Visit them at atmospherepress.com

*In an email to Charles, Tina Cabrera writes: I wanted to invite you and the other editors to contribute to an online journal I’m starting called **HYBRIDITIES**, the first issue to be themed Life in the Time of Corona. The link is **HYBRIDITIES.com/submissions/**. I’m planning to publish pieces as they come in and eventually turn it in to a pdf. **Please submit!***

WHY I LIKE IT: Guest editor/author DIRK VAN NOUHUYS writes:

I like Waking Hours because it stirs my mind. It throws up clues, like a mystery story, but in a mystery story the author has arranged the clues rigorously like Gretel and Hansel's white pebbles, and they lead you to a comfy conclusion. That's the deal between the author of mystery stories and the reader. Waking Hours throws up only clues and the crumbs are scattered by the birds as in Gretel and Hansel's second journey, then re-scattered by the anti-birds, which force us to wander into a dangerous confection. The confection houses a series of statements that are repetitive, but distinct. For Gilles Deleuze difference precedes being. Cabrera prompts us to consider the connection, but does not guide us, among such things as: sleeping cats, the consciousness of deaf and blind, and Gilles Deleuze. Anti-fiction provides snatches of background material, like disorderly footnotes. She also leads us off the page: I watched the movie she tells about, and only partly agreed with how she saw it (I need to ponder that). I read the Wikipedia pages on Gilles Deleuze. I searched the Internet for who said, "Do not be sad when death arrives"—you may be surprised at the answer. The deal in this fiction is: there's no simple answer. More thought provoking than Agatha Christie and more fun.

Waking Hours (Fiction)

The cat – in play-dead position, marble eyes rolled back – murmurs like a dreamer. Maybe she is prey in some exciting chase. Maybe the fluttering of her eyes and the quivering of her mouth are merely a reflex.

The man who looks like a child sits on the floor, dressed in a sweater and tie. The documentary film camera focuses on him for a (painfully) long time. Both deaf and blind, he's forgotten how to speak and write. Incapable of dressing himself and maybe of abstract thinking. When he spits and drools and slaps his cheek, listen to what he is saying.

The philosopher threw himself out the window. Maybe death's delay was too much to take, and after years of deliberation he took the leap.

If you could pray, maybe you would ask to die a sudden death unexpectedly. Or maybe you would choose. Time to pay. Time to pay.

Do not be sad when death arrives, someone somewhere must have once said. Welcome and accept it, rather than crying like a lost child.

The man-child can't help it. He spits and dribbles. He winks.

The cat can't help sleeping through the waking hours.

There are worse things than death.

Hand the man-child a banana and he will eat immediately. He may never think of a tree the way a philosopher thinks of one, but he can feel one with his hands and climb it without analyzing what makes a tree a tree.

If the man-child could speak, maybe he would say: This constant buzzing in my head. Make it stop—please. If you do, I'll stop slapping and scratching myself, stop crawling on all four of these things you call hands and feet.

The philosopher threw himself out the window. Suddenly. Maybe it was merely a reflex. Contradiction. After several years of struggling to breathe.

Look before you leap.

The philosopher starts from the position of thinking.

The cat stares for hours on end, when she's not sleeping. Maybe daydreaming. In between.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Waking Hours* is part of my manuscript called *Counterbook: Fiction, Anti-Fiction, and the In-Between*, a series of narratives that present two forms of the same story. For this particular pairing, I think I was compelled by a desire to understand the relationship between memory, dream, and the waking world and by a sort of Zen concept that they are all interlinked. The "anti-fiction" version is especially interested in exploring the various versions of stories whether "factual" or "fiction," and what can be gained (or lost) by exploring them all. I was definitely influenced by Borges and his philosophical style, especially this quote that serves as the epigraph of the collection: "Works of fiction contain a single plot, with all its imaginable permutations" and a "book that does not contain its counterbook is considered incomplete (from Borges's short story, "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius")."

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Tina V. Cabrera currently resides in the ATX area with her husband, dog and two cats. She teaches as Assistant Professor of English for Temple College and devotes her free time to writing and making art. Visit her website at tvcannyuncanny.com*

WAKING HOURS (Anti-Fiction)

By Tina Cabrera

This story, together with ‘Waking Hours (Fiction)’ posted above it in the TOC, are both from Tina Cabrera’s latest collection *Giving Up the Ghost (and other Hauntings)* published by Atmosphere Press, Spring 2020. Reprinted with kind permission. Atmosphere Press is ‘*an independent, full service publisher for excellent books in all genres and for all audiences.*’ Visit them at atmospherepress.com

Waking Hours (Anti-Fiction)

If a cat—or any other mammal for that matter—is observed murmuring, its eyes fluttering, and its mouth quivering, can it be claimed that it is dreaming?

Psychology Today claims that animals do in fact dream. Scientists are confident that all mammals dream. According to research conducted at MIT, "rats have been shown to dream about previously running a maze, and researchers have also discovered that they have complex dreams."

If rats can dream complexly, so can cats.

Of what exactly rats and cats dream, scientists are not sure. Some speculate that future researchers will find the answers. For now, one can only imagine: running a maze, pouncing, playing, prey in some exciting chase.

*

Werner Herzog's 1971 film *Land of Silence and Darkness* includes footage of Heinrich Fleischmann, a man both deaf and blind, who has forgotten how to speak and write, and has lived in a stable with animals. He stumbles into a tree, feeling the trunk and branches and leaves.

Footage of a man both deaf and blind, Heinrich Fleischmann, is included in the film *Land of Silence and Darkness*. Fleischmann has forgotten how to speak and write. At some point, he lived in a stable with animals. The camera focuses on him stumbling into a tree, feeling the trunk, branches, and leaves, among other things.

We see Heinrich Fleischmann sitting on the floor, appearing as a man-child, dressed in a sweater and tie. The camera seems to focus on him for a (painfully) long time. We see him eat a banana. We see him stumble into a tree, feeling the trunk and branches and leaves. Who wouldn't feel moved? If we are not moved, this says something, though what exactly one can't be completely certain.

*

OBITUARY: Gilles Deleuze

" - he committed suicide by throwing himself from his flat in Paris - "

Source: The *Independent* online archive, published Wednesday 08 November 1995.

"In 1995, he committed suicide, throwing himself from the window of his apartment."

Source: *Wikipedia*.

"November 4, 1995. Avenue Niel, Paris. The broken body of an old man lies crumpled on the footpath. It is that of Gilles Deleuze, the philosopher. His apartment room window, three stories above, stands open. There is no suicide note, yet it is clear enough what has happened. After twenty-five years of increasing physical infirmity, *the struggle to live had become too much for Deleuze* and he took his life" (italics added).

Source: *First Things*, Issue Archive, May 2007.

First Things Masthead: "First Things is published by The Institute on Religion and Public Life, an interreligious nonpartisan research and education institute whose purpose is to advance a religiously informed public philosophy for the ordering of society."

Fact or fiction?

Google News: The Post and Courier - Nov 6, 1995, *Philosopher Gilles Deleuze commits suicide at 70*, Associated Press

"The author of one of the world's best-selling philosophy books, "The Anti-Oedipus," had suffered for years from a serious respiratory illness and recently underwent a tracheotomy."

Jump to new paragraph: "Deleuze was born in 1925 into a conservative Paris family."

Read between the lines.

*

If you could pray, would you ask for a sudden death rather than a long-winded, expected one? Or would you pray for forgiveness for what you are about to do?

Do not be sad when death arrives, someone somewhere might have said. Welcome and accept it rather than crying like a lost child.

Fleischmann couldn't help it.

Cats can't help it.

Some say there are worse things than death.

A man like Fleischmann may not ever think the way a philosopher thinks, but he'll immediately eat a banana or climb a tree without stopping to think.

If he could speak, maybe he would say: This constant buzzing in my head. Make it stop please. If you do, I'll stop. I'll stop slapping and scratching and crawling like an animal. At least animals dream.

The philosopher Gilles Deleuze threw himself out the window. Whether it was sudden or done with forethought, no one really knows. Maybe he did it because he suffered physically for several years. Maybe.

Someone somewhere said: "Think before you leap," and this saying eventually became a platitude, a cliché.

A philosopher normally starts from a position of thinking and ends in a position of thinking. Maybe.

Cats stare through the waking hours. Some say they dream. Daydream? Maybe. In between.

*

Addendum: What does one have to do with the other? Read carefully, and if you do, it will all come together.

LUNCH TIME

By Alexander Jones

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author MICHAEL HOWARD writes: Perhaps the most effective—and surely the most efficient—means of developing characters and presenting them to readers is through dialogue. More can be said about a character or a scenario in one well-crafted line of speech than in five pages of mediocre description. Salinger knew it, Hemingway knew it, Steinbeck knew it, and the author of this story evidently knows it. Consisting wholly of dialogue, minus the tags, this one-act play manages to boldly communicate the frustration, banality and conformity that so often characterize middling suburban existence without ever directly alluding to it. All that is going on is going on beneath the surface, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps as he or she likes. The author creates the scene, but the reader completes it—and that, ultimately, is how fiction should operate. Frills have no place here; ingenuity of form does, though, as you’ll see when you start reading. With such a boiled-down style, every line has to pop, and in this story they do. Try these on for size:*

Hey, that’s not funny.

Yeah, lay off. He’s touchy now that he’s the one in the family wearing the leash.

Whipped.

Fuck both of you.

Lunch Time

Cold, overcooked meatloaf. Again.

At least you’re married and your wife’ll cook for you. I’ve got turkey. Again. And the kid didn’t put enough fucking mustard on it. Again.

That’s life as a bachelor. Me, I got peanut butter.

You have peanut butter every day.

So? You both are the ones complaining. I like having peanut butter every day.

You love, love, love that peanut butter.

Yup.

You're the type of pervert that'll put peanut butter all over your dick and let the dog lick it off.

Why are you always starting shit with me? He's starting his bullshit again.

How about you?

He's just trolling. Desperate for attention.

You're not denying it, though.

Dogs love peanut butter.

That's animal cruelty.

You're a fucking dirty pervert, you know that?

You started talking about this. And I don't even have a dog.

Well, I'm not letting you near my dog.

You don't have a dog either. Your wife decided you weren't getting one.

We had a dog. She just didn't want another after he died.

Choked to death on the peanut butter?

Hey, that's not funny.

Yeah, lay off. He's touchy now that he's the one in the family wearing the leash.

Whipped.

Fuck both of you.

You know, speaking about pets and animals and all, you know what I saw on one of those nature shows my son likes?

You're not going to start talking about watching the lions fuck again, are you?

It was tigers, not lions.

What difference does it make?

They're not the same animal.

I said 'what difference does it make?' not 'what's the difference?'

Don't take it out on him, that you're mad your wife won't let you get another dog.

That was so thirty seconds ago. What'd you see on the nature show?

It was about animals in the ocean. It said that an octopus is smarter than a dog.

Bullshit.

It's true.

Do you believe everything you see on tv?

There was a lot of, like, evidence to back it up.

Evidence?

Scientific shit.

Still sounds like bullshit to me.

No, it's true. It says right here... hang on, my signal died again... alright, here we go. It says that an octopus has better recognition of shapes and numbers than a dog, more problem solving ability and that it's the smartest non-vertebrate animal.

There's no way an octopus is smarter than a dog.

It says so, right here. And, hey, it's on the internet so it has to be true, right?

Whatever.

Google it yourself, then.

I don't have internet in here. I never get internet in here. I'm lucky if I even get texts.

That's because of your bullshit phone.

I'm not cheap.

Did I say that? Don't get all defensive. He's getting defensive.

That's because when someone accuses you of being cheap, there's no way to argue your way out of it.

Like being a pervert?

Anyway, at least according to this, some people are saying an octopus is smarter than a dog. So it's worth thinking about.

Some people.

Scientists doing research.

Our tax dollars at work.

The show said they're training octopuses to do things, so maybe it's worth it. I mean, an octopus could do your job, even if it is dumber than a dog.

Stop trying to sound like you know what you're talking about, it's octopi, not octopuses. You sound extra fucking stupid when you try and sound smart, you know that?

Octopuses isn't wrong.

It's octopi.

Actually, both of them are acceptable, according to this.

See?

You need him to keep backing you up.

If you weren't too cheap to get a real phone, you could look up this shit yourself and you wouldn't need me to play referee.

No one needs you to play referee, you just like coming off like you're the reasonable one, like you're some fucking... guardian of knowledge and wisdom.

No, he just sounds like someone that spent money on a phone with internet service.

And he believes everything he reads on the internet, so what does that prove?

It says here that octopuses mainly eat crabs, clams and other small crustaceans.

So?

Would you let an octopus suck clam meat off your balls?

I don't want to think about it.

Seriously. An octopus is in the water, so it's probably slippery, which feels good, and this says that they don't have teeth or claws, so you don't have to worry about it biting and scratching you. Plus it has eight arms, so it can jerk you off and cup your balls at the same time, and still have a couple tentacles left over to massage your ass.

Huh.

That's gay.

An octopus isn't even a person, so how can fucking an octopus be gay?

Fucking an octopus can be stupid, though. The show said that they're poisonous.

Oh, wait. Yeah, it does say that down here, though. But still, it doesn't have teeth. Or hair. I'm-

We only got like, two more minutes.

Shit. I didn't even have time to finish.

You talk too much.

No I don't.

If you couldn't finish your lunch because you were talking, then you were talking too fucking much.

I didn't even really want it. The guy didn't put on enough mustard.

Don't throw it out, I'll take that other half.

Sure?

Man, I only eat peanut butter every fucking day. Gimme the rest of the sandwich?

Knock yourself out.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story was inspired by my interest in minimalism and because I recently took a class in dramatic writing. For the most part, other people get a sense of who we are by what we do and what we say; the problem is that most of us don't get the chance for grand, sweeping, memorable actions on day to day basis. Instead, we have mundane conversations like the characters in "Lunch Time." Which is where the need for characterization through dialogue becomes paramount, similar to a stage play. A coworker recently showed me a Not Safe For Work anime tentacle porn image, and the rest flowed pretty naturally. As a literary inspiration, Nicholson Baker wrote a novel titled "Vox" in which a man and a woman discuss their sex lives over the telephone, using nothing but dialogue. Monica Lewinsky famously gave a copy of it to Bill Clinton. Elmore Leonard is a dialogue master. So is Hemingway.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Alexander Jones has short fiction and poetry appearing Akashic Books, Bastion Magazine, Crack the Spine and DASH, among other publications. His nonfiction was recently anthologized by 2Leaf Press; multiple short stories he's written have received honorable mentions in Writer's Digest Annual contests and an essay he wrote won GoRail's 2012 contest. He has a BA in English/ Creative Writing and is currently pursuing a second BA in History. He works as a metal fabricator and lives with his family in New Jersey.*

EDITOR'S BIO: *Michael Howard's essays and short stories have appeared in a wide variety of print and digital publications. His website is michaelwilliamhoward.com. His story 'At the end of the day' appears in this issue (fiction).*

VIDEO GAMES

By S. F. Wright

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We like the way the author uses repetition and short staccato sentences to convey both the obsession that has taken hold of his life and the monotonous dead zone his life has become in this short but effecting study of a young dude and his addiction to video gaming. The reason for his numbing compulsion is never explained nor does the story's ending point to any kind of resolution. His existence as an automaton entrapped in a bleak aimless 'present' is a metaphor for the generational drift that has come, in some ways, to define millennial culture.*

VIDEO GAMES

Drew played video games much growing up. But he'd gotten rid of his games and consoles, having decided he was too old. After seeing advertisements for Grand Theft Auto III, though, he stopped at GameStop one day. Within five minutes, he was the owner of a PlayStation 2 and a copy of Grand Theft Auto III.

After a few minutes, he managed to hook up the PlayStation 2. He then inserted the CD; a moment later, the yellow Rockstar logo appeared.

The next day, Drew played Grand Theft Auto III all morning and afternoon, stopping only to eat and shower. With reluctance, he left for his four o'clock shift at 3:50.

When he got home, he resumed playing, a glass of Jim Beam and Coca-Cola by his side. And even though he had to work at twelve the next day, he played until three a.m.

The following morning, his mother and father got ready to go to Connecticut to visit Drew's sister.

He played Grand Theft Auto III while his mother gave him instructions:

Take the dog out.

Get the mail.

Get the newspapers.

All right.

He played until 11:30. Then he took the dog out and left for work.

That evening, he played late, drinking Jim Beam and Coca-Cola; and around two a.m., he decided to call out; he just had to wake up to do so.

He took a long sip of bourbon and cola and sped through Little Italy.

He got Nat. It was 7:04 a.m.

Hey. He did his best to sound ill, which wasn't hard, considering his hangover. Not feeling well. Think I'm gonna call out.

Yeah?

He affected to cough. Think I got the flu.

All right. Feel better.

He hung up, went back to sleep.

He played Grand Theft Auto III all day. He stopped only to eat lunch, take the dog out, feed the dog, order Dominos, pay and tip the delivery guy, eat, and take the dog out again.

As he raced through streets and shot pedestrians and hookers with his AK-47, he felt numb. He wanted to believe it was from the bourbon, but knew his mind was getting fried.

Gotta cool it. Gotta take a break.

But he played until 2:30 a.m., drunk by the time he passed out on the couch.

The clock said 12:08. Drew looked at the floor. The dog had shit on the rug. He felt guilty, annoyed. He cleaned it up, took the dog out.

After eating an English muffin, he turned on the PlayStation 2.

He played throughout the day, but was burdened by the knowledge that he had to get up early: American Literary Realism at 8:30, Creative Writing at 11:05. He'd already blown off both of those classes twice.

He paused the game to feed the dog, take him out, order Chinese. When it arrived, he ate hungrily: an egg roll, dumplings, chicken with broccoli.

Should give the game a rest.

But I'll play just a bit more.

And since it's after six, I'll do so with a Jim Beam and Coke.

Immersed in his game, his buzz getting stronger, he considered not going to his classes. He was sure other students had or would miss three classes as well.

The dog whimpered.

When he came back in, he gave the dog a treat and stood in front of the screen. He wanted to keep playing. He wanted to keep playing and drinking and not have to get up for classes or work or anything else.

He took a sip, finished his drink. He wanted another. But if he did go to his classes, he'd have to cut it out.

He stared at the screen.

He then picked up the control and sped through Chinatown.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story was inspired by my time working at a Barnes and Noble in my early twenties, during which I became very interested in video games, after having not played them for a few years. I wanted to address how stupefying, time-consuming, and addictive video games can be. My influences, among many others, are Richard Yates, Raymond Carver, John Williams, Evan Connell, Larry Brown, Jane Austen, Hubert Selby, Henry Green, Charles Bukowski, and Flannery O'Connor.*

BIO: *S.F. Wright lives and teaches in New Jersey. His work has appeared in Quarter After Eight, Linden Avenue Literary Journal, and Elm Leaves Journal, among other places. His website is sfwrightwriter.com*

FOSSILS

By Nancy Moir

WHY WE LIKE IT: *'Fossils' are both subject and symbol in this beautifully written story where a feisty paleontologist grandmother and an absentee artist father become the positive and negative charges in a young boy's 'coming of age'. Details of setting take hold in the mind: the inhospitable African desert that conceals priceless treasures beneath its depths and the unlikely 'resurrection' of a lovable dinosaur named Seymour. The author's style is deceptively simple: writing of this caliber only comes with talent and hard work. Quote: Alongside her grave, a bone pointed out angrily, laughing at me. I had no energy to kick it away. The sun was too hot. The rock was quiet. I laid my ear against it but heard only my own grief. And, The warehouse was bright and air-conditioned. I caught my face in its shiny surfaces and glimpsed a scarecrow. Economical linear story telling that yields an abundance of psychological and literary intricacies.*

"There," she said, pointing at the rock. I followed her fingers, but saw nothing beyond the slight variations in the stone, and the shadows of her hand, her brush, her chisel. Grandma was in her seventies, and though her skin was spotted and wrinkled, and her joints often creaked, she still had the eyes of a hawk. "That could be something," she said, handing her tools off to me behind her back. "Carefully," she warned, before setting herself back down on the rock, knees cracking as she fell into its embrace.

Father was an artist, and Mother was dead, so I lived with Grandma in the summers, which, in her occupation, was most of the year. I arrived in April, pale and lithe, and sprawled myself onto the sand like a starfish, too weak to bear my weight upon my elbows for long stretches. By May, the sun had basted and burned my skin and the work had built muscle beneath its slackness. When I arrived home in November, acquaintances would ask my father if I was adopted. It was true that we looked like we were of different ethnicities. He had not aged, but I had grown up and grown old.

As intense as the sun was alongside her, those green landscapes of home, which I rarely saw, were blinding to a child starved of colour. I lived in a sepia world, spending most of my days laid out on the rock beside her, narrowed into her shadow to shield myself from the sun, but mostly, to be close to her.

Grandma tutored me as she shaved stone from the creatures bound within it. The wind was punctuated by proclamations of "Aha, Samuel!" when I was correct and long silences when I

was wrong, as she waited for me to think and compute new answers. When I was 15, I begged my father to let me stay, and he gave in, much more quickly than I thought he would. A formal education would have been a disservice to all of us. She needed to purge her knowledge; I needed to know everything; Father needed his space.

At lunch, I often travelled with her to the nearest village. She drove like a maniac, which was quite a contrast to the way she worked (“Not so rough, Samuel! Those fossils have been there for millennia. Don’t break them to save an hour or day!”). She dodged cars, camels, horses, and pedestrians, waving to each, regardless as to whether they were capable of responding. I laughed as she clutched the steering wheel, and her face split into a smile as wide as the sky.

She selected individual fruits and vegetables from the stands, bartering with a smile. “At home in America,” she once told me, “I don’t like going to the grocer. They look at me and see an old woman. Do you think I’m old?” she’d ask, then answer her own question with a gesture. “Those bones are old,” she’d say, jostling the dice, carved from mammoth bones, which she kept in her pocket. “Not these.” She’d flex her muscles like a bodybuilder and we’d laugh.

I asked her once why she became a paleontologist; it seemed like such a tedious job. She lined her tools up one-by-one, like a dentist. The sky was overcast, so I could see her clearly—the smattering of freckles that merged across her nose, and her lake-green eyes. “When I was a little girl, I read stories about dragons—ancient stories, from before we’d begun to properly reassemble the past. I got the sense that maybe dinosaurs had roamed amongst our ancestors. I know now that’s not true,” she said, holding up a hand to stop me before I interjected, “But their bones did, the bones were there. Imagine discovering part of a dinosaur skeleton in the sand, it having risen to the top as the wind shifted the dunes? Or finding a preserved mammoth in a bog. Now imagine you were an ancient people, and you came across such a thing? You would believe in dragons, wouldn’t you? Monsters? This isn’t just prehistory we’re digging,” she said, gesturing to me where I lay chipping at my small section. “It’s the origin of art. Or at least that’s the way I see it.”

“Lie down,” she said, “And press your head against the rock. Close your eyes. Listen.”

I did as she instructed. The rockface was warm, and its texture varied. It smelled of dust and earth and salt. I inhaled it deeply, to make it part of me. I heard a low whistle, like the sound of the ocean imagined from the edge of a seashell, the hum of the earth as a living organism. I looked up to her, and she smiled, then returned to her work, probing with a small pick, brushing the dust lovingly back into the atmosphere from whence it once came.

She spent so much time with her dinosaurs that she gave them names. The specimen we worked on had first been discovered as a fragment of femur; hence he became Seymour the femur. “Seymour,” she would say, “You are a most beautiful puzzle.” “Aha, Seymour, you’ve been keeping secrets!” and, reverently, she hummed to him, blew dust from his grave, and imagined aloud what his life would have been like. He was a sauropod, his genus as yet unidentified. Each time she uncovered one of his fragments, she made a clucking sound with her tongue, and I

imagined his neck ratcheting up further in the sky, piercing the clouds we begged for, for respite from the heat.

Seymour's death was also a puzzle. After he died, his pieces had shattered and folded into lava. At first, I saw no bones in the rock, then I saw nothing but them. "That's how you know you have what you need to be a paleontologist," she told me, "When you sleep, the pieces move in your mind and snap into place." No need for sheep or counting. No need for restless nights when you were always bone-weary.

I was helping her with Seymour when she suddenly placed her hand on her heart and thudded onto the rock, her tools skittering down into the pit. Help was there before I'd broken the crust in my throat to cry out.

But it was too late. Her heart had given out; she died on the rock as passionately as she had lived upon it. The wind swept in and drew her hair across her cheek as I hovered over her, shielding her from the sun as she had always done for me.

I wired Father to let him know, but he didn't reply right away. He maintained a small apartment through which he conducted his business, but he was always flitting around, peddling his art to dealers and museums. Grandma's colleagues were family to me. They didn't skip a beat in my care. I was 16 by then, wiry and independent but still soft in the middle, softer now without her to shield me. They took turns trying to console me, and ensured that I didn't neglect my studies. I returned each morning to Seymour, to the place where she'd fallen. Alongside her grave, a bone pointed out angrily, laughing at me. I had no energy to kick it away. The sun was too hot. The rock was quiet. I laid my ear against it but heard only my own grief.

Father finally called, in the middle of the night. He said, "It's up to you where you want to live." His voice crackled over the line. He had answered it as my father, but truthfully, that voice could have belonged to any stranger.

"I'm staying," I said.

"Take care," he said, and hung up.

Elephant gestation lasts 22 months, but Seymour's rebirth took years. Sometimes I imagined him inside of the rock, yoked by lava, sediment, stone. I understood why Grandma spoke to him. Maybe she was a little bit crazy, or maybe I wasn't crazy enough.

Void of Grandma, the landscape lost its lustre. Her voice, I realized, had carried me for those years, that and her gentle touch. My stale textbooks coaxed me to sleep at night; I fought to stay awake and learn. Seymour became tedious. Occasionally my hand slipped and I scored his dark bones with my tools. In my head, she berated me, not softly, but angrily. I realized he was all that I had of her. I wept for her and him. I was gentle again.

Finally, her replacement, Louis, declared that we had removed all of Seymour's bones from the site. For the first time in many months, I stood back, feeling my vertebrae snap into place, and could see nothing but stone. We all hugged each other, but the victory felt empty.

I packed my bags, and followed Seymour to the warehouse, watching as he was packed into crates and prepared to be shipped to America, where he didn't belong. I didn't belong there either. The warehouse was bright and air-conditioned. I caught my face in its shiny surfaces and glimpsed a scarecrow. I had spent most of my life in foreign countries and sandscapes. Cities were migraines. But I wired Father and then followed Seymour across the ocean.

The ocean was the near opposite of the desert, but in many ways it was the same. The dunes moved more swiftly. The massive sea creatures were elusive, still throbbing with life. It was inhospitable to humans unless you had a vessel and provisions. I lay on the decks and languished, using my hands to shield my eyes from the blinding reflection of sun on water. "Seymour," I asked, "Did you float across the oceans when you were alive?" I knew the answer, of course. He was probably terrestrial. I saw his shattered mandible in my mind's eye. He was laughing at me.

We arrived in America in September, as the leaves were turning gold. I followed Seymour to the museum, where I easily got a job while I finalized my studies. I was lauded as my grandmother's replacement, a prodigy by proxy. Grief adds unnecessary fame. We were all in this together, the paleontologists, the locals she had hired, even the dogs who lounged on the periphery of our work area, guarding us. At the museum, I managed to hide in the background. I worked long days and commuted at night, when the city was less abrasive, gray scales and bright light.

I found myself falling into small cafes, looking for the similarities to those we frequented by the dig site, into which we'd arrive spent and sanded and dry. But the only thing familiar was their size. I visited other museums, looking for history that was not my own—which had been split across families and continents—but I remained lost.

I called Father. He too was in the city, another moored ship. I met him in one of those little cafes, where he was arranging to show his paintings. He had two of them with him, one beneath each elbow. I remembered holding him by the elbows when they were the highest point on him that I could reach.

I was glad that he had his paintings, because otherwise I wasn't sure if I would recognize him, or he me. His hair had greyed but otherwise he was unchanged, and I was looking for someone older. I was probably older than what he expected. The elements have a way of doing that to you. Spend time with too many dinosaurs, Grandma would say, and you start to look like one. I half-smiled in recollection and he took this as a gesture and smiled at me.

We sat at a table, across from each other. His paintings faced each other in the other set of opposing chairs. "Sammy," he said, "It's been—"

"Five years," I said.

He ordered us drinks, so we would have something to hold. I spun my straw in the tumbler, and he watched the ice. I felt his eyes on my face like the sand, hitting the high points—cheeks, nose, mouth, then eyes. I averted my gaze to the walls, to the gaudy paintings his work would be replacing. I lifted his from their seats and set them on the table. It was my turn to look at him, and I wasn't sure what I saw. Maybe pride, maybe shame.

“How are you?” I asked.

He nudged his paintings, unintentionally or accidentally, I wasn't sure. He shook his head. “My art is getting more exposure.”

I nodded. “Mine too.”

He looked at me questioningly, then softened. “The dinosaur? I read about it in the paper.” He took a deep breath, his chest rising as it filled with air. His loneliness hit me like a concussion. I explained about the dinosaur, and as my words rattled on in and outside of my head, I felt like I was on the ocean again, struggling to breathe in the rich, wet air. I did not belong there, nor did Seymour.

Father and I hugged each other gently, as the strangers that we were, then slipped out of the din and onto the street, not looking back for each other, waving into the darkness.

I stayed for Seymour's grand opening. He was propped up on his haunches, his head raised and mouth wide, showing his grin to an endless parade of customers. He was built on educated conjecture—cement holding together the pieces that had survived across time. Despite his size

and pose, he'd been an herbivore. What would we think of dinosaurs if they were staged tumbling joyously? Would it change humanity to know we'd not been preceded by savages? I listened to children exclaim about Seymour's size and ferocity; I searched within them for glimpses of Grandma's contemplative serenity.

That night, after the visitors had been shuttered out, and only the lab workers and security guards remained, I removed one of the bones of Seymour's toes, and replaced it with a facsimile. He looked no different. The important work had already taken place in the lab, where scientists scanned the fossils, analyzed them, categorized them. The skeleton was just for show, to draw in visitors who would finance the grunt work.

In my small rented room, I repacked my personal items, which I'd let drift across the table. I slept my last night on the air mattress, then let out its stale, city air. I considered advising Father that I was leaving, but it might hurt if I let myself probe for a reaction that I was certain wouldn't happen. He wouldn't miss me. I hadn't missed him.

I took the boat back to Africa, Seymour's bone jostling in a pocket at my hip. An acquaintance met me at the shore. “You look sick,” he said, “Pale!” I smiled and clapped him on the back; we chatted loosely as he drove me back to the village near Seymour's resting place. I slept a night

on a cot, then started a long walk across the desert, into the swathes of stone that we had unburied. Seymour's vessel was filled with sand. Our tracts, and tracks, were gone.

It was there that I stopped and unburdened myself of my pack. I took a measured sip of water, then pulled from my pack the urn that carried Grandma's ashes. As I removed the stopper, the wind took hold of her ashes and scattered them into the sky. I knelt, knees cracking, and dug

through the sand until I found stone, then returned Seymour's bone to his grave. I knew she would want this; she never told me, but I always listened through the lines.

As my eyes fell to the ground, I suddenly recognized my father's work. The strange clumps of colour made no sense in the café; no wonder he'd struggled so. He'd brightened the earthy tones, trying to manifest joy, instead of painting the rock and sand and sky as they were. I guess he couldn't see it through her eyes. It had been toil for him, but she made it joy for me.

"I'm sorry, Dad," I said.

About a half a mile back to the village, I glanced upon the ground and could see nothing but bone. I removed the tools from my pocket and began to dig.

In the morning, I called Louis in America, and told him that Seymour had a friend. I had begun to coax his metacarpal out from the rock. "Carl," I said, "Is waiting for you." I felt his smile through the static.

My hand lingered on the phone. I'm not sure why, but I rang my Father. He answered right away.

When he said I could stay with Grandma, I had imagined him clutching his paintings, which were strung together like a kite, and simply flying away. But now, in death, she'd suddenly pulled him back to earth, tied us back together.

"It's me, Sammy," I said.

"I knew you'd be calling."

I didn't ask him how he knew. I told him where I was, and about the dinosaur, Carl. Then I paused to catch a breath. "I saw your paintings in the rock," I said, "You never told me that you visited Grandma when she worked."

He paused. I heard cars passing in his background. Mine was filled with wind and sky. The birds were silent in the heat.

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

“Your paintings, the ones you had at the café. Aren’t they inspired by the landscapes here, that you shared with Grandma?”

I heard the cord twisting over the line; I imagined his face in his hands, muffling his voice. “I was in university when she travelled to Niger,” he said, “I never visited her. Didn’t she tell you that?”

“I guess she did. I just can’t make sense of this.”

“Of what?”

“Your paintings. The bones and rock and sand, the skies, I see them in your paintings. You’ve just transformed them, but they’re there. The bones are there.” I laughed awkwardly.

“I see.” He paused; I heard him twisting the cord around his thumbs. “She described her work in great detail to anyone who asked. Even those who didn’t. She had a theory about art and bones-“

“Yes, I know,” I said.

“Come,” I said, “Please come visit me. I’ll show you.”

“Alright,” he said, “I will. Next month.”

When his plane landed, I smiled at him, and his arms settled around my back. I took his bags, which were heavy with paints and canvases, a camera, a few clothes. I drove him out to the site right away. We spoke little. His eyes were scanning the horizon, his camera jostling, unused, on his lap.

I didn’t tell him that we stopped at the site where I cast Grandma’s ashes into the wind. I think he knew. “By God, Samuel, you’re right.” He looked at me, and I felt exposed.

He stayed on with me another month, then through the winter, then for another year. As I and the other paleontologists brushed dust from the stone, he stood beside us, brushing paint and dust onto his canvases, which shaded us from the scorching sun.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: “Fossils” started with an image, as many of my stories do. In this case, it was a rock. A friend and I had been discussing petrification, which led me to think of fossils, and how “fossil” is used as an insult, to identify someone who is considered obsolete. I saw the aged paleontologist unearthing dinosaur bones; a fossil pursuing fossils. Despite her age, she is not old; all that her grandson sees is her vibrancy.

I have read about the purported backstories of mythical creatures such as unicorns and sea creatures, and wondered if fossils played a role in their emergence. That connection manifested in the protagonist’s father’s art. I wanted to tie science and art together in a peaceful way.

I draw much of my inspiration from being out in the natural world. I see writing as painting with words; I feel words as colour, sound, texture, heart. I enjoy reading anything that captures my senses and makes me mourn the last page.

BIO: *Nancy Moir lives between cornfields on the edge of Ottawa, Ontario, with her husband and five cats. When she was young and idealistic, she dreamed of being a novelist, but technical writing was a better provider, so she and creative writing broke up for awhile. Recently, a fellow writing friend encouraged her to start again, and it has been love ever since. Her first published story was featured in the 27 Stories: The Winter 2018 Owl Canyon Press Hackathon Contest Winners anthology. Her second published story, "Godomatic," will appear in an upcoming issue of Flash Fiction Online. She is currently working on a novel. When she is not writing, she can be found riding a bicycle around the countryside or happily weeding one of her many vegetable gardens.*

Discipline is the Bread of Contentment

By Dirk Van Nouhuys

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author Linda Boroff writes:*

I like this story because it claws us—note the word—into that bleak and exciting terrain where playful meets deadly. There’s plenty of cat and Catholicism here, one of which I am familiar with, the other is a total mystery. But by the cat-piss smell, Camel smoke and ravenous rats at the outset, we know we are not in for a soothing read. I liked this, not because I am comfortable with, or comforted by it, but because as a writer who pulls many punches from fear of where prose can lead, I easily spot and admire a writer who pulls none.

*This is a story about tough men and murder, and its prose keeps persisting toward death: “The cat gave the rat a strong shake, and a tiny snap clicked from the floor. Al glanced down. Feral faced him back, heat in her eyes.” Called to mind that disturbing scene at the claws of Kitty Cassini in *Cannery Row*: “Daintily she stabbed the mouse and drew it wriggling to her and her tail flicked with tense delight.” And the story pulled me back to Steinbeck in other ways than just the muscine. It’s a venture into the mind of a hitman (or “missman” because I see that Dirk Van Nouhuys can’t resist playing with language any more than a cat can resist playing with a mouse.)*

Not being Catholic, I can only wonder at the pervasive power that it holds over certain writers, Graham Greene springing quickly to mind, of course. But this story, told from the feverish perspective of a gunsel who has seen better days, and which includes a shockingly compromised “Father,” is a journey toward a flawed redemption of sorts that could only be told from a Catholic-aware consciousness. Both the language and the perspective are challenging and adventurous, just what we read fiction for.

Et Al, the former hitman, now missman, former fancier of many Franklin faces, now quarrier of changed quarters, formerly favored by Prudence, now prudent, et by ravenous rats in the cellar, raised his eyes to regard the line of pines ratcheting past the car window, and beyond them the serenely enduring white horizon. Not dimwitted was Al, when he breathed the cat-piss smell and blew Camel smoke out his vents. Yes, somewhere, somehow something had gone bad.

Earlier that day, or another, the jobs called from Baltimore with a motivator: "C'mon, Al," they said. "It's the Way Back." Really.

And Al, et by hatred, bit. Which is why from the back seat Father Rose's resonant voice, which was always on key, although it did not seem so, began to hum Un Bel Di from Madam Butterfly. Father Rose put his pink-gray fist to the small mouth that lurked sphincter-like in the snowy matrix of his beard and said, "Arg, my stomach is bloated." To warn ships at sea it sounded. Et Al smiled, though he could not not.

On his last job, Al had followed the shortman for a weekandaday as he always did, with the purposeful eyes of a workingman.

When not yet et, Al's eyes watched the shortman go to a laundry each day, carrying only the shirt from the last. Thirty minutes passed before the shortman emerged, starched white on a hanger jauntily over a lifted shoulder.

Not yet on Good Friday, Al matched his steps behind the shortman where he left the laundry and turned down a quiet side street and Al leveled at the base of the shortman's skull, his arm crooked professionally, eyes focusing. Then what never happened before happened: Al hesitated. The shortman opened a car and got in, and Al stood, his metal thrust sloppily in his pocket; he considered about the laundry.

Not yet, he had reshafed the metal to its holster and retraced his steps toward the shirthome. He glanced at a storefront and saw that the shortman's car was floating behind him in the glass like a shark.

The fin of the cool wonton cutting the surface in lazy arks left to right and right to left. Al felt the stab of fear loosen his holster in the window. Chinee smiling, little goatee, numbers for sale. Al grabbed and ran, didn't read the ceremony until he was home again, safe in his bunkie above the TV. Dramatic deaths all around gored by surprise Al, the professional.

Father Rose, bishop of Chiusa if he'd chosen, et oat meal wolfishly at Al's sidebar, and, fulminating, said, "By the time you've said so, it's another -; with The Father it's otherwise."

Al lifted the edge of the window shade and looked down, peeking at himself looking like he should. "I don't give a flyer," he said. "A talker turned the tale on me, and it's my head half-way off my neck." He dropped the shade carelessly, and it swayed with a Venetian clash.

The Father smiled and chewed a sweet raisin. "Don't worry your head." Al lit and blew blue smoke.

"La disciplina," the Father expostulated, "la disciplina è il pane della contentezza."

Al stepped behind the Rose and whispered in its flower, "La fuck in la ass. What're you going to do for Al?"

A skeletal rat slithered toward a floored gob of oatmeal, and the pissy cat cast herself from stalk to pounce.

"This," the deranger simpered, "is the answer to it all. A forty-five magnum of l'acqua di semplicità in your ear."

To which the reverend father genuflicked, risen again from the deaf. "On your right hand," he said simply.

The cat gave the rat a strong shake, and a tiny snap clicked from the floor. Al glanced down. Feral faced him back, heat in her eyes.

At the Opera, stylishly late, Al hung by the curtain where the usher placed him, glancing over the balcony seats looking for the back whose seat made a pair with his. Long hair peaked from an unfashionable hat on one side of his assigned. On the other, a worn tuxedo shone. The music died along with the worse soprano, and all rose for a piss and drink.

Finally, she rose and seated her hat. Armed with his glasses, he studied her with rapture: 'Young, brilliant, light as a bird,' he said to himself, 'she is not yet twenty-five. Her beauty is the least of her charms: where else could one find that soul, always sincere, that never acts with prudence.'

Above, a trellis of steel pipe on the roof of the opera house supported reconstruction from an earthquake four years quaked. On the jobs' screen in Baltimore the refocusing metal deconstructed the image of Al's weapon, rerayed from the surveillance satellite into a swarming field of stars.

Prudence, on the other hand, as she was ambidextrous, rubbed her own charms the wrong way. Looking around, she saw her life's opera standing in the shadows, a test of her heavy metal. "Is this what you mean?" she simpered. "Darling?" At which Father Rose rose also in his tight tuxedo, expecting, as always, the man with the gun in his hand.

Al aimed his eyes at the unexpected servant of the Lord. Rose eyed Al. The left corner of his mouth lifted and dropped. Al down the aisle like a groom. Al uplifted his cyclopean binoculars; one axle steered eyebeams, the other fast lead. A flash like a bulb popped.

915 Words

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story is like a cassoulet, not in the sense that people nibbled it nightly, but that it has been bubbling a long time, absorbing this and that. I keep a folder of writing projects that I look into every so often and develop a few and leave most alone. As near as I can remember it began roughly 60 years ago when I was in college and noted down the remark, *La disciplina e' ill pane della contentezza*, made by a linguistically facile friend of mine, who, by the way, many years later died and has been canonized in the Russian Orthodox Church. At some subsequent time, after I had copied it into a computer file, I worked on it a little and had the idea that "Et Al" could not only be a dialectical past tense but also someone's name. That freed me up to be quirky. A couple of years ago I was working on another project, needed a break and opened it again. The bubble of the cassoulet is a quirky way of writing or thinking that generates the story's character. Alliteration helps, like the gas flame under the pot, as does forsaking the nouns that adjectives modify. I got my head into it and finished that way, but I don't think I could repeat it in any other context. The theme?? To have fun.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *I'm a native of Berkeley with a BA from Stanford in creative writing and an MA from Columbia in contemporary literature. You've seen me before. I worked for decades as a tech writer and manager in Silicon Valley. A few years ago, I devoted full time to fiction.*

I write short stories, some experimental forms, and occasionally verse, but mostly novels, four of which have been published in excerpts or serially. About 80 items of fiction and a few poems have appeared in literary or general magazines. I occasionally publish translations and photography. You can learn more about me at my web site, www.wandd.com and see a complete list of publications at: <http://www.wandd.com/Site/Publications.html>.

EDITOR'S BIO: *I wrote my first novel at age ten about my hobbyhorse, Pal, a spirited, cardboard-headed palomino that only I could control. When I was eleven*

my mother told me I couldn't ride Pal to school anymore because the kids were laughing at me. (I would ride him now if I dared, but only occasionally.)

Fast forward, I went to Berkeley and majored in English. My writing has appeared in McSweeney's, The Guardian, Hollywood Dementia, Epoch, Cimarron Review, Prism International, Drunk Monkeys, Word Riot, Hobart, Blunderbuss, Adelaide, Thoughtful Dog, Storyglossia, Able Muse, The Furious Gazelle, JONAH Magazine, The Boiler, Crack the Spine, Fleas on the Dog and others. A short story collection is coming out in late 2020.

I was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and have written one feature film. One of my stories is under option to director Brad Furman (The Lincoln Lawyer) and Sony. My thriller script, Space Reserved, is in development in L.A.

Her story 'PRUFROCK' , J. Alfred Intake Records was published in Issue 5.

SUERTE DEL TERREMOTO

By Joseph Hirsch

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A dark tale of retribution in the underbelly of the drug world that is every bit as interesting for the way it's told as the tale itself. Action and dialogue are compacted between dense description and the resulting disrupted linearity whelps TNT dramatic tension. Shrouded characterization is minimally textured, mood big bad Noir-ish and the prose is so good it's like put your Trojan on Billy it's time to dance. Quote: 'The bulletproof Lexan glass windows could only roll down four inches. Roger stuck his head through the partition where there was no tinted glass, smiled with a mouthful of golds. "Raiders," he said, still grinning so hard his ears twitched. "My man." He tapped the side of the Jeep, the glossy apple-red topcoat showing his fingerprints for the moment before the smudges evaporated.' And, 'If his two friends found him, they would have nothing but time on their hands to engage in the kinds of tortures he knew they were capable of; they had the wire hangers and this building probably had a hot radiator; he had a sphincter, and there were no impediments to them engaging in that kind of party.' *Five stars.**

Suerte del Terremoto about 2,900 Words

Suerte del Terremoto

Someone had left the lamp on in Mr. Durnham's room last night after he died and the medics came to carry him out of the Lancelot Arms SRO, and the day was overcast enough for the same lamp to pour a few rays of dying light out the window over the couple of city blocks where the retired and disabled sat around, shooting the breeze.

Clarence in the tattered Raiders fitted cap looked up at the window, watching that warm mica light radiating from the lamp in Durnham's room. The parchment of the shade over the lamp looked old enough to tear at the slightest provocation, ripping like a petrified mummy's wraps if so much as a breeze or a cat's paw hit it.

"They get his kitties out?" Someone asked. Clarence looked over to see who had spoken. It had been Earl, polishing the brass spokes of his wheelchair with an oilcloth.

"He never got the authorization, never filled out the forms, so Cutty just chucked 'em out." That was Curtis, an ashen-skinned older black man with an unkempt beard like a kinked wooly lamb's hide. Clarence didn't know much about Curtis, except that he liked to layer his clothes no matter what the weather, and once you got him started on the Bible, he wouldn't stop.

A light rain fell. Earl leaned back, contemplated popping a wheelie, cutting on a dime. He sometimes performed tricks to kill the hours. "They'll sell them Siamese cats to Yeung Ho Kitchen. Lots of protein in felines."

They laughed, except for Clarence. He lit a cigarette, cupping the flame on his lighter. A salty wind moved through the canyon formed by the shabby old brick and brownstone hotels in the Tenderloin.

The men heard loud rap music muted by the weight of bulletproof glass before they saw the Jeep Comanche.

Curtis kept his eyes averted, timid around strangers, especially flashy and young ones. He'd gotten beaten up too many times by the across-the-Bay-Bridge-kids. Earl didn't like it much either, but knew Clarence had to go with them.

The bulletproof Lexan glass windows could only roll down four inches. Roger stuck his head through the partition where there was no tinted glass, smiled with a mouthful of golds. "Raiders," he said, still grinning so hard his ears twitched. "My man." He tapped the side of the Jeep, the glossy apple-red topcoat showing his fingerprints for the moment before the smudges evaporated.

Clarence moved closer to the Comanche, hopping into the truck's bed. Rog and Smokey had made good on their threat to get a layer of Goldschläger flakes embedded in the car's alloy and Earl practically salivated as he watched them pull off, wondering how much it would cost to get those little gold speckles in his set of wheels.

Clarence watched his friends grow smaller and then disappear from his place in the bed of the truck moving through the downtown area.

Smoke looked back from the driver's seat, so familiar with this neighborhood that he could navigate it with one hand on the burlwood wheel while keeping his eyes on the guest in the backseat. "What you think, my man? A's or Giants?"

Clarence turned back toward the front of the jeep. Smokey's doo rag was low enough over his forehead to crease his eyebrows, scrunching the skin of his brow so that the rippled flesh looked like that of Worf on *The Next Generation*, which Clarence sometimes watched in the Lancelot's dayroom.

"I thought the Series was off?" Clarence coughed. His lungs burnt, and every time he spoke it felt like someone was pouring chlorine down his throat. He wondered if he had cancer.

Smokey swung a left, taking a familiar backstreet with newspapers and litter scattered on the road and jagged pictograms of graffiti sprayed up and down the walls. "Nah, man, the engineers went down there and said it's safe."

"Play Ball!" Roger cupped his hands around his mouth, mimicking the sports announcer from his slouch in the passenger seat.

Smoke put it in park in front of an ancient concrete loading dock with its poured stone broken down to the rebar. A handful of seagulls nested in the architrave above the door. They cooed until the doors on the Jeep slammed shut, at which point the birds scattered to the sky, leaving a wake of feathers behind them.

“Birds is headed to Candlestick for the game,” Roger said, sulking as he adjusted the cross straps of his web holsters beneath his Troop jacket.

“We got time.” Smoke checked his Presidential Rolex, its gold glowing white and making a counterfeit of Rog’s teeth. He let the bejeweled watch slide back down his wrist and threw aside the shuttered scissor gate barring the warehouse entrance.

Brown cardboard boxes sat stacked on either side of the room. Smoke and Co. had apparently tested the merchandise, as pink packing peanuts overflowed from one box. A Mitsubishi Diamond TV sat in a harvest gold cabinet in the center of the room, on a length of blood-splattered plastic.

A Galil automatic rested at the side of the TV. On-screen a man narrated the antics of a squirrel hopping from picnic table to picnic table on some campgrounds. The squirrel glided into the towering coiffure of a woman with too much hairspray. As she stood and screamed and the laugh track cued up, the narrator said, “Hmm, I think I’ll hide my acorns here!”

Roger giggled and made himself at home on the makeshift chair of a cardboard box where one of the TVs still sat. He opened his red Troop silk jacket to give himself easy access to the burners if he needed them.

He kept his eye on the TV and spoke to Smoke in the backroom getting things ready. “Hey, yo, we need to put some mag tires on that bad boy out there.”

Smoke’s voice sounded cautious, measured, as he was half-occupied. “I’m thinking run- flats is the way to go. Can’t outrun Jake and the Fat Man with no monster truck tires, my man.”

“That bulletproof shit’s already heavier than a mother anyway, though. Might as well.”

They let the subject drop. On TV there was an ad for a theme park. Two white children with corn-blond hair smiled as they went upside down on a rollercoaster’s loop.

Clarence took his Raider’s hat off, wiping down the thin strands of hair that stuck to the pate as if glued to the crown of his bald spot.

“Hey, you need to put that dope down and start mainlining that Rogaine.” Roger laughed at his joke.

Clarence rolled up the loose raglan sleeves on his gravy-stained Goodwill rugby.

“Nah,” Roger said, and stayed his hand. “Not this time.”

Clarence, slightly confused, obeyed, pulling down his sleeves. He looked around the room. “Where’s Bad Moon?”

“He’s pitting tonight,” Roger said. “Over in Oakland.” His bloodshot eyes hardened. “I told you you ain’t got to be scared as long as he’s on his chain, anyway.”

You couldn’t convince Clarence of that, though. Bad Moon was a Cane Corso mastiff whose boulder of a head and two testicles were larger than most men’s. His russet coat made him look like some kind of iron gargoyle weeping rust as it melted in the white-hot forges of Hell. The dog was a mass of marbled muscle on muscle, a pure monster whose presence even a spoonful of Mama H barely made tolerable.

“All right,” Smoke said, returning from the bathroom. He had the package in his right hand, the butcher paper wrapped around a glassine layer stamped with a Scorpion logo to let people know the batch belonged to the Triad. “This is high class, for the locals. Shit’s non-soluble.” He paused. “You know what that means?”

Clarence nodded, understanding now why Rog had urged him to roll his sleeves down.

“Usual deal,” Smoke continued, fitting some butternut-colored powder into the beveled mouth of the glass stem. “You rate it on a scale of one to ten. And then we pay you in powder for your service in this series of FDA clinical trials.”

“Don’t burn your eye,” Roger said. “Make sure not to light it too close, cause that thing gets hot.”

Clarence set the pipe in his mouth. Smoke turned around to Roger, who watched a commercial in which a Corgi in a Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses surfed on a banana-colored board. “Hang Ten!” The dog said, “with Aloha Punch!”

Clarence gripped the glass stem in his mouth and pointed the gun-shaped lighter at Smoke. He pulled the trigger. There was a soughing hiss, like high tide’s echo trapped in a seashell, and then a spout of bluish-white flame erupted, boiling the filmy mucus from Smokey’s retina, his eye opened in surprise.

Smoke shouted as the sable flesh of his face melted to blackened charcoal. Clarence dropped the pipe from his lips, the lighter from his grip and snagged the package from the screaming man’s right hand. He hauled ass for the front door as the tinkling of shattered glass whispered behind him.

Clarence heard his breath pounding in his ears, heard Roger’s “The fuck?!” faintly over the roar of Smoke’s full-throated screams.

He made it outside, tripped as he was coming down the ramp and flew into the building in front of him, breaking through a termite-eaten creosote train tie lain over a boarded-up window. He tumbled to a stop inside, stirring up a floury wake of powder that might have been asbestos as he touched down.

Gunshots rang out and the black mold on the surrounding walls exploded, sending a fungal musk into the air. He coughed as the plaster danced and his eyes burned, and ran through the empty room.

The boards groaned beneath his feet and he figured one false step would put him through the duckboards and into a basement where the pipes dripped.

If his two friends found him, they would have nothing but time on their hands to engage in the kinds of tortures he knew they were capable of; they had the wire hangers and this building probably had a hot radiator; he had a sphincter, and there were no impediments to them engaging in that kind of party.

He put more spring in his step.

The windows on the other side of the ground floor of the building were tarped with thin sheets of plastic blowing free with the wind, in and out like a translucent ghostly shroud. He ran through that, fighting the wraithlike form as it clung to him, landing on a grey patch of gravel outside.

Beneath him lay a bed of green beer bottle glass glittering from the concrete and a couple empty syringes with orange blood like gum arabic congealed on their points.

“Motherfucker!” The Comanche jerked to a stop in the alleyway to Clarence’s right, blotting out the light in front of him. Smoke, his face mangled by the kiss of flame, skin around his eye welded into a waxen mass of proud flesh, winced but leveled his Sig through the hurt, rage overcoming all else.

A bullet left the chamber and claimed a piece of mortar from the wall next to Clarence’s ear. He rolled backwards, falling through the window through which he’d just come, back into the empty building that felt like it might collapse on its foundation with the next false step.

The car door slammed shut, an echo ripped through the barren stone of the alley.

He could hear them cussing and picked himself up, running for the hole in the opposite wall through which he’d initially busted his way like the Kool-Aid Man, just as shots stitched their way around him. The bullets buzzed like hornets from a nest that had been kicked one too many times.

The Israeli rifle poured the rest of its full magazine through the breach, one shot ripping a tear in Clarence’s billowing shirt as he booked it, finally making his way through the gap glowing with daylight in front of him.

In the alley he could hear someone shouting in Vietnamese and a police siren wailed. He ran right, down the alley, knowing they could appear in front of him any second. Left was Skid Row, and right was the Tenderloin.

The Row was downhill, which was easier on the legs, but people were less likely to care about shots down there and so Smoke and Roger could pick him off like it was a duck hunt. If he could hoof it up the hill, there were nonprofits and even some police cruisers that would make it harder for Roger's dumbass with his firepower and Smoke with his smaller guns and bigger brain to light him up.

Decisions, he looked left, held the dope package to his belly, beneath his shirt, like he was the Make a Wish kid and it was the game-winning pigskin a quarterback had brought to his bedside.

A Muni came, the bus lumbering and hissing as it left a cloud of heavy, warm exhaust in its wake. He watched its metal body parade past, slowly, like a papier mâché dragon through Chinatown on New Year's, and then he ran across the street, almost tripping, getting his foot caught in an old cable car line lain in the pavement.

He ran until he was ahead of a postman in his blue khakis and pith helmet. The guy walked with the mail in a leather satchel as his chain wallet rattled.

Clarence slowed to a walk-trot, spinning three-hundred and sixty degrees and seeing the world shake around him, panic spiking in his heart, unable to shake the threat of those two men in their red ride bearing down on him.

He felt the pressure of the ghetto wane in increments and slowed to a walk. In front of him a pretty girl in a cornflower blue sundress pushed a tan canvas baby stroller.

The houses around here were Victorians, two-storied and with yellow bay windows and pistachio-colored minarets and cyclamen spires, the fairytale inverse of the world where he lived only a few blocks away.

He didn't sense too many eyes on him. He could be here to cut someone's lawn or something like that. Some rich people were oddities and wore ragged clothes from time-to-time. He'd seen the fallen stockbrokers and CEOs hitting the pipe or plunging the needle with him on Murphy beds.

The lines in the city existed, but they blurred. Not like in the old days, with the Haight and the head shops, but still.

He passed the old Bank. The once-blonde stuccowork had mostly flaked off, but the Palladian shell of the thing stood intact, looking like a ramparted outpost in some dying kingdom. From above the next hill a tangerine-colored cable car took the incline, clanging as its wooden body shimmered from the light of the sun setting over the horizon.

The Jeep broke the moment's idyll, peeling off and burning rubber where before the trolley had clanged and made its unhurried rounds with a carload of tourists.

He knew, somehow, even through the impenetrable black of the tinted windows, that they had seen him, and the hard turn Smokey made only confirmed his gut feeling.

Something broke in him and he could run no more. It wasn't just that his lungs and his legs hurt.

He walked into the middle of the street, ready for them to gun him down.

The Jeep drove on the unbroken yellow that separated the four lanes where there was no traffic. Clarence straddled his own piece of the yellow line, squinting against the turtle-waxed shine of the car bearing down on him.

He shifted the package to the front of his belly, hoping that when that car hit him the pouch would explode and the dope dust would go everywhere, like ashes from an urn scattered to the four winds.

The Comanche ate up the road, a second and some change from plowing him, and still he didn't move.

He closed his eyes, accepted the end, and the ground shook.

"Aftershock!" A woman shouted from a trattoria on the sidewalk. A sandwich board collapsed to the ground and a man in spandex fell off his carbon fiber bicycle, cutting his elbows as he bounced to the concrete and landed splayed sideways and moaning.

Panes of glass shattered immediately in their storefront sashes and their sparkling shards fell

him got lifted by the concrete which the enraged center of the Earth had turned to liquid in its rumbling, flipping the ride on its top and letting gravity do the rest to carry it down the steep hill.

He felt the heat of the burning metal deathtrap as the ride breezed past him, watched the upside-down car emit a shower of sparks as its shiny hood burnt free of its metal skin with a horrid shearing sound.

The thing finally rolled to a stop, crashing into a Honda Civic's side after having lost most of its momentum. For all its previous terrible power it might as well have been a shopping cart.

The impact had triggered the car's horn, and the blatting joined the chorus of other alarms going off up and down the block, along with a clarion-like tinkling that came from several parking meters that had fallen over and vomited up coins onto asphalt hot as oven-warmed butter.

Clarence continued up the hill and toward the lowering sun, wishing he hadn't lost his hat.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Suerte Del Terremoto came to me pretty much in toto after watching the same homeless man working the same concrete island (without much success) who I pass on my daily commute into the city. I wanted to make an “invisible man” the centerpiece of a story, to suggest his history and backstory without being too explicit or diving in depth (since I wanted the piece to center on a couple of action set-pieces). Looking for analogs in the world of fiction, I'd say it's a distant cousin to my favorite Chester Himes novel, *Run, Man, Run*, a minimalist masterpiece of the “Chase” story in the suspense genre. There's something very elemental and compelling about a straightforward story of the hunted and the hunter, so much so that when you write such tales it's sometimes not even necessary to give the characters names, though I saddled my protagonist with “Clarence”. I debated calling him just “the Man in the Raiders Hat” at some length in an earlier draft, but that just kept reminding me of “The Man in the Yellow Hat,” from the old Curious George stories, which wasn't quite the vibe I was trying to achieve.

Nothing against Curious George, though.

BIO: Joseph Hirsch is the author of many published books, short stories, and essays. His books can be purchased [here](#): More information can be found here: www.joeyhirsch.com

THE RITE OF RED DUST

By Jie Wang

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Even if you don't 'understand' this story—and we're not sure we do—you can't help but respond, in some capacity as a reader, to what's going on here. Are we being asked to see how languages—the molecules of language—change meaning and symbol capture through social evolution, the impact of reason/science and cultural osmosis? Maybe. For us, 'The Rite of Red Dust' explores the shamanistic power of words and their relation to material transformation. In the end, all languages are one in the way that all birds have wings. And if none of this makes sense just read it for the lyric impact. A powerfully conceived modernist short where poetic arabesques elope in a democracy of freefall word play. Quote: 'A dragon pillar. A huabiao. A pagoda.' said J, 'Mr White, we can't pin names on things any more. Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose... Even if we say it a thousand times, it will just become a meaningless sound.'/Semantic satiation', said W. Five stars.*

The Rite of Red Dust

Two Martians, Mr White and Jazz Pink, walked into the Rite. An enormous circle of people were dancing around a towering ancient artifact.

'It's a vertical bullet train.' said Jazz.

'It's Noah's Ark.' said Mr White.

'Charon's boat.' said J.

'Achilles' spear.' said W.

'Jacob's Ladder.' said J.

'An obelisk.' said W.

'A phallus.' said J.

'An ego.' said W.

'A titan boy's toy.' said J.

'Tower of Babel.' said W.

'Everest.' said J.

'Leviathan.' said W.

'Caduceus.' said J.

'A totem pole. A caryatid. A spire of a Gothic cathedral.' said W.

'A dragon pillar. A huabiao. A pagoda.' said J, 'Mr White, we can't pin names on things any more. Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose... Even if we say it a thousand times, it will just become a meaningless sound.'

'Semantic satiation.' said W.

'Names are fading, like a morning dream.' said J.

'Names are evaporating.' said W.

'It looks like it's going to snow.' said J.

The dancers stamped their feet, clapped their hands, and chanted 'Algorithm!
Algorithm!'

'Look, snowflakes!' Jazz pointed to the sky.

A few snowflakes fell onto the red waste land, and vanished like words.

'A graveyard of snow.' said J.

'A graveyard of names.' said W.

'Languages disappearing like species.' said J.

'Mass extinction.' said W.

'Do you remember the time, when words were written on bones, stones, turtle shells, metals?' said J.

'Then on skins, silk.' said W.

'Then on paper.' said J.

'In the end on dust, water, thin air.' said W.

'Look, the cloud is writing a word!' said J.

'Your brain is writing a word.' said W, 'The interlock between a word and a thing only exists in brains, and brains are becoming post-brains.'

'Words are losing their habitat.' said J.

The dancers spun and leapt, leapt and spun, then with a final leap, they left the ground. They flew higher and higher, spinning faster and faster, till they started to shed their skins and flesh like scarlet scales and feathers, swirling and falling in a rain of rubies and garnets. After a while there were only their brains floating aloft. They disassembled into strands of nerves, which weaved a stupendous double helix. It kept twirling and vibrating at such a speed that in the end there was nothing left but a red mist.

'It is... beautiful. Do you think so, Mr White?' said J.

'No.' said W.

The mist was whirling and churning like a starling murmuration. It wrote in the sky:

nirvana

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The vertical line of symbols suspended in the air for a while, then dematerialized into the unfathomable emptiness.

'What does it mean, Mr White?' said J.

'I don't know.' said W.

'Symbols without meanings.' said J.

'Shadows without bodies.' said W.

'Husks.' said J.

'Bark.' said W.

'Cocoons.' said J.

'Slough.' said W.

'Hide.' said J.

'Pelt.' said W.

'Kidskin.' said J.

'Sheaths.' said W.

'Wrecks.' said J.

By now the snow was pelting down. The surface of Mars was being eroded by an endless whiteness.

'Look, the eternal white foam on the eternal red dust.'

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I was inspired by Stravinsky and Nijinsky's ballet The Rite of Spring, Buddhism, and SpaceX. I wanted to explore how language and literature would survive and change in the age of science. The literary influences on this story include The Waste Land, Russell Edson's 'Clouds', The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, Gertrude Stein, some contemporary Chinese poets, and other sources embedded in my subconsciousness.*

BIO: *I am a flash fiction/short story writer. I was born in a northern city in China in the '80s. I've been living in the UK since I was 23. I am interested in the interaction between literature and science. My twitter: <https://twitter.com/JieWang65644813>*

TIN MAN

By Laura Petersen

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A unnerving story of a mentally challenged man and how he maintains his fragile grip on reality (if not sanity) through the use of a metal detector, an instrument that shines both as symbol of hope and beacon of the future. We like the way the author gets inside the character's head and the penetrating sense of claustrophobic alienation that is always closing in on him. A richly pathetic (as in pathos) tale on a difficult subject handled with impressive skill. Quote: 'The thing in the lump scurries deeper. He closes his eyes and jabs the gauze in. He pushes it deeper as the rubbing alcohol drips down his face, biting into the place where he cut himself shaving that morning. "Take that, you fucker!" He screams at his reflection in the mirror.'*

Tin Man

He sweeps the wand over the sand, hoping for some morsel, some hidden delight to expose itself. So far, nothing.

"There's a lot of sand. I could be here all day." He shivers with pleasure knowing that his work will never, ever be done.

He works hard and long, sweeping the wand over the sand, trying not to retrace his steps by paying attention to his footprints.

"I hate backtracking," he says to the waves curling on the shore at a distance and the gulls as they fly overhead, going who knows where.

It's gray today. Quite gray and quite still. The sea is calm, for a change. That's good. When it's calm, and not raining or blowing wind so hard it stings the eyes, tourists come to visit. Tourists bring pockets with treasures in them that get spilled on the sand. And that's where Boyd comes in.

Boyd. A memory about his naming shames him. He keeps his head down even though it's too early for tourists. Only the gulls can see his tears.

They didn't want him. That's what his mother said when he was ten. "We didn't want you, but you wanted life. So you happened and now we're locked down with you. We do our best."

Boyd props the wand against his leg and raises his head. He pulls his dirty shirttail out of his pants to swipe at his nose, and then he uses it on the sweat from his tender, sunburned forehead. He pushes his right arm into the wand's brace, turns up the switch under the word GOLD, and continues the hunt – not to lose himself or run away from the memories, but to keep moving, keep the rhythm flowing.

He doesn't know what brings the bad memories on, but he's compelled to push through despite the pain. It's a choice he makes every time the memories push at him—relive rather than expel.

A treacherous shiver wrenches the metal detector from his hands. He stoops to pick it up, knees bent and legs spread so his belly has room to sag between them.

He looks at the tips of his sneakers. They're the kind with Velcro tabs.

“I can't remember the last time I wore shoes that tied.”

He sweeps the beach (swing left, swing right, swing left, swing right), and remembers how Mother always went on talking like his feelings didn't matter.

As Boyd listens to the cracks and beeps the metal detector makes, he no longer sees the sand or the gulls—he sees the cigarettes she carried with her tucked in a small flowery purse with a metal clasp.

First thing, with a cigarette already lit and drooping from her fat lips, she would drop the purse on the yellow Formica table (SMACK) next to her begrimed yellow coffee cup. She fiddled with the closure on the purse, closing and opening it while she talked and puffed (snip-SNAP, snip-SNAP, snip-SNAP). Her far-too-short pink quilted robe hung open.

Boyd concentrated on the enormous orange curlers bobbing on her head. He imagined shooting paper airplanes through them.

“When you popped out of me like you owned the world, your father laughed like hell and called you ‘Boy.’ It stuck until we had to send you to school. That's when he added the ‘d’ at the end for the damn paperwork. Clever, your father. He may be a drunk, but he's not stupid.”

Boyd slumped in his too-tight gray and blue plaid shirt, his cereal clotting in a bowl.

“Or maybe he is!” She slapped the table with both hands. Boyd jumped, then slouched into his chair while she brayed on and on.

That's how she was. She hurt his feelings, drank coffee, smoked cigarettes, and showed off her floppy tits.

Boyd swings the wand left and right, left and right.

“And this is how you end up. You burn inside for what’s the right thing to do.”

A gull sweeps over his head.

“Fly somewhere else.” He drops his wand and flails his arms at the long-since-flown-away gull. Now he has to bend over to pick the detector up again. And all this is giving him a headache.

“Too much pressure on my noggin.”

Sometimes, Boyd wishes he had ex-ray vision so he could see the sleeping treasures where they lay. But then, he’s also glad he can’t. There’s enormous pleasure in looking for something when you don’t know what that something is, or if it even exists. He could go forever—wand in hand, trowel at his belt loop, gulls around his head, memories of Mother.

“I’d see too much with ex-ray eyes, anyway.” He grunts and hoists the wand above the sand when he sees a piece of driftwood shaped like a woman’s hand. Even the fingernails are there like someone planned it. Nature is sneaky—she makes fun of you.

The wand could be trusted. It tells Boyd where to go and what to see. It’s best when

he minds the wand. When he uses his eyes it always ends badly. Like that time by the swing set where the little girls played. Bare legs pumping the air. Hair like finely spun webs caught in the sun. The pumping rhythm ...

He’d never do that again. It wasn’t safe to leave the house without his wand.

The skyline brightens while Boyd examines the dial on his wand. It alerts him to something unseen as he passes it back and forth in a nice rhythm that soothes rather than incites. His head feels bad and this helps. The pulsing tone from the dial is grating on the ears and nerves, but that’s how life is. It grinds.

He stops and kneels on the cool, malleable sand. Kneeling isn’t the best thing for his knees, but the trowel is an easy reach from his belt, and he has to dig. Sometimes, it’s a false alarm and he gets worthless iron bits or burned aluminum cans. But that’s why he likes it. He knows something is buried there, its worth to be determined.

Boyd sinks the trowel into the sand, pushing through the dry, to the dry-wet, semi-resistant protective crust and down into the firm wetness.

All good things wait in the wet.

He sees a roundness that leads him to believe he’s discovered a coin, but he hopes it’s a ring. A true gold ring could bring him enough income to lay off his other less enjoyable endeavors—collecting cans and panhandling. He feels that he’s earning his keep in this lousy world. The disability checks and food stamps only go so far.

Boyd thinks about his tiny, drab apartment and how he might decorate a little if the ring is valuable. Maybe a throw rug or some new pillows?

He drops the object when something else catches his eye. The bright pulsing light at the edge of his vision reminds him that he left without taking his migraine medication—again.

Boyd breathes hard. Using the metal detector as a crutch to haul himself back on his feet, he looks down at the ball of sand he dug up.

Swiping his sand-sugared hands on his pants, he says, “I have to go home now.”

The pulses dart in and out of his left eye as if someone tiny with an even tinnier flashlight were spelunking in the darkness there. He feels them crawling on the surface of his eyeball and running spikes with ropes.

The pain that follows the flashes is on its way. The object is still trapped in a glop of gritty wet sand, so he yanks a plastic grocery bag out of his pocket and winces as he bends to retrieve it. Like a man picking up after his dog.

The thought makes him shudder with disgust.

“I would never pick up a dog’s shit.”

The old, rusted-out, blue Volvo sits in the parking lot. Gulls, attracted to the smells pulsating from the car, sit on the hood preening themselves and, of course, shitting on everything.

Boyd sweats while he walks through soft mounds of dry sand to his car. The wand across his shoulders has no opinions. He turns purple when he sees the gulls.

“Get the fuck off my fucking property!”

He swings the wand around his head. The gulls flap, shrieking into the sky and sail off high above the breakers.

The exertion costs him. He brings the wand to his chest, then down to the baking asphalt, like a weightlifter finishing a set of overhead thrusts. Bent in two, the flashes overwhelm him. The gulls sound far away now. He imagines them shitting over the waves.

His vision clears while he’s on his knees next to the Volvo. A minivan pulls into the parking space next to his. The sliding door swooshes open and kids of all sizes pour out like rats fleeing the nest. One boy stops to study Boyd.

“You praying, mister?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Just wondering why you’re on the ground. You got a bellyache? What’s that thing you got there?” He points at the metal detector with his dirty finger.

Boyd doesn’t answer. The kid shrugs and runs toward the waves with the rest of his vermin.

Boyd doesn’t remember driving home. He’s eating ice cream straight from the freezer with his elbows propped inside and a spoon buried up to the handle in the container. His favorite is strawberry, but for some reason he can’t remember, the last he bought was mint chocolate chip. The cold burn of the mint on his lips, teeth and tongue enrobe his head in a different pain.

“My head’s a mint chocolate chip.” He pays for laughing at himself with another blinding strike to the center of his brain—where the lizard lives.

“Why didn’t I take my pills? Wait ... did I?”

He tosses ice cream container and spoon into the freezer next to a tidy stack of frozen dinners with unappetizing names like, “Meat and Potato Lover’s Medley,” and “Country Style Chicken with Corn Muff-et.”

In the bathroom, he reaches for the brown bottle with the white cap he leaves near the sink. He shakes it.

“A mad man’s maraca.”

Though he knows it’s going to hurt like a sumabitch, he laughs anyway and pain like shattering glass embeds itself above his eyes.

“I forgot again.” His voice sounds pitiable and shallow to his ears. In fact, he sounds like he’s about ten—snot-filled and puny and surrounded in the permanent haze of his mother’s smoke.

Boyd tiptoes with the pills in one hand and a wet towel held to his forehead with the other toward the sofa. He hisses through clenched teeth as his treads push vibrations up his spine and into his brainpan.

The Venetian blinds are closed.

“Thank Christ.”

He sinks into the cushions and loose back pillows, still holding the pills and towel.

A sing-songy kid’s voice mocks him from the opposite corner of the room. “Stop your dawdle! Get the top off the bottle!”

Boyd shivers while it taunts him again. “You know kids are the only ones who can open that shit. Toss it here.”

Boyd's fingers are slick with sweat as he struggles to twist and push at the same time. "Damn voice will go away when I take my pills."

"Look up, if you know what's good for you."

He jumps at the terrible closeness of the wet whisper in his ear and drops the bottle. It clatters under the coffee table smothered in self-help books. Despite the rancid pain,

he whips his head around, now certain he's had a break in—some kid, playing games.

"Maybe it's that brat from the beach today."

They all taunt him and call him names like "Metal Dork," "Wand Wizard," or "Tin Man." Though he rather likes that last one; the L. Frank Baum book is his favorite. But the only reason the little turds know the story is through watching the terrible movies made over the years. He bets not one of them has picked up a book except to use it as a prop for a video game console—or to bludgeon a younger sibling.

"Nothing's there." A great fatigue washes over him, forcing him to lie back. He'll deal with the pills later when he's had some rest so the voice will stop. His headache fights like a flame on a candle pursued by the wind, and he sinks into the only relief he's had for endless hours.

He wakes to a darkened room and an even worse headache.

"I've made a mistake, that's all."

In a fog of pain, he turns the wand that's been lying next to him on the floor upside down so its circular detecting end is against his forehead.

"I can find it in here and eradicate it."

He presses his forehead into the loop until his neck aches.

"Got to get it out."

Gnashing his teeth and bearing down, he grunts as the signal that tells him he's found something goes off.

Boyd's vision grows black and speckled as he runs drunken zigzags to the bathroom, dragging the metal detector behind him like a giant child with a pull toy.

"Gotta see it!"

He faces the mirror and holds the wand to his forehead again. The signal hurts, pushing through his ears and into the soft tissue. He turns his head back and forth, listening for the strongest hit.

“There!”

Boyd props the detector against the toilet and leans into the mirror. It’s a red bump the size of a quarter. It looks familiar and like it’s got sand on it.

“Didn’t I dig this up at the beach today?”

He pokes at it with his pinky fingernail. It darts away from his touch causing him to jump.

“Holy shit!”

Pain crackles through his head. The lump pulsates like a heart. He whimpers and leans toward the mirror.

“It is the treasure I found today. How the hell did it get stuck in my head?”

The lump throbs as he opens the medicine cabinet behind the mirror.

“I must have fallen on it when I passed out. Where are the tweezers when you need them?” He rummages until he sees them poking out from behind a box of gauze.

“Got you!”

Boyd had bad acne once. “My tweezing skills are worthy of a degree in medicine. I’ll fix this bastard.”

He closes the cabinet door and leans into the mirror with both elbows propped against the glass. Something shiny and metallic is peering out at him from the red, sandy lump. He shudders and drops the tweezers in the sink.

“It’s hatching!” Nonplussed, he moves in for a cautious look.

“If you’re what I think you are ...” not taking his eyes off it, he feels for the tweezers in the sink, but the thing slips back down inside the lump—like an evil shrinking violet.

“You little shit.” He hisses as the pain rips through his head. “I’ll flush you out!”

Back inside the cabinet, he grabs the bottle of rubbing alcohol and the gauze. It digs deeper into his forehead. “You can run, but you can’t hide.”

He slams the cabinet shut, blows out a nerve-steadying breath, uncaps the alcohol, rips into the gauze and slops a generous amount on it. The biting fumes make his eyes water. He sets the bottle on the back of the toilet.

Boyd brings the sopping gauze up to his forehead, bracing himself for the sting. “It won’t be long now.”

The thing in the lump scurries deeper. He closes his eyes and jabs the gauze in. He pushes it deeper as the rubbing alcohol drips down his face, biting into the place where he cut himself shaving that morning.

“Take that, you fucker!” He screams at his reflection in the mirror.

The burrowing stops under the alcohol’s burn.

“Back to the tweezers.” His hand shakes as he brings the tweezers up to the lump. “I don’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

This time, there’s no movement or digging. He gets a braveness boost and goes in for the kill, stabbing the tool into the lump and pushing in as far as he can go—which is farther than he ever thought possible.

“Hey, man. Where’d you get that ring? It looks heavy.” The man in dress slacks and matching tie drops some change in Boyd’s open guitar case.

“Earned it fighting in Nam. Same place I earned this.” He moves his strumming hand off the guitar and flicks the black patch over his left eye. The ring sparkles on his hand.

The man frowns and laughs. “They handed out rings for bravery in Vietnam?”

Boyd puts the guitar across his lap and squints up at him with his good eye. “Sir, they didn’t hand nothing out in Vietnam.” He picks up the guitar again, dismissing the shirt and tie. “Thank you for your fine patronage.”

The man looks down as if to reconsider his donation, then turns and walks away.

Boyd waits until he can’t see the man on the long sidewalk before he begins playing “Levon” again.

“Why don’t they ever walk away from me on my blind side?”

He thinks about the irony—trading tourists with treasure for pantywaists with coins. “Idiots. They throw away rare coins and don’t even know it.”

He plucks the strings, hits a bad chord, hears a coin drop, and turns his head to give a thankful nod.

The sun hits him in his good eye as a woman with a wiener dog on a leash stops at the curb. She watches Boyd play as he watches the dog hunch up to take a shit on the sidewalk. Somehow knowing the dog is finished, the woman fusses with a plastic bag to pick up after it. She leaves a shit stain behind and Boyd plays while it bakes in the sun.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *As a child, I watched old grandpas waving metal detectors under the jungle gym. There was more than one old man sometimes. It made me wonder about their private lives. As a big fan of buried treasure myself, I was also intrigued by the metal detectors. Stranger Danger kept me from pestering them with a battery of whippersnapper questions. Then I grew up and got a metal detector of my own, hoping to sate my curiosity. My first find was a tiny metal fighter jet on the beach (that was cool), but mostly I got hits on bits of aluminum cans and other metal garbage. And I once skimmed a playground to give the kids' imaginations some room to grow. I found a quarter under the jungle gym.*

I write about characters who experience the uncanny in their everyday lives. My writing is influenced by Daniel Woodrell, Flannery O'Connor, Shirley Jackson—and love him or hate him—Stephen King.

BIO: *Laura L. Petersen is an emerging writer who grew up in the fog along the Pacific coast where she practiced writing before she could actually write by making up plays. She has published a short story, "Minor Wives' Tales" on Wanderings Magazine, and two poems on Red River Review. She has a day job writing for THE MAN without an accompanying byline, but it pays the bills. Laura earned her MFA from the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, WA.*

WORLD AT LARGE

By Nicholas North

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author TINA CABRERA writes: As writers and humans in general, what compels us to tell stories? Why do we seem to return to the same story over and over again? I think part of it has to do with an attempt to capture the world at large. For our part as writers, we construct worlds on the small scale and by means of limited settings. We do this because we want to feel that we are not alone and that while we suffer, so does everyone else. Yet, we want to be unique in the telling of our tales. I've been thinking a lot about the elusiveness of originality. Even when a story seems unique and original, it always contains the familiar; otherwise, we wouldn't be drawn to it. Nicholas North's WORLD AT LARGE is at once unique and familiar with its blurring of boundaries between the small and large and between two protagonists: Vic Macarelli and Mac Vicarelli, both artists who visit a museum with microscopic figures that reflect back their lives and desires. In effect, the tiny sculptures become a microcosm of the larger world that they inhabit. North, the narrator and creator of this grand fiction seeks to change his tenuous relationship with the "you" of his story by the very telling. Isn't that our objective as we navigate the world stage? I am enamored with the irony, absurdity, and sarcasm of this engaging metafiction within metafiction, worlds within worlds; The words of Nicholas North ring true for this writer: "The thing about fiction--what I love about fiction--is the way it allows us, me, to recreate our lives, to construct Edens and Utopias, from the simple garbage of words and the common stink of languages."*

Per Carlo, March 17

1.

Last week, Vic Macarelli (artist), visited the Glasnost era museum dedicated to the work of Nikolevsky, Yev-Nikolai. The museum is located within the compound of a 10th century Orthodox nunnery in the city of Kiev—Kiyv—Ukraine and is famous for its exhibition of micro

miniatures. Located in the main gallery are two rows of microscopes focused on tiny sculptures. One shows a scabies mite shod in black stilettos (*Sarcoptes scabiei laboutaine*). Another has a map of Madagascar carved on a sesame seed and a third, the Palace of Versailles, complete with *parterre* gardens, etched onto the head of a pin.

But the one Vic liked the best was *Calla Lily Trapped inside a Hair Follicle*. A microscopic long-stemmed lily inserted into a hollowed out strand of hair. Vic figured it was a hoax until he saw the tiny hair positioned on a slide tray.

2.

A week later, artist Mac Vicarelli visited the Brezhnev era museum dedicated to the work of Yev-Nikolai Nikolevsky. The museum is located next to a 10th century Rosicrucian cemetery in the city of Odessa—*Odesa*—and is famous throughout the Crimea. Inside the museum are two rows of microscopes focused on tiny mechanically-driven dioramas. The first shows the building of the Great Pyramid at Giza, complete with whip-masters and a scowling Khufu (*hw-fw*). The second has a re-enactment of Marie-Antoinette at the guillotine with a mob of ten thousand crowded into a space the size of a molecule. This one is accompanied by a sound track. Mac cocked his ear to the lens and heard the queen cry ‘No, not my head! Not my pretty Austrian neck!’ In the last one he saw Vic Macarelli (artist) look up from the microscope in the next room and scratch his head. Mac figured Vic figured it was just a hoax.

3.

I recall quite clearly the two of us standing beside the last exhibit. You told me you didn’t want to look into it—you were scared or something. ‘It frightens me,’ you said and shook your head,

your hair coming loose as you did so and your face taking on that pouty look I love. I assured you—I said, I remember reassuring you—that none of it was real—the little parasites in high heels, the pharaoh, and the story of Vic and Mac and Kiev and Odessa was just a fabrication I put down on paper because, well, I was pissed off because things aren't like they used to be. You have a job now. I can't drink anymore (let's leave that where we found it) and there's some question about who the father is.

But understand: your neck is not on the guillotine and you are not the Queen of France. I would never do that to you. I would never inflict such atrocities upon you, Maryann, anymore than I would concoct some spy body to survey (in the sense of surveillance) your life (and find out who the fucking father is!) anymore than I would throw you in front of a speeding train or sentence you to years of hard labor like a pyramid builder, while whip-masters lashed, and I watched them, thinking about you, of course. The finest gift I received from you was a strand of your hair I recovered from the bathtub, the same day—you remember—that I bought you a rose.

'You bought me a calla lily.'

'A lily, right. A calla Lily. I'm sorry.'

If only you would change your mind. If only you would do that. I promise I will dismantle all this improbability (that so frightens you). Promise to disassemble this frightening world-view of our world and make a new world, a pretty and not so scary world. I can do this for you.

In the final sequence of *World at Large* I have Mac looking into Yev's last microscope. I've thought about this one for awhile. I began the paragraph (energetically, confidently) with a gerund (ing)—Mac look-*ing*; Mac lean-*ing* forward, that is, Mac bend-*ing* down to look into the microscope but after reading it a few times, I thought, *go simple*.

Mac looked into the last microscope. He saw a big black circle. It looked like an eclipse of the sun but instead of a yellow corona this one was blue. He fiddled with the focus (you could that) and was a little shocked to discover a big eye was looking back at him. Even more shocked when he felt the force of a gale at his back. This was the breath rushing from the big nostrils just behind him in the face with the big blue eye. It was bloody disquieting. Mac told himself it was just a hoax.

5.

The thing about fiction—what I love about fiction—is the way it allows us, me, to recreate our lives, to construct Edens and Utopias, from the simple garbage of words and the common stink of languages, the shit, even, of speech, the rancidness of slang and the cruel combustion waiting to explode inside the neologism—too many examples to quote, let's move on.

There are two endings to this story. I do not know which is the real or which is the best ending. I do not know who the father is or if it was Mary Ann's hair (a single clean strand) I recovered from the bathtub. But I do know that was the day I bought her a calla lily (actually, a rose).

6.

In another room of the same museum Vic looked into the last microscope and saw Mac looking at a big black circle. He saw him pull away in shock and then tremble in the rush of air at his back. Vic knew Mac had seen a big blue eye with golden flecks in it staring back at him. Mac didn't know whose eye it was of course but Vic knew that his own eye was blue and there were not only flecks in it but they were—

7.

Because this is fiction and because my name is Nick, the following can happen, does happen. Marie-Ann goes into the museum and looks into the first microscope. What she sees is the hair I recovered from the bathtub lovingly combined with a calla lily (single long stem) I bought her the same day. In the next, a blue sky followed by a sunset, lurid yet romantic. In the next, a Cross and Rose both dating to the 10 century (that explains the rose). Next, two Rosicrucian symbols (a rose by any other name. A lily? A calla lily?) Next, two cymbals. Next, our beating hearts beating together. This one comes with a soundtrack and when Marie-Annette cocks her ear to the lens she can hear the sound of our lovemaking. In the last frame, an eye--mine, I believe--is looking back at her. She knows this eye, blue, my eye, and there are not only flecks in it, but just as Vic is thinking (and Nick is writing) Marie-Antoinette (who knows who the father is) is saying

'Golden'.

I would like to think he has my eyes.

I would like to think I have his eye.

My name is Nicholas. I am Nick. My name is Nikolai Nikolevsky. I am Yev. This is fiction and I do not exist.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I wrote WORLD AT LARGE while I was on a metafiction kick and in lust with Donald Barthelme and others but mostly Donald who I believe writes the best metafiction ever. Since I sometimes wonder if I exist I wanted to play around with images/reverse images, actions/counter actions, probability and absurdity and the mirror like character of reality, time in all its conjugations and the Buddhist thing that all phenomena are conditioned by 'dependant origination'. Language is important to me. Every word is a 'final', It just won't do for one word to substitute for another.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Sono nato in Canada ma sono cresciuto in Italia, nel sud, in Campania—una bella parte del paese. Ho un master in letteratura ma in realta' odio l'universita', quindi non sono andato avanti per il mio dottorato. Vivo il mio amichetto vicino a Toronto con i nostri gatti imaginari 'Ghost' e 'Phantom'. Scusi gli apostrofi, ma non ho una tastiera italiana.*

EDITOR'S BIO: *Tina V. Cabrera currently resides in the ATX area with her husband, dog and two cats. She teaches as Assistant Professor of English for Temple College and devotes her free time to writing and making art. Visit her website at tvcannyuncanny.com Her stories 'Waking Hours (Fiction)' and 'Waking Hours (Anti-fiction)' are published in this issue (fiction).*

ROY'S FUNERALS

By Marco Etheridge

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A flawless performance on every level: story, voice, character, style, prose. Listen to this for perfectly realized regional dialogue:*

Morning, are you Roy?

A-yuh, that I am.

I'm Amos Knightly. Was wondering if you could help me out. Got the wife's old mother in the back. Promised the wife I'd get her planted proper.

A-yuh, I can probably help you. What did you have to trade?

Times is lean, as ya know, but I've five gallon of diesel, a little less of gas, and some ammo. Just a dite, I know, but like I said.

The whole thing is, like, fucken deadly. Five stars.

Roy's Funerals

By Marco Etheridge

Roy owned the only drive-thru funeral business in what used to be the state of Maine. He hadn't planned it that way, but a fella needed to be adaptable in this world. The troubles come up from all those cities down east and they come up fast. Gangs of Cutters poured out of the big cities after everything went to hell. What with the flatlanders running north, and the Cutters chasing them, corpses started

stacking up like culch at a lawn sale. Roy largely disagreed with all the killing, but it was happening one way or the other. The days of well-dressed folk standing around freshly dug graves vanished along with the rest of what they called polite society. Where others saw tragedy, Roy saw a business opportunity.

He set up shop in an old warehouse with a big fenced yard out back. It was a sweet arrangement. The customers could drive right on in through the double-wide rollup doors. The corpse got unloaded after Roy rolled down the steel doors for the security of the bereaved. Once a fair barter price had been struck, Roy would commence the service, such as it was. Folks could choose from one of the three prayer options posted on the wall. For vestments, Roy wore a black felt hat and a clean set of coveralls with his name embroidered on the front. Headstones were concrete pavers done up with spray paint shot over a stencil kit. He used the same stencil kit to make a plywood sign. Roy posted that sign down at the end of the hot top drive:

Roy's Drive-Thru Funerals

Secure Graveyard

Cremating Done

Honk Twice

Late-morning sun washed over the graveyard behind the warehouse. The dogs were busy working the fence-line, running it in sections. The beasts stopped now and then to sniff the air. Roy scratched at the stubble on his jaw, pondering the sky and the weather. Spring was getting on, a slow business here in Maine. This was the first morning of the season without a hard frost. The ground was probably getting soft enough to dig. Roy would need to be getting to work. Some of them winter corpses were thawing out quicker than the ground. They'd be plenty ripe if he didn't plant them quick. He nodded his head at the bright sky. Tomorrow he'd fire up the old backhoe and give it a go.

Wintertime the ground was froze too hard to dig. Roy could wail on that icy earth until the backhoe bucket was stove in, and still not make so much as a posthole. Folks were pretty understanding for the most part. Once they helped wrestle the body onto the cart, Roy would run through the service. At the end he'd intone one of the three prayers from the menu, and that was that. The formalities observed, there was nothing to do but shoo the bereaved back into their rig. Everyone got a complimentary air-freshener as a parting gift. As soon as the customers drove out of sight, Roy wheeled the dearly departed outside. With the hard bite of a Maine winter on his skin, Aunt Mabel or Uncle Ernie would get stacked with the rest of the frozen stiff.

* * *

Roy saw the lead dog drop into a crouch. He was already reaching for his rifle as Blackie broke for the rear of the graveyard, the rest of the pack hot on her heels. The dogs hit the back fence in a storm of snarls, but there was naught to see. It was probably just a rabbit hopping along the verge. Still, a man couldn't be too careful these days.

He'd had some trouble over winter. A few of them Cutters tried to sneak into the place. The thirty-thirty had taken care of two of those old boys before they made it into the graveyard. The third one, he got inside the fence. Real quick he wished he hadn't of. The dogs took him down wicked fast, the big black bitch leading. Roy left them dogs to have their way. It was a good thing to keep them hungry.

The dogs swung away from the fence, alerted to the sound of a vehicle on the road out front. Roy walked to the back door of the warehouse, the old lever-action rifle cradled in the crook of one arm. He locked the back door behind himself and crossed the interior of the warehouse. Standing beside the heavy steel front door, he squinted through a small square of a reinforced glass. One quick look, then he swung his head away from the window.

A pickup was idling at the end of the hot top next to the plywood sign. The driver honked twice. Roy opened the door and stuck out an arm, waving the driver up. He watched the rig ease up the driveway. It was an old Ford, nobody in it but the driver. There was a blue tarp thrown over something in the bed of the truck. Roy

stayed behind the protection of the steel door until he could get a good look at the driver. When he felt sure of things, he stepped outside.

Morning, are you Roy?

A-yuh, that I am.

I'm Amos Knightly. Was wondering if you could help me out. Got the wife's old mother in the back. Promised the wife I'd get her planted proper.

A-yuh, I can probably help you. What did you have to trade?

Times is lean, as ya know, but I've five gallon of diesel, a little less of gas, and some ammo. Just a dite, I know, but like I said.

D'you have any thirty-thirty?

Sorry, no, but I do have two boxes of twenty-two mag, a hundred rounds I reckon.

That and the fuel.

'Taint much, not meaning to be hard.

A-yuh, 'taint much. But the fella that sent me up here, he said some tobacco might sweeten the thing for ya. I got some cigars to offer as well. Don't know nothin' about 'em, but I got 'em.

How many cigars d'ya figure?

There's ten here, which is all I've got.

That'll get the job done for you. It is a bit lean, like you said yourself, but you're the only customer today. Let me just roll up the door and you can drive her in.

The tarp over the bed of the truck stuck up at funny angles. When that fella Amos yanked it back, Roy saw an old biddy stiff as dry sticks, looking like she had been toppled out of her chair. Which, as it turns out, is exactly what happened.

Odd, ain't it? Found her just so in her rocker, like she was froze up solid. Musta died sitting up some time of the night. I pushed and pulled, but it weren't no good. I couldn't straighten her out. It were gawmy getting her into the back of the truck. The wife didn't care for it much.

Yeah, the rigor mortis will do that. Makes them right awkward to handle. A warm room, that will speed it up.

Funny, I always thought it was made up, like for the movies.

A-yuh, it's real all right. Here, you get her by the prayer handles and I'll take her arms. Set her right here on the cart.

They laid the old thing on her side, her forearms sticking straight out, hands reaching for nothing. Her bony knees were bent at ninety degrees, pushing a worn housedress out like a tent. Roy stifled a laugh as best he could. Judging from the expression on the old girl's face, she looked a might bit peeved about the joker what swiped her rocker.

Which words would you like me to say over her? I got them up there on the wall.

Most folks go with the Number One. They seem to like it, but it's your choice.

The fella just shook his head.

To tell the truth, the old girl had enough words for everyone while she was living. I don't believe she needs anymore now that she's gone. If it's all the same to you, I'll just get you your barter goods and be on my way.

Amos Knightly wrestled two fuel cans from the bed of the pickup. He reached through the window of the cab, fishing out two fifty-round tubs of twenty-two rimfire and a fancy-colored cigar box.

I can't promise nothing on these cigars. They were in this box; leftover from her dead husband I suppose. Like I said, I don't know nothin' about them.

A-yuh, I guess a man will just have to smoke one and find out. Let me get you a couple of empty fuel tins to replace those.

Appreciate it, Roy.

* * *

Roy sat out back of the warehouse, smoking, thinking, and counting his blessings.

It was a good thing for a man to take stock from time to time. The fence gleamed in the starlight; a silver line etched in the darkness. The new moon was leaving the stars to do all of the work.

He puffed on the dead man's cigar. Roy smoked slowly, with no reason to be in any kind of hurry. He marveled at the stillness of it all. It was deadly quiet of a night anymore. There weren't no airplane noises, no trains far off, no traffic whining

down the road. A whip-poor-will mourned in the woods past the fence-line. The sound of it would scare a fella if he believed in ghosts. Roy was past all that now, having seen what he'd seen.

Closer at hand was the sound of the dogs gnawing bones. There hadn't been much meat on Granny Knightly's old gams, but it was all the dogs were going to get.

When he couldn't straighten her out, Roy nipped off her legs with the chain saw. It wasn't like anyone was going to miss those bony sticks. He'd bury the rest of the old gal in the morning.

All in all, it had been a pretty fair day. Sitting there, smoking a decent cigar, Roy felt almost civilized. After he finished his smoke, he would turn a few of the dogs loose inside the warehouse before he tucked himself into the little office apartment.

It was the only heated room in the place. By now it would be snug and warm.

Tomorrow would be a busy one. There were holes to dig and corpses to plant. A busy day was a good day. A man couldn't help but have a spark of hope, what with spring coming on and all. Yessir, it looked to be another fine day at Roy's Funerals.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I love writing 'normal-world' people into an abnormal world. Flush Toilets! Running Water! Guess what? I believe that whatever cataclysm humans final concoct, the aftermath will be folks trying to fix the plumbing. "Roy's Funerals" is an example of this: Where do you bury Granny after the world goes to hell? The backstory is kept to a bare minimum. Who cares how society died? Regular folks still have to deal with ABC problems and super-heroes are super-boring. I guess that's the theme: The Post-Apocalypse Proletariat tending to the tasks at hand with a minimum of fuss about moral quibbles.*

BIO: *Marco Etheridge lives and writes in Vienna, Austria. His short fiction has appeared in Literally Stories, Dime Show Review, Five on the Fifth, Storgy, Inlandia Journal, Manzano Mountain Review, Every Day Fiction, Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, Literary Yard, Mobius: A Journal for Social Change, Czykmate, and Cleaning Up the Glitter. His non-fiction work has been featured at Route 7 and Bluntly Magazine. Marco's third novel, "Breaking the Bundles," is available at fine online booksellers.*

His author website is: <https://www.marcoetheridgefiction.com/>

His Facebook Author page is: <https://www.facebook.com/SerialZtheNovel/>

GAZETTE OF THE HOUSE OF THE PEAKS

By Daniel de Culla

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Daniel de Culla is a raging prophet of artistic celebration, a literary renegade who bucks bronco in a territory without rules. His smelted word strings, poured from a shimmering crucible are axe and file finished, the line between poetry and prose is trampled gallantly; sweetnesses are screamed from the street corner from which he blasts. Post-modernist formalist images by his own hand sing like a chorus in a glade. The original submission is in Spanish; the English translation is the author's own. We didn't edit it in the interest of voice authenticity—the rough cuts and bumps are part of the reading experience. Art is nothing if not flux, right?. (Spacing is the author's own.)*

GAZETTE THE HOUSE OF THE PEAKS

We're here, next door, right next to the Segovia Aqueduct, sitting on the terrace of a bar in front of the Casa de los Picos, (House of the Peaks), on Calle Real de Segovia; very close, also, from the Mirador de la Canalejas, from where we can see a wonderful panoramic view of La Mujer Muerta, a mountainous alignment of the Sierra de Guadarrama, and, on the contrary, of the Conciliar Seminary, where the Poet spent more than five years to "Study to cure and serve God and you," as he laughing tells us.

The grace of being here, this February 29, 2020, is because the Poet presents these two new books of him, and he has chosen Segovia for being half Segovian and half Aragonese; "Therefore, the next presentation of my books will be in Huesca"; He has promised us; while telling us:

- We could have been in Washington DC, USA, because I have been invited to the Split This Rock Poetry Festival 2020 (Friday 28); showing us the invitation.

And, smiling:

-But, we are better here.

We are next to "The House of the Peaks", because this house was a refuge for his mother when the aviation of the two sides of the civil war bombed Segovia, and his mother, at that time, with four of her daughters, here she's hid, along with other Segovians Wo/Men with their children.

-Attend, Juani; attend, Luisa; that father has marched to Alto de los Leones for many days, mother told the elders.

Pilar cried, Lupita moaned, and her mother Daniela, to the smallest said:

-Don't cry, Pilar, don't cry, Lupita, if the Moor hears you, they will come and kill us.

The truth is that we have accompanied Dany, because he has promised to invite us to eat farm beans and Segovian suckling pig, with Segovian dessert puff pastry cake, in the Hostal "El Hidalgo" Restaurant, after the church of San Martín, an archbishop's palace rehabilitated thirteenth century, which smells like a holy brothel.

"Good Morning, Pero Diaz", and "A Flight through Segovia" are his two new books full of Art, Poetry and Prose, which we have loved the seven that have come to accompany him, all "males", to this presentation in "my Segovia".

He has given us one of his books, to choose; and, later, we will accompany him to the Public Library to leave a copy of his "A Flight through Segovia".

From the entrance door of "El Hidalgo" we see, from behind, the statue of Juan Bravo, in the square of his name; that famous communer decapitated by the evil inclined, vicious, thief, false and similar things king Carlos I.

One of those present, Francisco de la Santísima Trinidad and Todos los Santos, who was, as a young man, suitcase and novillero in Extremadura and Portugal, broke the conversation and admiration we had about the two books presented, shutting us up and asking:

- Why don't you know what Daniel wants to express when he says: "I believe what the Segovian son of coalman believes"?

-Well, everyone exclaimed.

Addressing Daniel, they begged:

- Account Culla, account.

Daniel told them:

-Francisco refers to things of faith that I learned in the Seminary, and about the Holy Trinity, something so superior, doubtful and disputed by theologians.

A colleague of mine, son of a coalman in Segovia, by the way, from Valledado, married to a woman from San Cristóbal, explained to me about the three divine people, three and one, taking the cassock down, making three folds, and then , extending it, saying:

-So, Daniel, look: there are three things and all, one.

Everyone laughed, some thinking of another mischievous thing, that, also, are three and one excellently erect.

Happy and satisfied with their gifted books; the Poet made us listen, before arriving at “El Hidalgo”, the Manifesto in Defense of Miguel Hernández, of the Association of Collegiate Writers of Spain, to whom the government of the City Council of Madrid cannibal and frank facade has withdrawn some verses of freedom and concord of the Almudena Cemetery, as well as other names of remembered and revered republicans killed by the sacred fascists.

We all support the Manifesto that ACE-Andalusia has sent to us and, walking through Calle Real, which are three streets and a small square: Cervantes Street, Juan Bravo Street, Corpus Square, former Major Synagogue, and Isabel Street the Catholic, until arriving at the Restaurant set, after the church of San Martín of Mozarabic origin with Romanesque style.

-Gerineldo Fuencisla. February 29, 2020.

Translate: de Culla

THE BOOKS:

BUENOS DIAS, PERO DIAZ
GOOD MORNING, PERO DIAZ



DANIEL DE CULLA

Back Cover



Daniel, exquisite poet. Your work explores the plastic of the Word and the Verb at the tip of a cocoon.” “Gerineldo Fuencisla



Author-Editor: DANIEL DE CULLA

Título: BUENOS DIAS, PERO DIAZ

GOOD MORNING, PERO DIAZ

Gender; Poetry, Prose, Drawings and more... in b/w

Pages: 696

Year: 2020

UN VUELO POR SEGOVIA
A FLY THROUGH SEGOVIA



DANIEL DE CULLA

Back Cover



“Following this “Flight through Segovia”, I was amazed”. Gerineldo Fuencisla

Author-Editor: DANIEL DE CULLA

Title: UN VUELO POR SEGOVIA

A FLIGHT THROUGH SEGOVIA

Gender: Poetry, Prose, Drawings and more... in colour

Pages: 320

Year: 2020

AUTHOR'S NOTE: ...tell you: this "Gazette" is a writing signed by Gerineldo Fuencisla, a Mine's close friend, and inspired by me, in the presentation, among friends, of my two books, in Segovia capital. The idea of going to Segovia was mine, since I am Segovian by birth, and I studied in its Conciliar Seminary, because, innocent child as I was, I wanted to study for a priest, and to become a saint; because my mother said that priests live like god, until Lust awakened, and a spiritual father put his hand on my holy Arsehole, "like a dog' flea".

The Song of Songs, of Solomon; The Spiritual Canticle, by Saint John of the Cross; and the three great books of our spanish literature: The Book of Good Love, by the Archpriest of Hita, La Celestina, (Tragicomedy by Calisto and Melibea), attributed to Fernando de Rojas); and Don Quixote, were the books that inspired me and inspire me in all my literary events.

AUTHOR BIO: *Gerineldo I met him at Café Gijón, in Madrid, in his literary evenings of Poetas Malditos, back in 1977. He is a man who goes free, and does not want to be labeled. He painted and did some poetry, which we read in Café Libertad, in Madrid from time to time. With him and other friends we moved in Burgos with the name "Grupo Poético" Elogio del Rebusno ", back in the year 2000. Now, I ask him for something sporadic and he just does it to me.*

GACETILLA LA CASA DE LOS PICOS

By Daniel de Culla

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Daniel de Culla es un profeta furioso de la celebración artística, un renegado literario que gana bronco en un territorio sin reglas. Sus cadenas de palabras fundidas, vertidas de un crisol reluciente son hachas y archivos terminados, la línea entre poesía y prosa se pisotea galantemente; se gritan dulzuras desde la esquina de la calle desde la cual él explota. Las imágenes formalistas posmodernas por su propia mano cantan como un coro en un claro La presentación original está en español; La traducción al inglés es del autor. No lo editamos en aras de la autenticidad de la voz: los cortes y las irregularidades son parte de la experiencia de lectura. El arte no es más que un flujo. (El espaciado es propio del autor).

GACETILLA LA CASA DE LOS PICOS

Estamos aquí, al lado, justo al lado, del Acueducto de Segovia, sentados en la terraza de un bar frente a la Casa de los Picos, en la Calle Real de Segovia; muy cerca, también, del Mirador de la Canalejas, desde donde divisamos una estupenda panorámica de La Mujer Muerta, una alineación montañosa de la sierra de Guadarrama, y, a la contra, del Seminario Conciliar, donde el Poeta pasó más de cinco años para “estudiar para cura y servir a Dios y a usted”, como él, entre risas, nos comenta.

La gracia de estar aquí, este 29 de febrero de 2020, es porque el Poeta nos presenta estos dos libros nuevos suyos, y ha elegido Segovia por ser mitad segoviano y mitad aragonés; “por eso, la próxima presentación de mis libros la haremos en Huesca”; nos ha prometido; al tiempo que nos ha dicho:

-Podríamos haber estado en Washington DC, USA, porque he sido invitado al Split This Rock Poetry Festival 2020 (Friday 28); enseñándonos la Invitación.

Y, sonriendo:

-Pero, estamos mejor aquí.

Estamos al lado de “La Casa de los Picos”, porque esta casa fue refugio de su madre cuando la aviación de los dos bandos de la guerra civil bombardeaba Segovia, y su madre, por aquel entonces, con cuatro de sus hijas, aquí se escondía, junto con otras segovianas y segovianos con sus hijos.

-Atiende, Juani; atiende, Luisa; que padre ha marchado al Alto de los Leones para muchos días, les decía su madre a las más mayores.

Pilar lloraba, Lupita gemía, y su madre Daniela a éstas, las más pequeñas, así les decía:

-No llores, Pilar, no llores, Lupita, si os oye el moro, vendrá y nos mataría.

La verdad es que hemos acompañado a Dany, porque ha prometido invitarnos a comer judión de la Granja y cochinitillo segoviano, con tarta de hojaldre segoviana de postre, en el Restaurante Hostal “El Hidalgo”, tras la iglesia de san Martín, un palacete arzobispal rehabilitado del siglo XIII, que huele a prostíbulo sacro santo.

“Buenos Días, Pero Díaz”, y “Un Vuelo por Segovia” son sus dos nuevos libros llenos de Arte, Poesía y Prosa, que nos han encantado a los siete que hemos venido a acompañarle, todos “machos”, a esta su presentación en “mi Segovia”.

Nos ha regalado uno de sus libros, a elegir; y, después, le acompañaremos a la Biblioteca Pública a dejar un ejemplar de su “Un Vuelo por Segovia”.

Desde la puerta de entrada de “El Hidalgo” vemos, de espalda, la estatua de Juan Bravo, en la plazuela de su nombre; ese famoso comunero decapitado por el mal inclinado, vicioso, ladrón, falsario y cosas semejantes rey Carlos I.

Uno de los presentes, Francisco de la Santísima Trinidad y de Todos los Santos, que fue, de joven, maletilla y novillero en Extremadura y Portugal, rompió la conversación y admiración que manteníamos acerca de los dos libros presentados, haciéndonos callar y preguntando:

-¿A que no sabéis lo que quiere expresar Daniel cuando dice: “Yo creo lo que cree el segoviano hijo de carbonero”?

-Pues no, exclamaron todos.

Dirigiéndose a Daniel, ellos le rogaron:

-Cuenta Culla, cuenta.

Daniel les dijo:

-Francisco se refiere a cosas de la fe que aprendí en el Seminario, y acerca de la Santísima Trinidad, cosa tan superior, dudosa y disputada por los teólogos.

Un compañero mío, hijo de un carbonero en Segovia, por cierto, de Valledado, casado con una mujer de san Cristóbal, me explicó lo de las tres divinas personas, tres y una, tomándome la sotana por abajo, haciéndole tres dobleces, para luego, extendiéndola, decir:

-Así, Daniel, mira: son tres cosas y todas, una.

Todos rieron, alguno pensando en otra pícara cosa, que, también, son tres y una excelsa.

Contentos y satisfechos con sus libros regalados; el Poeta nos hizo escuchar, antes de llegar a “El Hidalgo”, el Manifiesto en Defensa de Miguel Hernández, de la Asociación Colegial de Escritores de España, a quien el gobierno del Ayuntamiento de Madrid caníbal y franco facha le ha retirado unos versos de libertad y concordia del Cementerio de la Almudena, así como otros nombres de recordados y venerados republicanos asesinados por el fascismo sacro facho.

Todos apoyamos el Manifiesto que le ha hecho llegar la ACE-Andalucía y, caminando, paseamos la Calle Real, que son tres calles y una plazuela: la Calle Cervantes, la calle Juan Bravo, plazuela del Corpus, antigua Sinagoga Mayor, y Calle Isabel la Católica, hasta llegar al Restaurante fijado, tras de la iglesia de san Martín de origen mozárabe con estilo románico.

-Gerineldo Fuencisla. 29 de Febrero de 2020.

LOS LIBROS:

BUENOS DIAS, PERO DIAZ
GOOD MORNING, PERO DIAZ



DANIEL DE CULLA

Contraportada



“Daniel, poeta exquisito. Tu obra explora la plástica del Verbo y la Palabra en la punta de un capullo”. Gerineldo Fuencisla



Autor-Editor: DANIEL DE CULLA
Título: BUENOS DIAS, PERO DIAZ
GOOD MORNING, PERO DIAZ
Género: Poesía, Prosa, Dibujos y más... en b/n

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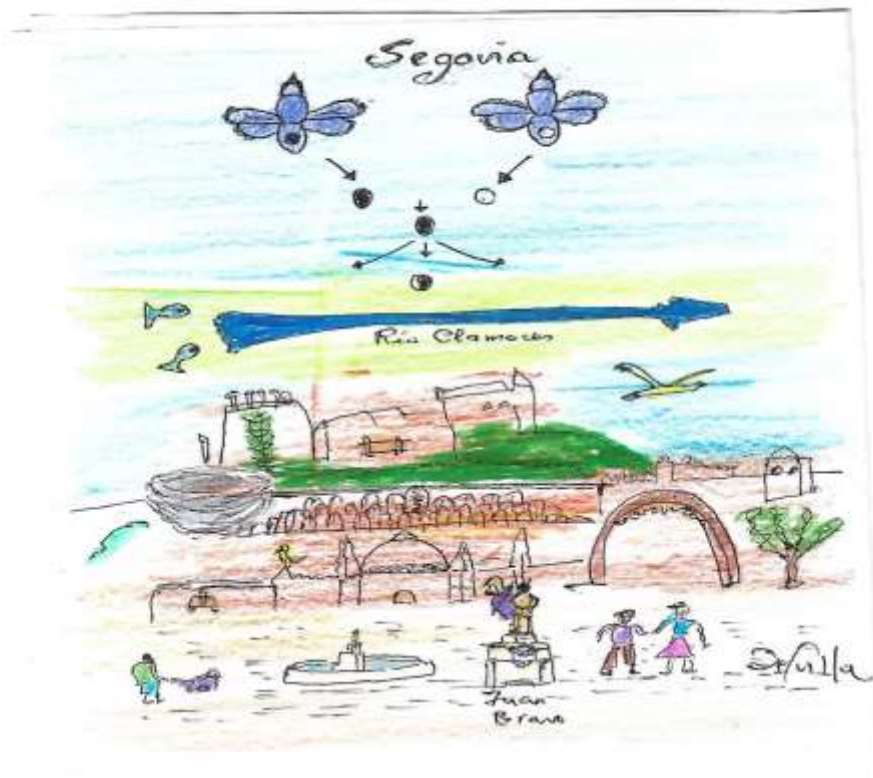
Año de publicación: 2020

UN VUELO POR SEGOVIA



DANIEL DE CULLA

Contraportada



“De seguir este “Vuelo por Segovia”, maravillado quedé”. Gerineldo Fuencisla

Autor-Editor: DANIEL DE CULLA

Título: UN VUELO POR SEGOVIA

Género: Poesía, Prosa, Dibujos y más... en color

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: *En cuanto a NOTA DE AUTOR, decirte esta "Gaceta" es un escrito firmado por Gerineldo Fuencisla, íntimo amigo mío, e inspirado por mí, en la presentación, entre amigos, de mis dos libros, en Segovia capital. La idea de ir a Segovia fue mía, pues yo soy segoviano de nacimiento, y estudié en su Seminario Conciliar, pues, inocente niño como era, quise estudiar para cura, y llegar a ser santo; pues mi madre decía que los curas viven como dios, hasta que despertó en mí la Lujuria, y un padre espiritual me puso su mano en mi Año santo, ¡"como una pulga de perro"¡.*

El Cantar de los Cantares, de Salomón; El Cántico Espiritual, de san Juan de la Cruz; y los tres grandes libros de nuestra literatura: El Libro de Buen Amor, del Arcipreste de Hita, La Celestina,(Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea), atribuída a Fernando de Rojas); y El Quijote, fueron los libros que me inspiraron y me inspiran en todo mi acontecer literario.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Gerineldo le conocí en el Café Gijón, en Madrid, en sus veladas literarias de Poetas Malditos, allá por el año 1977. Es un un hombre que va por libre, y no quiere ser etiquetado. Pintaba y hacía algo de poesía, que leíamos en el Café Libertad, en Madrid de vez en cuando. Con él y otros amigos nos movíamos en Burgos con el nombre "Grupo Poético "Elogio del Rebuzno", allá por el año 2000. Ahora, le pido algo esporádico y me lo hace, sin más,.*

ROOM 310

By Peter J. Stavros

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WHY WE LIKE IT: *In the simplest possible language the author presents a moving, emotionally layered group portrait of a family coming together when one of their own is about to pass. It's easy to overplay this kind of story but Stavros keeps everything on an even keel. The voice rings with common familiarity and the elegiac tone that colours (Cdn. sp.) character, dialogue and description, is sustained throughout. The use of the third person passive—a challenging POV—is both wisely chosen and perfectly handled. All of which means if this looks simple and easy it's only because in Room 310 Stavros does really well what so many writers try to do and fail. The best writing is magic and he is a magician. His prose is like some kind of phonic elixir. Quote: His skin was ashen, and his hair had fallen out in curious clumps. He lay buried beneath a mound of warm blankets, tethered to monitors straight out of science fiction that blinked and beeped and flashed numbers that meant nothing to you, his body a pin cushion for needles and tubes.' This story, together with 'Ten Something in the Morning' which we published in Issue 2 (fiction) are included in Stavros's upcoming chapbook Three in the Morning and You Don't Smoke Anymore from Etchings Press, for release this month (May). You can read more from this talented writer at www.peterjstavros.com*

Room 310

It was Room 310, where your father was, that year he had leukemia, that year you feared you would lose him, at the University Hospital in Lexington, the cancer wing named after some anonymous benefactor. You would visit him every Sunday, dutifully, your father's son, would make the hour or so drive east across I-64, no matter the conditions, no matter the circumstance (the flat tire), with a stack of newspapers and those sports magazines he liked. She went with you, every time, without question, without hesitation, and you had only recently started dating. It was fresh and alive between you two, new and exciting as you discovered each other, flutters in

your stomachs and sweaty palms, electric anticipation coursing through your veins. And you couldn't bear to be apart, even to the cancer wing at the University Hospital.

Your father looked bad, he looked terrible, he looked at death's door, and that scared you, that terrified you, made you feel helpless and alone. You had never seen him that way before because he wasn't supposed to be that way. He was supposed to be strong and forceful and in control, the goddamn bear claw hammer in the tool box. Yet there he was, anything but. He was weak, and frail, disappearing inside the hollow shell of himself. His skin was ashen, and his hair had fallen out in curious clumps. He lay buried beneath a mound of warm blankets, tethered to monitors straight out of science fiction that blinked and beeped and flashed numbers that meant nothing to you, his body a pin cushion for needles and tubes. You understood how sick he was when he didn't bother to complain about the thermostat, the air conditioner running full blast, set at sixty-two. He wasn't who he was supposed to be and you feared you would lose him. But would he ever perk up when she walked in.

Your father was enamored of her, everything about her (but in all fairness, everyone was). There were just some people in this world who were powered by a special kind of energy. She was always the brightest light in the room, and especially a cramped white sterile room in the cancer wing at the University Hospital. When she walked in, your father would perk up and take notice, shoving your newspapers and magazines onto the metal side table along with the pink plastic water pitcher and cellophane bag of hard candies and the creased and tattered pictures of all those saints your mother prayed to. When she walked in, a smile escaped across your father's face, and you caught a glimpse of who he used to be, calling her "young lady" and "my sweetie" and other pet names you had never heard him say, and at first you figured it might have just been the medication – the morphine dripping, dripping, dripping – but you came to realize it was

because of her, because he was enamored of her, everyone was. He became who he used to be, if only briefly, if only during those fleeting few hours of your visits – laughing and chitchatting, catching up on gossip, what was happening at church, current events, local news, clichés about the weather – until the nurse ushered you out, telling you that he needed to rest, telling you that he needed another round of poison to try and kill the poison that was trying to kill him.

He hated to see her go (and you too probably though you wouldn't know) but he loved it when she left because she would lean over and stretch her arms wide, and hug him in this ridiculously affectionate yet genuine embrace, one dainty foot dangling off the linoleum floor, as if she had known him forever, as if he were her dad. She would just lean over and hug him like that, her small body, you would tease, appearing even smaller against your father, who was a big man despite the state he was in, the toxins eating away at him. He would try to hug her back, clumsy and awkward because he wasn't much of a hugger (no one in your family was) and as best he could tethered to those science fiction monitors (and you swore the blinking and beeping and flashing numbers sped up for a split-second). She hugged him as if she didn't want the hug to end, as if she would never hug anyone ever again, and you could tell your father loved it.

On your way back home, the hour or so drive west across I-64, you fell silent, brain addled by your apprehensions, hypnotized by the broken white line that flickered past like frames of Super 8 film. You craved a cigarette, just one deep, satisfying drag, for the stress, and the depression, and visiting someone in the hospital always made you crave a cigarette in some perverse way, perhaps a fucked-up show of resistance to the inevitable. You would turn on the radio, more out of habit (who listened to the radio anymore?), some white noise to drown out the monotone humming of the engine, since you couldn't talk, speechless, running it over and over in your head what would happen if you lost him, if your father wound up dead. She respected your mood

(and moodiness), and sat motionless, equally silent and still beside you.

On one of those drives back home, Foo Fighters came on the radio, “My Hero,” and you didn’t think you were listening to the radio (who listened to the radio anymore?), couldn’t recognize any songs before or after, but when that song came on, and you heard the refrain, you broke down, a subconscious response, a spontaneous emotional collapse, and you lost it, you absolutely lost it, and you cried – thick and guttural and choking. It was all you could do to drive, to keep the car on the road, on the right side of the broken white line. She reached across and placed a delicate hand on your shuddering shoulder (she smelled like spring flowers), and she squeezed in close towards you, and she whispered that everything would be alright. It was all she said – just that everything would be alright. And you believed her. And it was. And you always believed her when she said that everything would be alright. Until it wasn’t.

That night, lying in bed, staring up at the stucco ceiling, in the dark and quiet, her head on your chest, your arms wrapped tight, pressed up against her, soft and safe, warm skin against warm skin, you told her you loved her.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I was inspired to write this story from my own experience having visited my father in the cancer ward of a hospital. I wanted to depict the wild swing of emotions someone went through watching a loved one, and particularly a parent, suffer from a serious illness. Then when I was putting stories together for my chapbook, I felt that this piece fit in well with the extended narrative to provide some backstory for the protagonist. My literary influences are varied. Being from Louisville, and a former journalist, I’m a big fan of the immersive, gritty, energetic “gonzo” style of Hunter S. Thompson, who was born here. When it comes to creating conflict, especially through dialogue, I admire the plays of Sam Shepard, who also incidentally spent his later years in Kentucky, about an hour down the road from where I live.*

BIO: *Peter J. Stavros is a writer in Louisville, Kentucky. “Room 310,” and “Ten Something in the Morning” from Volume 2 of Fleas on the Dog, are from his forthcoming chapbook, Three in the Morning and You Don’t Smoke Anymore, which will be released this May by Etchings Press (<http://etchings.uindy.edu>). Peter is also a playwright who has had plays produced across the country. More can be found at www.peterjstavros.com and follow on Twitter @PeterJStavros.*

At the end of the day

By michael howard

WHY WE LIKE IT: *'At the end of the day' is an expression we use to mean when all the crap has cleared away what lies beneath comes to the surface. A group of friends have come together and their casual conversation, at once innocuous, even banal, is the fuse of a dynamite charge. Through fragments and glimmers of dialogue a story is laid out and we are drawn into a private world where old wounds refuse to heal. Of all the authors we've published no one comes closer to being a 'poet of the ordinary' than Michael Howard. It's writing that drinks the bittersweet wine sap of everyday experience in a style which eclipses improvement. His impossibly beautiful prose is to minimalism what boneless sleep (to quote Carl Sandburg) is to a cat. Five stars.*

Quote: Rob grunted and waved his hand dismissively. He was sitting forward with his forearms on his knees. Theo was slumped against the back cushion, almost lying down. He took his hat off and put it on his chest. His dark hair was flattened against his head. It looked painted on. *And this intoxicating four lines of dialogue:*

"Who's going," Rob asked with his mouth full.

"Katie, Jim and Emily for sure. Probably a few others."

"Emily's insufferable."

"I totally agree. But we don't have to talk to her."

Read Michael Howard's Can anyone else feel that? (Issue 2-Fiction)

At the end of the day

Alyssa came through the door about six thirty. Rob and Theo were sitting on the couch drinking Michelob Ultra and watching tennis. They were still wearing their polo shirts and khaki shorts and hats.

She said, “Hi boys,” and kicked off her heels, put her keys and purse down on the kitchen table. Rob said, “Hey Lyss.” Theo looked over and waved. Alyssa took a small apple from the bowl on the table and bit into it loudly. She moved to the living room.

“How was your game?”

Rob grunted and waved his hand dismissively. He was sitting forward with his forearms on his knees. Theo was slumped against the back cushion, almost lying down. He took his hat off and put it on his chest. His dark hair was flattened against his head. It looked painted on. Alyssa said:

“Does that mean Theo won?”

“By two strokes. I triple-bogeyed seventeen.”

That’s true, Theo thought. It was also true that Rob had lost his ball in the trees on the fourteenth hole and then played one that didn’t belong to him rather than take the one-stroke penalty. So he would have lost by more than two strokes if he hadn’t cheated. Theo was tempted to say so but he didn’t, just as he hadn’t called him on it at the time. Rob was under the impression that his fraud went unnoticed.

“Anyway it was a lousy day all around,” Rob said. “For both of us.”

Theo thought that that was true, too. It had been a lousy day.

Alyssa asked what they shot.

Rob looked at Theo. “What was it? Eighty-three, eighty-one?”

“Yup.”

“Yuck,” Alyssa said. “Well, it still beats work.”

“Yeah, how was it?” Rob asked distractedly. The TV had his attention. It was late summer; the US Open was underway.

“Usual.” She started telling a story about something a coworker did but stopped when she saw that she had no audience. She looked at the TV. Federer was steamrolling some American qualifier.

“Think he’ll win?” she asked.

“The whole tournament? Doubt it,” Rob said. “He hasn’t had good form this summer. It’ll be Nadal or Djokovic.”

Theo said, “I wouldn’t count him out.”

“Theoretically he could do it,” Rob said, “but I’d be very surprised.”

Alyssa realized she was still standing and sat down on the loveseat. The apartment had come furnished, so the decor was new, modern and coordinated. She and Rob split the rent down the middle. Theo had his own place nearer the city. He and Rob had known each other a long time—since junior high. They’d played sports and thrown parties and engaged in juvenile antics together. Went to different colleges but stayed in touch. Now Theo sold car insurance and Rob worked for an IT distribution company. Alyssa worked there too. The wedding was planned for next spring. Theo would be the best man.

“If he keeps serving like that he’s got a shot,” Rob said when the match ended.

Theo nodded.

Alyssa got up to throw away her apple core. She asked if they wanted more beer. Rob answered for both of them. She took two more bottles from the fridge and poured a little Chardonnay for herself. On her way back to the living room she switched on the light. The sun was almost gone. Another day gone.

“Did you eat?” she asked.

“No,” Rob said. He fell back and rubbed his eyes. “Not since lunch.”

“I’m starving,” she said. “And I don’t feel like cooking.”

“Order something.”

They did. Theo went to the kitchen for another beer. Rob said he wanted one too. It was a good thing they’d bought two six-packs with the money Theo won off Rob in the golf match; they’d probably go through all twelve bottles. Theo felt low as he pulled open the door of the fridge. He’d been feeling low for a while. But right now, at this moment, he thought he felt lower than ever. Beating Rob today didn’t give him any satisfaction at all. That was unusual. Theo hadn’t planned on spending the rest of the day at Rob’s place but he didn’t know what else to do. He dreaded going back to his own apartment. The thought sickened him. Everything sickened him lately.

They sat in the living room wolfing down chicken wings and half a tray of pizza. The US Open was still on but it was a women’s match and Rob and Theo weren’t interested in women’s tennis. Alyssa wasn’t interested in any form of tennis. At length she mentioned that some people from work were meeting up downtown for drinks a bit later. It was Friday night, after all.

“Who’s going,” Rob asked with his mouth full.

“Katie, Jim and Emily for sure. Probably a few others.”

“Emily’s insufferable.”

“I totally agree. But we don’t have to talk to her.”

“Sounds like you’re set on going.”

“I’m not opposed to it. Are you?”

Rob threw his crust into the box and leaned back, sighing. “I guess not.”

“We can wait till the match is over.”

“No, it’s alright,” Rob said. “It’s only the second round.” He looked at Theo. “What do you think?”

Theo indicated his clothes.

“Right.” Rob thought for a second. “Well, we could stop at your place so you can change. Or you’re welcome to borrow something from me.”

“That’s okay,” Theo said. He forced himself to yawn. “I’m pretty tired.”

“Sure?”

“Mhm. And,” he lied, “I have to pick up my sister from the airport in the morning.”

“Fair enough,” Rob said, yawning himself. Alyssa was looking at him. “You really wanna go, huh?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“Alright,” he said. “Let me shower and change. Then we’ll go.”

Alyssa smiled and sent text messages to her friends. She and Theo made small talk while Rob took a shower. How is work and what have you been doing lately and did you see that new Tarantino movie? Neither of them had but both said they wanted to. Theo pointed out that it got good reviews. Alyssa asked him what his sister was coming into town for. “Just a visit,” he said, and then he felt a great disappointment at being unable to come up with a better story. As though some opportunity had been wasted. Alyssa almost asked him how Brook was doing.

“Well,” she said once they’d run out of things to talk about, “I better clean up.”

“I’ll help,” Theo said.

Theo drove from Rob’s apartment to the supermarket. He pushed a shopping cart slowly up and down the aisles in his golf clothes. Every so often he took something from the shelf and turned it over in his hand, looking at the nutrition facts and ingredients without reading them. After half an hour his cart was still empty. He began grabbing things at random. Cookies, prunes, frozen waffles, hamburger buns. He put a case of Budweiser in the cart. Two cans of tuna fish for his cat. A carton of eggs. A bag of powdered sugar. He paid with his debit card and shoved the clattering cart across the parking lot and loaded the groceries into the trunk of his car, next to his clubs. He started the engine and stared at some trees in the distance. “Afterlife” by Arcade Fire came on the satellite radio. Theo shut it off and drove away, away from his apartment.

The same blue Dodge was parked in the alley next to her building. Two months ago it would have been his car there. Right there in that spot. Theo rolled up to the curb across the street and stopped. He fixed his eyes on the window, third story, second from the left. The lights were on. The window was open. The curtain swayed a little. She was home. He was there. But Theo couldn’t see them. He wondered what they were doing. Having dinner, maybe. Watching a film. Getting ready to go out. Or maybe doing something else.

Theo studied the small yellow square until he had no more thoughts in his head, and then he was driving around the back of the building and parking his car in an empty space. He looked around, got out. Crept through the shadows. When he came to the blue Dodge he crouched down and reached into the bag. An egg went curving through the air and splattered with a tiny thud against the bumper. Then another. Three, four, five. He stole closer and cracked a few between the hood and the windshield. The last one he crushed against the door handle. He ripped open the bag of powdered sugar and poured it all over. It would be a bitch to clean off, mixed together with the eggs like that. Theo knew from experience. His first car had been attacked in a similar fashion back in high school. He was fit to be tied. He had a famous temper in those days ...

But that was a long time ago. And he'd come a long way.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Going through some old notes I saw that I had scribbled down an idea for a story in which a recently single young man is spending time with two friends who are in a successful relationship. I figured I'd give it a try. As with most of my stories, nothing happens; it was the character dynamic and general situation I wanted to investigate. I imagine that Theo unconsciously despises his friends and that's interesting to me. As for the last scene, some rogues did in fact do that to my first car.*

BIO: *Michael Howard's essays and short stories have appeared in a wide variety of print and digital publications. His website is michaelwilliamhoward.com.*

a micro and a nano

BY wade springer

HONDA

The service center was like a lounge. The maintenance consultants who sat at consoles like spa workers talked in soft voices and empathic keys. When they presented the estimate with all the crap your car needed done, they slid a box of Kleenex across the table. I went through half a box. March 12/20 @ 6:13 am

PALE AS THE MOON AS FAINT AS A PHANTOM ROBBED OF MY BREATH
HEART LIKE A CLOCK BETWEEN MINUTES...WELL, BECAUSE

it was the look in his eyes. Worlds rose and fell on his face.

Feb 14/20 @ 3:46 pm missing him

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Whatever.

AUTHOR BIO: Yeah.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Yeah? *That's his bio because Wade doesn't want to mention the seamier side of his life which actually is his whoooole life! He lives alone with his dog and we know who wears the strap-on in that relationship.*

THE ELEVATOR PITCH

By Alex Auclair

WHY I LIKE IT: Guest editor/author ROBERT P. BISHOP writes:

Writer Tom Thomason is desperate. He ambushes publishers in elevators, telling them stories of drug-dealing alligators and alien females with eight breasts seeking reproductive partners. Eight breasts! That's an image guaranteed to stay in the mind. Alex Auclair writes with a style that is lean, trim, unburdened with needless descriptors, and easy to read. The story flows well. Any writer who has a collection of rejection notices knows the torment main character Tom Thomason lives every day. Despite twenty years of ceaseless effort, Tom Thomason remains unpublished. His friends tell him, "Why don't you grow up, get a business degree, work in a cubicle for forty years and die." Thomason dismisses this deadly advice and goes to New York City where his quest takes him on an improbable and humorous journey in search of publishers. Along the way we are forced to ask, "My god, will this man ever get published?" Then we read these lines: "You want a good elevator pitch?" he screamed. "I'll give you a good fucking elevator pitch! How about a book based on a writer who has strived to be successful his entire life. He has given up everything to be a writer, to bring people joy, to create worlds that the reader can get lost in. And he's good... and so is this story. Tom Thomason is finally published.

The Elevator Pitch

By Alex Auclair

Tom Thomason was a writer. Not just any writer, Tom Thomason was an unpublished writer. A special breed of the noble and elite class of professionals that put words on paper and paper on fantastic journeys. There were two kinds of writers; published and unpublished. Both could be geniuses and both could be failures. The only difference was published writers could buy a nice house and drink fancy wine, while unpublished writers could buy a nice night on a friend's couch and drink fancy Bud Light. It was very hard to have a family and a life as an unpublished writer. All of your time was spent writing to get published. It is what it is.

This was the dilemma of Tom Thomason. He had been unpublished his whole life. And life was not forgiving to unpublished writers. "Get a job," they told him. "Why don't you just write as a hobby," they suggested. "Why don't you grow up, get a business degree, work in a cubicle for forty years and die," The Man said. The American dream. But Tom Thomason would not get another job. His job was as a writer, and to be a writer one must devote one's life to the cause. Tom Thomason was not about to give up on the cause.

So he wrote short stories and sent them to literary magazines. *Sorry, please submit again in the future.* He wrote longer stories and submitted them to contests. *Sorry, please submit again in the future.* He wrote entire books and submitted them to literary agents. *Sorry, please stop sending us your writings, we can not take it anymore.* It is what it is.

Tom Thomason decided after twenty years of trying to get published the traditional way it was time for a new approach. It was time to take drastic measures. It was time to start breaking and entering. Well... sneaking into publishing agencies to try and pitch his writing, so breaking and entering that's pretty low stakes.

He packed his bag with everything he owned and moved to the book publishing capital of the world, New York City. The bag was not very big and there were not very many things within. It contained two pairs of pants, four solid colored shirts, three pairs of underwear, and five socks (one of the socks lost their companion in the Great Eviction of twenty seventeen). He arrived in The Big Apple on a Tuesday. He had found a nice subway car to sleep in overnight. The last car of the A train goes from the top of Manhattan all the way to Far Rockaway deep in Queens. It's a long way. No one to bother you and no one to tell you to get a job on the A train. It is what it is. The next day (Wednesday for those of you who are keeping track) Tom Thomason found a gym and got a free one day membership. You know, just to try it out. He took a shower in the locker room, freshened up, and left for the first day of his new job of breaking and entering. He decided to start small and work his way up. He went to a publishing house in Brooklyn that was mostly

responsible for erotica and some sci-fi... but only if it had space sex in it. He went into the building and sat patiently in the lobby.

A man walked in with a briefcase. He had his pant cuffs rolled up to his calf, a plaid button up, a handlebar mustache, and large round glasses. *That's a publisher if I ever saw one*, Tom Thomason thought. He stood up and sauntered behind the publisher man. They got to the elevator and the man hit the up button. It lit up like a firefly on a warm August night. There was a ding and the door opened. The man stepped in. Tom Thomason followed.

"Good morning," Tom Thomason said.

"Morning," the man replied.

"You wouldn't happen to work at the publishing office on the seventh floor would you?" asked Tom Thomason.

"Yes..." the plaid man said a little uneasily.

"Well do I have an elevator pitch for you!" exclaimed Tom Thomason. "I am a writer! Unpublished, but a writer nonetheless. I have this wonderful book that would fit right into your repertoire. It's about a race of aliens that are all female. They scour the galaxy looking for males of any species to reproduce with, you know, so they can continue their race. And they have eight breasts that..."

"Let me stop you right there pal," the publisher said. "We aren't really looking for anything in that genre right now."

"I see... well I have another..."

"Listen. I'm not going to lie, books are becoming a hard sell at this point in time. People seem to be more interested in bingeing the next show or immersing themselves in social media on their phone. It's a bad time to be a publisher... or an author. I am going to have to pass."

"Oh, I see," said Tom Thomason.

The door to the elevator opened and the plaid shirted man with a handlebar mustache and large round glasses stepped off. He turned around and put out his hand. Tom Thomason walked right into it. The publisher's hand hit his chest and stopped him from stepping off the elevator. "Listen buddy, nothing personal, but we have to try and salvage this company and your story isn't great. An elevator pitch doesn't need to be in an actual elevator... just so you know."

"Haha," Tom Thomason laughed, shifting his eyes from side to side a little uneasily. "Of course it doesn't, that'd be crazy."

"Why don't you head back down to the lobby and try writing something new."

"If I could just talk to another agent or a publisher, I have a million ideas."

"I really don't want to call security, but I will."

Tom Thomason looked down at his feet. "Okay." He stepped back into the elevator and hit the "L" button. The doors closed and the elevator descended. *It is what it is*, he thought.

A writer never gives up. Tom Thomason took out a notepad from his back pocket and a pencil from his front. He licked the tip of the pencil and crossed out the first publishing company on the list. "On to the next one!" he said aloud to himself.

Tom Thomason hopped on the subway and rode it into the Financial District of Manhattan. The next publishing company was a couple of blocks from the Fulton stop. He walked down the sidewalk and looked for the next publishing office he would sneak into to pitch his ideas. He came to a skyscraper made of white brick. He entered the revolving door and entered the granite filled lobby. He walked up to the security desk with purpose.

"Hi I have a delivery for Treehouse Publishing Associates," Tom Thomason said. "We messed up the first order, so I just need to run it up real quick, I know what office it belongs too."

"Alright, go ahead," the security guard said without giving him a second glance.

That was easy, Tom Thomason thought. He walked over to the elevators and sat on the wooden bench that was along the back wall. It was more for decoration than actual use, but that didn't bother Tom Thomason. He waited. And waited. And waited some more.

Eventually a woman in a grey pant suit pushed the elevator button. *That's a woman who is definitely in charge of publishing books*, Tom Thomason thought. He stood up and walked over to the elevator right as the doors opened. The pant suited woman walked in. She pushed the button for the eleventh floor. The doors began to close.

"What floor?" the woman asked without looking at him.

"Actually yours," replied Tom Thomason.

"Oh... really?" the woman asked a little uneasily.

"Yeah!" Tom Thomason said excitedly. "I'm a writer... unpublished, and do I have an elevator pitch for you!"

"Please don't," the woman began to say.

"Now I know your publishing agency deals with a lot of historical fiction and romance. I have this book I've written about Cleopatra gaining the ability to time travel on the back of a sphinx. She goes through history exploring cultures and societies she could never even dream of! But here's the kicker... she falls in love! And you'll never guess with who!"

"Sir, I really don't have time for thi..."

"Hitler!" Tom Thomason blurted out. "She falls in love with Hitler! Who would have thought that historical fiction and romance could come together to produce such an unlikely love story am I right?"

"Sir!" the publisher yelled. "We are not looking for new authors right now. It is getting harder and harder to sell books. And if I am honest with you, your elevator pitch wasn't great. You kind of blindsided me there."

The doors opened. The lady in the grey pantsuit hurried out. She turned around and looked at Tom Thomason. "I think it's best if you just head back down to the lobby and leave, I really don't want to have to call security," she said. Tom Thomason stood in the elevator with a frown. He slowly reached out and hit the "L" button. The doors began to close. "An elevator pitch doesn't need to be in an actual elevator... just so you know," the publisher said as the doors snapped shut.

Yeah, that's what I've been told, Tom Thomason thought as the elevator began to descend. *Oh well, it is what it is, on to the next publisher.*

Tom Thomason rode the subway to the Upper East Side to a publishing agency that specialized in crime novels. He waited for the right opportunity, which finally came when an old man entered the elevator and pushed the button for the fifteenth floor. On the ride up Tom Thomason pitched his book.

"It's about a cop who follows a drug dealer into the New York City sewers to try and unfurl his operation only to find that the drug kingpin is a mutant alligator that has been living in the sewers of NYC for over a hundred years! The old man publisher (who kind of looked like an alligator with his old leathery skin) did not like the idea. He threatened to call security on Tom Thomason, but before he did Tom Thomason pushed the "L" button in the elevator. As the doors closed, he was told by the alligator: "an elevator pitch doesn't need to be in an actual elevator... just so you know."

Tom Thomason rode the elevator down to the lobby. *It is what it is.*

He took the train across the East River to Astoria where the next publishing agency on the list was located. He got off the train and walked five blocks to the building that housed the company. Tom Thomason saw the name of the publisher on the frosted glass door. He looked up at the old brownstone building. It wasn't very tall. He opened the door and walked into the

humble lobby. Tom Thomason looked around and walked up to the security desk. "Hello," he said.

"Hi, how may I help you?" said the gentlemen behind the desk.

"I am looking for the elevator," Tom Thomason said.

"We don't have an elevator in this building. It was built pre-war and it is only five stories high, so under city regulations at the time, there didn't need to be an elevator. It's not too bad walking up the stairs..."

But before the security guard could finish his sentence Tom Thomason had turned around and walked straight out the door. *No elevator?* he thought. *That's crazy! Stupid elevator pitch.*

Tom Thomason visited six more agencies that day. He went deep into Queens. He went to the Bronx. He went to Harlem. He went to Upper West Side. He did not go to Staten Island. Who in their right mind would go to Staten Island? There isn't even a train that goes there! You have to take a boat!

Every publishing agency Tom Thomason went to said the same thing. "Thanks, but no thanks." Oh, and: "an elevator pitch doesn't need to be in an actual elevator... just so you know." He knew, at least he thought he knew. But he definitely didn't like it. Every elevator ride down to "L" he kept telling himself: *it is what it is.*

Tom Thomason had one last publishing agency to visit. It was in the center of Manhattan, smack dab in Times Square. The core of the Big Apple if you will. The sun was beginning to set. Billions of lights and screens lit up the area as if it were still high noon. Tom Thomason filed into the building with a large group of people. He snuck past the security desk and found his way to the elevators. He waited and waited. He watched people go up and down in the gravity defying mechanical boxes. He was getting really good at spotting potential publishing agents. He used clues, like if they were holding books, or if they had reading glasses, or the telltale sign of ink

marks on their hands. People who worked in publishing always unwittingly revealed clues of their profession. “Elementary, my dear Watson,” Tom Thomason chuckled to himself.

It was getting late and Tom Thomason was beginning to get nervous that he wouldn’t get a chance to pitch his greatest book yet when a gentleman exhibiting all of the characteristics of a publisher entered the lobby and walked to the elevators. Tom Thomason pushed off against the wall he was leaning on and strode up behind the man. They entered the elevator. The doors closed.

“You going to push a button?” the man asked.

“Nah I’m going where you’re going. I’m an author! Unpublished.”

“Damn it,” the man said.

“I have a great book that I’ve written and it’d be perfect for your publishing agency! It’s a play on Jack and the Beanstalk that takes place in modern London. It has suspense, magic, and talks about current issues such as climate change. It is the perfect book for...”

“I really don’t have time for this. And I’m sorry, but the book industry is...”

“Yeah I know, we’ve hit hard times, but I’m telling ya this book is great! It has every...”

“Honestly, I don’t really care. I mean I get hundreds of manuscripts to read through a day, and at this point... I just don’t care,” the publisher said punctuating each word. “Plus, it wasn’t even a good elevator pitch.”

Tom Thomason stood in silence. He did not move, he did not make a sound. “You want a good elevator pitch?” he screamed. “I’ll give you a good fucking elevator pitch! How about a book based on a writer who has strived to be successful his entire life. He has given up everything to be a writer, to bring people joy, to create worlds that the reader can get lost in. And he’s good... he’s reeeeeeeal good! But no one will give him the time of day, so one day he loses it and walks his sorry ass over to a huge publishing company. He gets into an elevator with a big wig publishing agent and pushes the stop button. He holds the publisher hostage until

he promises to publish his book! But the publisher doesn't agree and the author can't take the rejection any more so he climbs out of the elevator and cuts the cable! They both go plummeting to their death! How does that sound for an elevator pitch?" Tom Thomason was breathing very heavily and staring directly into the publisher's eyes. His chest heaved up and down as he wiped spittle from his lips and chin.

The publisher furrowed his brow and held eye contact with Tom Thomason. The elevator was completely silent for what felt like an eternity. Then the publisher's lips curled up and his mouth turned into a great big smile. "I love it!" he boomed. He grabbed Tom Thomason's hand and began shaking it like a jackhammer. "When we get up to the office we will print out your manuscript and read through it. I think it'll be a great story about the frustrations of a genius author. It'll be a hit!"

"Print it out when we get to your office?" Tom Thomason stammered. "But I just..."

"Don't worry about it, I am sure our editors will fix any little misspellings or grammatical errors you have. The important thing is that you have the story down, and what a story it will be from how you just explained it!"

"Uhh, but..." Tom Thomason whispered.

"What is the title of the book my boy?" the publisher asked.

Tom Thomason shifted nervously. "It is what It is?"

"Nah, I don't like it... let's call it The Elevator Pitch."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The Elevator Pitch is my first published work of fiction. Oh the irony! It is not easy being a writer, but for a lot of us it is something that we can't control. This story is meant to make the reader laugh. If it came off as me whining or complaining about the writing industry that was not my intent. Sure it sucks getting rejection letter after rejection letter, and I'd be lying if I said I wrote this just for fun (it was written out of frustration because of aforementioned rejection letters). But a little frustration is good for the soul. This story was influenced by the writings of Kurt Vonnegut. I am under no illusion that this story, or any story I will ever write, will be comparable to Vonnegut. But his satire makes me laugh as I hope The Elevator Pitch made you laugh, or at least smile, maybe just a smirk? Thanks for reading and remember when life throws absurdities at you, it is what it is*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Alex Auclair is a high school science teacher in Hell's Kitchen. He is currently a freelance writer for an educational YouTube channel and various online magazines. His goal is to try and leave the world a little better than he found it. So far it's going okay, not great, but okay.*

EDITOR'S BIO: *Robert P. Bishop, a former soldier and teacher, lives in Tucson, Arizona.. His short fiction has appeared in The Literary Hatchet, The Umbrella Factory Magazine, CommuterLit, Lunate Fiction, Flash Fiction Magazine, Fleas on the Dog, Corner Bar Magazine, and elsewhere. His story **Cat Food** appears in this issue (fiction).*

HISTORY NEVER FORGIVES

By Michael Washburn

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The dashing silver-haired alumnus Costello is enjoying a couple drinks at 'a popular student hangout' when events take an unexpected sour turn. Irony plays a strong hand in this involving story in which he is suddenly forced to confront his 'ideological foil' from a past he'd rather forget. Behind the author's breezy prose and light touch lies a penetrating portrait of human frailty in which we witness Costello's descent from prideful swagger to wrenching humiliation. A well-paced, effortlessly entertaining 'good read' that pushes all the right buttons. Quote:*

He knew that a touch of *Schadenfreude* wasn't wholly absent when he read about someone who'd been a Big Man on Campus all those years ago and today worked as an assistant librarian somewhere.

And this powerful evocation:

He thought he heard "system," "framework," "unifying principle," "hoax," and "Tremblay" here and there around the place, the aural equivalent of tiny will-o-wisps.

History Never Forgives

Costello enjoyed the attention he was getting from a few of the ladies in the tavern. Despite his latest resolution to lose weight, he'd been indulging rather liberally in beer and wine again this week. But he knew his limits, he was in control of himself, and he had no doubt that when they glanced over at him with mischievous smiles, they relished the sight of a handsome silver-haired man who projected both erudition and warmth. Tonight he wore a spiffy, pristine light beige jacket and pants, with which his coils of thick silver hair contrasted agreeably. His waves of

thick hair were his selling point. If George Clooney was a gray fox, why then he was a rare, refined, melanin-endowed silver fox.

Fancying himself stylish and eligible, Costello was in a fine mood this evening. An edition of the alumni magazine of Prescott College, his alma mater, would be out in a day or two and he looked forward to finding out what his classmates were up to, what jobs they'd taken, what they'd published, what unions they'd made or dissolved, and who had passed on. He knew that a touch of *Schadenfreude* wasn't wholly absent when he read about someone who'd been a Big Man on Campus all those years ago and today worked as an assistant librarian somewhere.

The bar where he sat was a square enclosure in the middle of the tavern. He looked around at the gathering crowd as Duke Ellington's "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy" flowed from the speakers. It was impossible to forget for very long that this place was basically a student hangout, not for kids from Prescott, thirty minutes from here, but for those from Westhaven College, whose campus lay a few hundred yards away. Costello didn't mind the clientele at all, in fact he rather liked being one of the few adults in the room. It sure helped him stand out.

As if to reinforce this impression, a blonde in a denim jacket came up to the bar and slid onto the stool to Costello's right. She had pale smooth skin and a slender form, and in her eyes he detected a bit of the ingenuousness of a kid who arrives at college full of curiosity and wonder about the decades of accumulated wisdom and knowledge that professors have to share.

"Evening, miss. How're you?"

"I've had a stressful week."

"Tommy!" he called to the bartender, who sauntered over. Then to the girl: "What're you drinking, dear? It's on me."

Her deep brown eyes widened, naked orbs of wonder and vulnerability.

“That’s awfully kind of you.”

“Why so much stress, if you don’t mind?”

“The usual. Exams and papers. I guess I’m still not used to thinking so hard.”

“Oh, it’ll come more easily, believe me, dear. Your tolerance builds over time, kind of like with drinking.”

Her smile was truly beautiful.

“Were you at the talk this evening, sir?”

“The talk? No. I’ve been here for a few hours now.”

“Well, I just attended Paul Tremblay’s talk in the Harris Auditorium. You should’ve been there. It was so packed people were standing at the rear and in the aisles. The Q&A went on for, like, an hour.”

Costello pitched his head back and gave a long, caustic laugh.

“Paul Tremblay! Really? You gave up a couple hours of your life to hear a talk by that guy?”

“So you’ve heard of him.”

Costello laughed again.

“Heard of him. He’s a classmate of mine!”

“You’re kidding. When was this?”

Costello told her about the college thirty minutes away. Prescott was in a slightly more rustic part of the state, yet as boldly progressive as any institution of higher learning in America. The girl’s eyes widened further with wonder.

“Really? The two of you were friends back then?”

“Ah, no, not exactly. Tremblay was quite the public figure, quite the celebrity even back in those days, and I followed his antics pretty closely. But, you know, now that you raise the subject, we *were* friends, for a while, before his outsized ambitions got the better of him and he made a total ass of himself in front of the whole campus.”

Her eyes glittered.

“How’d you guys meet?”

“We lived on the same dorm floor our freshman year—sorry, people say ‘first-year’ these days, don’t they—and we had a fair number of discussions about various issues. Even then, I could tell here was a guy with a severely inflated ego, one of those pseudointellectuals running around under the notion that they really have something to impart about human history and psychology. I’ll tell you, it’s sad to watch someone like that rise so far on hot air, knowing he’s going to plummet to the earth and it will be brutal and humiliating for him when he does.”

Though she must have sensed the playfulness in his voice, her mouth widened.

“Wow. What’s his, like, big weakness?”

“His Achilles heel?”

“Yes! Exactly. His Achilles heel.”

“Look, dear, Tremblay’s fatal flaw isn’t hard to identify. The man’s grasp of history is negligible. Ask him to set forth a theory, an interpretive framework, a unifying principle, and watch his face turn red as he fumbles and stammers. I don’t think he’s ever read more than a few words of Hegel, or Marx, or Engels, let alone Trotsky or Gramsci or Bakunin or one of those guys. He’s a poseur and a pseudointellectual if I’ve ever met one. What’s really tragic is that a couple hundred people just gave up two irreplaceable hours of life to hear the guy propound his silly ideas.”

She nodded earnestly, leaving no doubt that his critique had persuaded her.

“Why do you think there’s a market for that kind of silliness?”

“Some people just lack the knowledge and the critical faculties to see through a slick presentation that pretends to be politically incorrect. It’s a damn shame. If it were up to me, I wouldn’t even give a huckster like that a platform.”

Something about these remarks didn’t sit quite so well with the girl, who failed to smile or nod as she’d been doing. He wanted to offer her another drink, but right then a young guy, strikingly handsome in a flannel shirt and jeans, came over and touched her shoulder. She reacted with joy at meeting her boyfriend. With perfunctory thanks to the middle-aged stranger who’d entertained her, she followed the boyfriend to a table where they joined four other young people. Straining his ears, trying hard to hear above the chatter, Costello got the impression they were talking about what he’d told her.

“Hey, Tommy!” he called to the bartender.

With a fresh drink in hand, he began to share with the bartender his thoughts about the fraud visited on an audience near here this evening. In his peripheral vision, he began to notice something surprising. Though he couldn’t be sure, it appeared that people at points around the bar overheard bits of his monologue and found it captivating. He thought he heard “system,” “framework,” “unifying principle,” “hoax,” and “Tremblay” here and there around the place, the aural equivalent of tiny will-o-wisps. So people took note of Costello’s words. Even if he hadn’t pursued a career in academia, his opinion carried maybe more weight than Tremblay’s. He drank some more, listening to the chatter.

A pair of women in their mid-twenties, whom he recognized as regulars though he forgot their names, moved past the bar toward a table. Feeling bad about blanking on their names, he

signaled to the bartender that he wished to get them drinks. Tommy knew what they liked to order. A server brought drinks to the table where the women sat, indicating the silver-haired man who'd shown spontaneous kindness. They gave effulgent smiles and made gestures of thanks.

As the server moved among the other tables, Costello thought once again he was picking up on phrases from his discussion with the girl. He heard the name of his alma mater a few times. But he tried to shut out the chatter as he downed more beer. Then, as if in confirmation of his suspicions, a kid, twenty-two or twenty-three, got up from one of the tables and came over.

“Hey, man. I was talking to Rich, the server, and he said you went to Prescott. My name’s Kevin. Class of 2018!”

“No way! I graduated before you were born.”

“Gosh. I don’t know if you’d recognize the place if you went back there now.”

“Oh, yeah, I know. A lot of newfangled buildings and computer stations everywhere.”

“That’s not even half of it, man. Did you ever write anything for the *Standard*?”

“The *Standard*? The student paper? I was never a regular contributor, but I pitched in with a story here and a letter there. I’ll tell you, Kevin, that rag was never going to win a Pulitzer. Those old issues must be gathering dust in a basement or a warehouse somewhere, and I very much doubt anyone has the time or interest to dig them up.”

Kevin held up an iPhone.

“Guess again. They’ve scanned every issue of the paper and uploaded it to a digital archive. Didn’t you get an email about this a while back?”

Feeling little interest in or accountability for those distant days, Costello tended to delete the college’s periodic email. He shook his head.

“No, Kevin. If I tried, I don’t think I could remember exactly what I wrote for that rag or what the gist of a given piece was. I guess I am a bit curious now.”

The kid began fiddling with the iPhone. As Costello gulped down more beer, he noticed that half a dozen people had just entered the place and were working their way toward one of the last unoccupied tables. One of them, a middle-aged man in a white blazer, was his old nemesis, his ideological foil, Paul Tremblay! It was only logical that Tremblay would end up in this bar, a popular hangout, the only watering hole within walking distance of the auditorium where Tremblay had just spoken.

Kevin didn’t appear to notice the little troupe’s entry.

“What’s your surname?” the kid asked.

“Costello.”

The boy pressed buttons, looking down at the little screen with fascination. Through this sorcery, Costello thought, Kevin was bringing to life the mummified thoughts of a younger version of himself, whose passion he’d never lost though his opinions today had a broader and firmer factual base.

Over at the table on the far side of the place, Tremblay held forth to his audience of five young people, his crisp voice distinct above the chatter.

“E.H. Carr’s a brilliant historian. He really does a job on the concept of historical inevitability. Read his little book, *What Is History?* Frankly the guy packs more insight into a couple hundred pages than some academics achieve in many volumes.”

Costello did his best to ignore his nemesis for now. The tips of Kevin’s fingers worked aggressively on the buttons in the little frame until it appeared he’d found something.

“Look, here’s a letter of yours! You’re blasting the administration for dragging its feet on multiculturalism! This polemic has some pretty colorful language.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, delete it.”

Kevin searched a bit more, then said, “Look, here’s another letter. You’re attacking none other than Paul Tremblay for some stuff he wrote in the same paper!”

“Let me see.”

Kevin placed the device in Costello’s hands. Costello read words he’d typed and fired off to the *Standard* at a distant time of life when he could drink two six-packs a night and not gain weight.

The letter from decades ago stated, “Ostensibly, Paul Tremblay is sharing his views about the Cold War and the ‘inevitable’ fall of communism. But if you read his opinion pieces over time, a lot of his analysis lands right at the nexus of Cold War politics and anticolonial struggles in the developing world. Tremblay is much less interested in the Berlin Wall than in the ongoing struggles in Angola. His identity as a privileged white westerner, and a neo-imperialist attitude with a strong odor of racial condescension, are evident time and again. I wonder why more readers haven’t picked up on this.”

He handed the phone back.

“Well, Kevin, what I observed back then is true today. The guy’s journalistic tropes are a code for certain bigoted attitudes.”

Over at the far side of the bar, the talk didn’t seem even implicitly to touch on racial politics. Tremblay and the others were having a lively discussion about Sartre’s play *Les Mains Sales*. Costello caught a few of Tremblay’s comments about philosophical themes in the play.

“So here you have bunch of doctrinaire Marxists in Illyria, or Yugoslavia in other words. These are people who believe in a highly rational, scientific approach to understanding historical developments. Everything unfolds inexorably according to a set of laws or principles. The irony here is that all the action in the play flows from petty personal motives like vanity, jealousy, anger, status anxiety, unrequited love, or from pure chance. *Les Mains Sales* really drives that home. If Hugo went through that door five seconds earlier or later, he might not have seen Hoederer and Jessica embracing and might not have assassinated the party secretary. The course of history would be different!” Tremblay told his little audience.

These words were a catalyst to discussion at the table, but Costello tried to shut out the talk coming from over there. Kevin had found another little jewel in the paper’s archives.

“Here’s another letter. I guess you did take a certain pride and pleasure in running down uninformed blatherers.”

Kevin handed him the device again.

The letter stated, “Tremblay’s criticisms of the anti-apartheid movement smack of racism. One does have to wonder how Tremblay dares to offer any advice to South Africa on how to resolve its dilemmas when our own country’s racial problems are so severe. This is the definition of hypocrisy.”

Kevin watched with interest as Costello read the text on the screen.

“I see you weren’t immune to bouts of self-righteousness yourself,” the boy said.

Costello laughed, though he wasn’t sure it was a joke.

“But, I mean, like, weren’t you anti-apartheid activists all doing the very thing you accuse Tremblay of in this letter?” Kevin added.

Costello was too deep in his cups just now to have an argument with this kid. He dropped the phone, which clattered loudly on the ground.

“Oops. Sorry.”

Kevin bent down, retrieved the phone, and dusted it off with a perturbed look. Costello wanted to shut out the talk coming from Tremblay’s table, and focus on drinking, but it wasn’t working.

Tremblay was eloquent. “Of course I don’t know all the historical antecedents Sartre had in mind, but a somewhat important event in the history of our civilization, the Great War, began after a somewhat inexplicable blunder. An Austro-Hungarian officer decided that the archduke’s car should take a roundabout route to the hospital and avoid the center of Sarajevo, but forgot to relay this decision to a driver, who took the archduke right into Gavrilo Princip’s path. Princip! A young man whose mental state arguably puts his actions far outside the scope of any discussion of historical laws. The latter don’t account terribly well for the role of pathologies in human affairs.”

This set off another round of chatter.

Meanwhile Kevin fiddled again with the phone, seemingly having detected no malice on Costello’s part in dropping it. The older man raised his glass of beer to his lips again, wishing the kid would go away.

“Here’s another one. Ho, boy,” Kevin said.

This piqued Costello’s interest, and not in a good way. When he reached for the device, Kevin jerked it away.

“Lemme see.”

Kevin’s eyes roamed over the little screen.

“Wow. Maybe you were upset when you wrote this.”

“Give me the fucking thing!”

Something in his tone compelled the kid’s obedience. Costello read the letter with none of the indulgence one extends to juvenilia, though he wasn’t sure whether he disagreed with his younger self or just wished the polemic had taken a form others wouldn’t be able to seize on later.

“Many of us on this campus are wondering why someone as reactionary and racist as Paul Tremblay deserves a platform at all. He doesn’t know the first thing about the ideologies he thinks he’s critiquing. It should be clear by now that his ignorant, poorly reasoned opinion pieces are desperate pleas for attention from someone with no social life. He’s truly the epitome of a sick, alienated person posing as a commentator.”

Kevin looked at him expectantly, as if to say, *Do you stand by what you wrote?* The boy had been away from his friends for some time now and Costello wondered who he really was.

“I was drunk,” Costello said.

“Oh, I see. And there was no time at all between your drunken state and the letter going to press. Wow.”

“It’s true, you know, Kevin. The guy was a nerd. He barely had *any* friends at Prescott.”

From the far side of the room, Costello heard: “E.H. Carr understood the fickleness of human actors, and pointed out instances where even Marxist historians acknowledged it. Like when Lefebvre characterizes Napoleon was a rogue acting on his own peculiar psychology and not in accordance with any overarching principles. History—meaning the study of events no less than the events themselves—won’t forgive and forget.”

Again Tremblay sparked bursts of animated talk. The undergrads at his table were *so* into him. Costello could only imagine the audience in the auditorium earlier tonight.

“Fuck it,” Costello said.

He tossed Kevin’s iPhone across the room. It landed near the two women for whom he’d ordered drinks. They looked up in surprise. Before Kevin could process what was going on, Costello got up and strode across the place toward his nemesis’s table.

When he arrived there, he thought all eyes would immediately be on him. But to his surprise and dismay, only a couple of the young people at the table even acknowledged him, with the irritation they might show a panhandler. Tremblay had really got going. The talk went right on.

“Anyone who talks about the role of individual actors is throwing rocks in the glass house of theory, and, if you’ve ever wondered, that’s really why postmodernism is so defensive and nasty. One voice can set back generations of painstaking work on the part of theorists. Not to mention—”

“Paul,” Costello said.

“—jeopardizing the stature of not a few tenured militants.”

“Paul.”

Still Tremblay didn’t acknowledge him, didn’t even make eye contact.

“Hey, Paul. Remember me?”

But Tremblay was listening to one of the kids now. Maybe, just maybe, Costello had been a bit unkind to the man in his remarks here this evening.

“Hey, Paul. I know we didn’t always see eye to eye on everything in the past. But I dissented in good faith, out of my deepest convictions. You can at least acknowledge me, Paul.”

It was if he were talking to himself. The two students who'd briefly looked at Costello had now joined in the discussion.

“Paul, you presumably wouldn't have written all that stuff in the *Standard* in those days if you didn't want it to generate spirited discussion. I exercised my right to free speech, just as you did yours. Fuck, you could at least acknowledge me, Paul!”

Costello felt fury rise in him as the party went right on talking and laughing. He turned 180 degrees and took in smiles and smirks all over the place. People were making light of him, Costello realized, they found him ridiculous and pathetic.

He raised his voice. “Do you all see the fraud who'll get a huge check from Westhaven for the nonsense he delivered tonight? Do you see him? Look over here, everybody, at Paul Tremblay! A neo-fascist who tries to dress up his repulsive opinions in scholarly discourse. A stain, an anachronism, a criminal who will go to the bank with a big check drawn from your tuition! The man shouldn't get out of here alive. Look—”

A hand seized him by the elbow. It was the young server, slender but strong. Quietly but resolutely, the server moved him back toward the bar. As the server dragged him across the floor, he twisted his neck for a look back at the interloper's table. Tremblay and the others still carried on as gaily as ever.

At the bar, Tommy brought him another drink with a surly look. Costello felt too humiliated to speak. He resumed drinking.

Kevin came up, seemingly devoid of anger if perhaps not of other negative feelings.

“Hey, man. Sorry. Your phone okay?” Costello asked through a fog of alcohol fumes.

“It still works fine. You know what? I found yet another intriguing little item. It was a bit of a surprise to find out that you tried to defend yourself in the paper from charges of plagiarism.

I gather that your roommate during your final year was a guy from India, a Sikh, and one of your profs got two copies of the same paper, one with your roommate's name on it and one with yours. You tried to claim that he copied your paper while you were sleeping, and that he thought he could get away with it, coming from India where the educational system is so corrupt. But there were red herrings in the paper, things that you as a native English speaker almost certainly would never write. 'Carriers' for 'careers,' 'play the fuel' for 'play the fool,' 'zoan of influence' for 'zone of influence,' 'Raygan' for 'Reagan,' and such. You couldn't refute the charges and your letter is basically an ad hominem attack on those members of the judicial committee who voted for your expulsion, even though that didn't end up happening. They sure should have kicked you out."

Costello grabbed the boy by the collar with both hands, head-butted him, spat in his face, and gave him a mighty shove. Kevin went flying and landed on his ass. The server appeared at Costello's side and told him to leave at once.

"All right, all right," Costello said, but first he went over to the two young women and demanded that they produce money to cover the drinks he'd ordered for them.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I think this story speaks for itself and I don't want to overanalyze it. Some of us remember how tough high school can be. And some are aware of how little the world of high school, and people's status therein, has to do with "real life." All too often, the prom king and the prom queen don't end up where they might have liked, and the so-called nerds are ruling the world. College, of course, is supposed to be different from high school, but as we all know, the temptations of dogmatism can sometimes be inversely proportionate to how much real knowledge and wisdom young immature minds possess. Bullying and ostracism shouldn't happen, but they do. But there are no prom kings and queens in college, right? What exactly is the dynamic and how does it play out? Imagine if people could have the perspective to step back,

assess their actions soberly, and understand their own relationship to historical forces and phenomena they have passionately argued for or against.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *I am a Brooklyn-based writer and journalist and the author, most recently, of *When We're Grownups* (2019) and *Stranger, Stranger* (2020). My story "Confessions of a Spook" won Causeway Lit's 2018 fiction contest.*

ELLIS MORNING

By Elise Marenson

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author GREGORY CIOFFI writes:*

"What's in a name?" asked Juliet from her balcony. "EVERYTHING!" screamed Ellis Morning from his park bench.

Here is a man who became nocturnal to spite his own name. A man whose sole ambition is to make a name for himself by choosing a new name. No wonder he dreams of moving away from Morningside Heights.

This story is wittily intelligent and candidly relatable, even if you love your name. It is more than a worthwhile read; it's a highly recommended one.

As we delve into Ellis' tale, I found it extremely interesting to watch the protagonist attempt to distance himself from his surname while we simultaneously observe, through short and amusing anecdotes, how very much alike he is to his father and the familial legacy of Mornings. That juxtaposition brings into focus the idea that sometimes the only paternal family heirloom we truly have is our name. After all, what is an inheritance if not a collection of genes, names, and allergies.

The writing may have metaphysically bled onto another level as well. "It was clear now that this was a larger project than he had anticipated, but he had to get it right." Even if this piece did indeed start out as a literary exercise to see how far one could push a single idea, it was so pleasurable that I could have easily read another fourteen pages on this subject in the same sitting.

Kudos. We should be on the lookout for more of Elise Marenson's work; who knows - it just may become a household name (unless of course, it changes).

Quote: "He wondered if he should wear a name tag in the street to measure the reaction of random citizens. For how long a period of time the neighborhood focus group should last, he didn't know yet."

ELLIS MORNING

By Elise Marenson

Ellis Morning awoke early and made the decision to rid himself of his surname. It was high time he free himself from the mockery he had endured all his life. He had no particular attachment to Morning, the family moniker of dubious origin. His parents were lying under a tombstone by the Long Island Expressway. He was an only child with one paternal cousin who lived in the Midwest. No one would care what he was called, except him.

He was tired of people greeting him with, “Hello, Mr. Evening”. The thin gag had worn out by the fourth grade. Everyone who shouted, “Hey, Morning Glory,” disgusted him, as if it were the first time someone had made fun of his name. The gall of the joker, thinking he was being original, was more infuriating to Ellis than all the witless nicknames that had ever been thrown in his face.

Ellis left his tiny studio apartment to walk over to Riverside Park. It was a perfect spring day for his mind to work fluidly, without the extremes of city weather. He would draw up a list of potential names, while seated comfortably on his favorite bench overlooking the Hudson.

Ellis was a man of slight build. His reedy physique made it impossible to pinpoint his age, not even down to the decade of his life. He wasn't an athlete, but he had played handball against the wall of a decaying brownstone when he was a boy. The vacant lot, where he and his buddies cupped a Spalding ball and threw it, was now a glass condominium. The landscape of the neighborhood had been so altered that he could barely remember the candy store that sold red licorice or where his grandmother's purse was snatched.

He crossed the street where West End Avenue meets Broadway. He liked that route, with one avenue flowing into another. It was a break from the monotonous grid of Manhattan streets. The little, flowered triangle there reminded him of Europe, where he hadn't been in years. He always wondered if it was a coincidence that he grew up on the frontier of Morningside Heights. Perhaps his great grandfather had taken the name Morning in honor of his degree in philosophy from Columbia University.

Ellis was relieved to find his park bench unoccupied, for he needed concentration to conjure up a suitable name. He sat down in the center of his bench, in order to encourage others not to share and go for another one. There was a light breeze on his face from the river, a sign to Ellis that the universe was in tandem with his creative wind.

He had suffered through years of teasing. Nonetheless, he understood that he couldn't eradicate Morning until he customized a first-class last name. He needed a designation that made him feel strong and superior yet dignified. It should impress but not dazzle. There can't be a hint of loftiness which would be uncharacteristic of him. His new appellation had to be original like

Shakespeare but not so peculiar that no one could remember it. The most important element, it must command respect instead of ridicule.

Ellis watched a pigeon stand in the path of bikers moving up and down the river promenade. The pigeon didn't move, despite the spinning bicycle wheels nearly hitting him. He wondered if the pigeon was wounded and thought of getting up off his bench in a humane gesture to save it. But he would forfeit his seat to some quick stepped pedestrian, to whom his bench had no significance. He couldn't risk upsetting the nimbleness of his mind, if he had to move to a different bench. He wasn't exactly OCD, but he relied on his rituals. Order governed his thought process which had to be acute on a day he was choosing a new name. He wasn't so old for it to be inconceivable that he would carry it longer than Morning.

Seated firmly on his park bench, Ellis was feeling his mental agility. He would be reincarnated, in a manner of speaking, in just hours. He would enter the lobby of his apartment building, not the man he was when he departed. Even at night, Jorge the doorman would welcome him with, "Morning, Mister Morning," and shake his head and let out a chuckle. Jorge's joke never got stale to Jorge. But Ellis would walk past the smart mouthed gatekeeper without acknowledgement, as if it were a case of mistaken identity. He would open his mailbox, tear off the engraved black tag that says Ellis Morning, and replace it with his new name.

Ellis sat back with a smile that radiated accomplishment. By the end of the day, the lifelong embarrassment of being called Mister Morning would be over. In a movement of extreme confidence he didn't normally experience, he stretched his legs out. Bikers had to go around him.

He wasn't defying any religious tenet. Ellis Morning wasn't his God given name. His mother had traded in Episcopalianism for nudism and didn't believe in baptism. His birth certificate filed at the Bureau of Vital Statistics had him down as Ellis Morning, but that was only in the secular world. In the eyes of the Lord, there was still time to become a man of great stature. He thought he might detour over to St. John the Divine on his way home to inquire whether there was an age limit on christenings. He liked the idea of having his new name announced in a giant cathedral.

Ellis shifted on his bench. Stilted blood circulation would impede the free flow of his ideas. He crossed his outstretched legs, resting his weaker left leg on his right knee. He believed that he wasn't a superficial man. If he was going to truly revamp himself, then maybe he ought to overhaul his character before he sported a new name. The size of this augmented task caused him agitation. He couldn't finish by noon.

Ellis thought he should make a list of his outstanding characteristics, both good and bad. He understood that his most endearing traits might be regarded as negative. He was guileless to a fault. It had cost him dearly in romance. No woman wants to hear the truth about her fleshy body. He preferred a little plumpness, though the woman was usually self-conscious about being flabbier than he. He realized while he was still a young man that he lacked the acumen needed to select an appropriate mate. And so he remained a bachelor, not unhappy with his situation.

He was thrifty but hardly parsimonious. He never left the bank without depositing a quarter in the cup of the poor fellow holding the door open for him. If it was a woman with her hand out,

then he gave fifty cents. He couldn't afford to be a spendthrift with the modest estate his mother left him.

His father was a man who had lived through misfortune. His mother called him a charming dreamer when she was being gracious. During less compassionate moments, her big zinger was that he was a depraved deadbeat. Ellis considered his father's indigence not entirely his fault. The Mornings, or whatever they were called, were horse thieves in the old country. Like so many immigrants, they hoped to bring their trade with them to America. They thrived in New York City, until the invention of the automobile. His great grandfather tried to turn things around by attending Columbia University, but his miscalculated choice of study, philosophy, didn't bring him the American dream.

To not make the mistake of his impractical great grandfather, Ellis enrolled in accounting classes at Pace University. But the morning subway ride from the heights to the financial district was long and grueling. He caught a light case of claustrophobia and couldn't stand the crowds commuting to and from work. He switched to night school and was quite satisfied with his nocturnal schedule, until the numbers in his accounting books began dancing before his eyes. He knew he was in crisis when he was diagnosed with numeric dyslexia. That was the end of Ellis' goal to become a certified public accountant.

Ellis wasn't a lazy man, like his father, but he was allergic to the pressed wood filled with formaldehyde that covers the walls and desks of offices. He concluded that he would have to take an outdoor profession like his ancestors. He toyed with moving to Wyoming to go into their

business of horse rustling, but he was terrified of rural areas. There weren't many cerebral, exterior jobs in New York City. He apprenticed as a penthouse gardener but quit prematurely because he was afraid of heights.

Ellis stood up. The view of New Jersey from his bench wasn't inspiring him. He needed a change in venue for fresh ideas. He headed down to the boat basin in a leisurely stroll. Rushing would only sap his energy, and then he wouldn't be able to intuit the right name for himself. He inhaled the aroma of spring blossoms. Riverside Park was lush and verdant. He may not possess the gift of profound joy, but he was most content by the river. He was grateful to the universe that he wasn't wasting his time being employed.

The long walk to the boat basin invigorated Ellis. Watching the boats always lifted his spirits, no matter how melancholy he had been when he woke up. When he was a boy, he wished he could live on a houseboat that used to anchor in the little port. He begged his mother every Christmas to buy him one. They could leave their grayish, pre-war apartment and go live on the Hudson. His mother's reply was always the same, year after year. She said river life was dangerous, and even though he'd learned to swim at the New York Athletic Club day camp, he had the weak lungs of his maternal grandmother, and if he fell overboard, he couldn't survive.

Ellis put his hands on the high gate that kept trespassers from the diminutive marina. He was envious of the serenity the invisible boat dwellers must have found on the river. He should have been living there with them, were it not for the aquaphobia that ran through the genes of his mother's family. When he was born, there was no genetic testing, or his father never would have

married his mother. Ellis felt so connected to the boats that he had a brainstorm. He would take his new name from them.

He was a methodical man. He didn't want to select one until he had read the name on every boat. Even if he came across a spectacular name before he finished, he would feel uneasy if he hadn't considered them all. He would write down the leading five candidates and assess their qualities. His last name should be pronounceable, mellifluous, geographically relevant, and harmonious with his first name Ellis.

Morning was smack in the middle of the alphabet. He wanted to be bumped to the top. He had waited in too many long lines. In elementary school, whenever the teacher made two groups, the Ms would always head the second line. He would be fuming at the end of the first line. He thought that to be fair, the teacher should sometimes make the cut off after the Ls. It got worse during the year his mother was a Catholic. When the rigors of life had become too much for her, she contemplated becoming a nun. She put him in parochial school, thinking it would look good on her application. At mass, he had to stand still behind all those McCarthys and McSweeneys, waiting to get his wafer.

He was never happier than the day his mother converted back to the Episcopal faith. That meant church once a year instead of every Sunday. Then they began skipping attendance altogether to spend Christmas in Florida with his great uncle.

He loved his great uncle Olaf. Olaf came from the Norwegian neighborhood in Brooklyn. He marched in the Norwegian parade every year, even as it dwindled to twenty or thirty people. He had been married to his grandmother's younger sister, until Ellis was in fifth grade. His mother explained to him that his great aunt was moving downtown to live with a very nice lady. Uncle Olaf moved to Florida to become a marine explorer like Jacques Cousteau. It was a natural career choice for a man with Viking heritage. Uncle Olaf wasn't related to them by blood and didn't carry the genetic defect of aquaphobia. But he was afraid of jelly fish. Being a realistic man, Uncle Olaf opened a motel.

Every year, Uncle Olaf reserved his best efficiency suite for them for two weeks in December. His mother and father and Ellis drove down south in the green Oldsmobile that a fellow freemason of his father's bequeathed them. Apart from South Carolina, where a nasty officer flagged their New York plates in a speed trap, the car trip was the highlight of Ellis' year. He loved the southern fried chicken served in the motels they stayed in during the three-day drive. He hoarded the pecan patties they bought at roadside stands. He felt a thrill when he saw the first palm trees, the hint they were getting nearer to paradise in Florida.

In the motel efficiency, his mother and father slept in the bedroom. Uncle Olaf set up a cot for Ellis in the living room. He loved the wall pictures of flamingos, orange groves, and Seminoles fighting alligators. Every morning, he ran to the motel office. Uncle Olaf and he would pour over brochures of Norway and the fjords. They planned to make a voyage together, retracing the Atlantic route of the Vikings who discovered America.

After five perfect Christmas vacations at his great uncle's Florida motel, Ellis and his mother and father drove there in the Oldsmobile one last time. Uncle Olaf told Ellis that he was becoming a man. Next summer, the two of them would fly to Norway to begin their Viking reenactment. The best day in Ellis' life turned out to be the worst. Uncle Olaf wanted to be prepared for the journey like a true Norseman. He went into the ocean, which he never did, because of his fear of jelly fish. He had barely put one toe in, when he was stung by an entire family of men o' war. It was instant death. Ellis would never forget seeing his great uncle sprawled on the shoreline, his blond locks all sandy, with his bright blue dead eyes gazing in the direction of Scandinavia.

The motel was sold to a guy named Raj. His mother told Raj that it was Uncle Olaf's wish that they continue their tradition of spending two free weeks there in December. Raj told his mother that they were welcome to reserve the same efficiency for winter vacation, but they would have to pay the high season rate. Uncle Olaf had neglected to include the codicil about the free room in his will. His mother explained to Raj that it was precedence, the basis of English common law. When Raj pretended not to understand, she exploded screaming, "Didn't the British teach you people anything?"

Ellis leaned against the railing of the river promenade, wiping a tear from his eye. The events surrounding Uncle Olaf's untimely death still upset him. He had never been able to set foot in Florida again, although he still adored palm trees. If he wanted his fill of them, he had to venture to the winter garden in the World Financial Center. This is a perfect example of why he needed a boat, he thought. He could sail from Morningside Heights down the river to the tip of the island,

avoiding the crowds and filth of the subway. The mild claustrophobia that gripped him as a young man had only intensified.

The boats always soothed him but made his mind wander. He had strayed way off his course of choosing a new name. He was standing there at the boat basin for inspiration. He debated whether his eyes should travel around the moored craft clockwise or counterclockwise. He decided that clockwise was easier on his neck.

He began on his left with a grey white motorboat, tied to the pier with a rope. He felt certain he would be a gifted sailor, if he had a boat. His love of the water meant that he had the recessive gene for aquaphobia, although he was a carrier. One of the reasons he never married was that he wouldn't pass that malady onto his offspring. There was no name painted on the starboard side of the motorboat. He moved along the promenade railing, trying to view the stern. He bent over so far, he nearly fell in. With his grandmother's weak lungs, he had narrowly escaped his demise.

The next boat in sequence was a rickety boat in need of a paint job. It had no name which was just as well, Ellis thought. It looked like someone hiding from the law lived there. The third boat was freshly painted a bluish white. Its name was Mary Doric. Mary was a woman's first name. It was another M, end of the line, out of the question. He thought about being called Ellis Doric. Its consonants were hard. And if he were going to be called a Greek column, he had always preferred ionic. Ellis Ionic wouldn't do either.

The fourth boat was so teeny that it was nearly hidden by its two neighbors. If it had a name, he couldn't see it. He asked himself if that was sufficient justification to ignore it and go to the next boat. Without access to the locked marina, he had no choice but to move on. His eyes skipped over three small boats with outboard motors and landed on a tangerine awning that crowned the tip of the short pier. He felt queasy, having upset his methodology already. He knew he would have to double back, but he couldn't help it. The last boat with the tangerine awning drew him in. It looked just big enough to house one person. Ellis wondered who could live alone at the end of a pier with no sign of life.

He didn't have a roommate, but he didn't consider himself a lonely man. There was his neighbor, Miss Babin, always ready to chat with him whenever they met in the hall. Most of their conversations revolved around their ailments. It was never boring because he and Miss Babin had different afflictions. She had flaky palms, like dandruff of the hand. The New York Public Library had banned her because she returned books with pages full of white scales. Her niece bought her a used E-book for her birthday, so she could read and shed without repercussions.

Ellis smiled thinking of his friend Miss Babin. Her Acadian forebears were caught in a terrible storm on their way to Louisiana and shipwrecked off Montauk Point. The Shinnecock Indians rescued them and gave them clams to eat. Then the Babins made their way on foot across Long Island. When they reached Brooklyn, they traded the wet Canadian furs on their back for a skiff. They sailed up the Hudson to Morningside Heights and settled there. Although she had never been to Louisiana, Miss Babin invited Ellis once a month for a gumbo she cooked, in honor of the Cajun woman she might have been.

Nobody had entered or exited any of the boats since Ellis arrived. In all the years he had been envious of these river people, he had never glimpsed one of them. There was never a soul on the piers. When sinister thoughts of drug ring fronts and fenced goods or the witness protection program popped into his head, he suppressed them. He preferred to think of the boat basin as the upper west side's Brigadoon, coming to life at sunrise and fading into the night. It was a mysterious but magical place.

Ellis realized maybe there was wisdom in his mother's refusal to buy a houseboat and relocate to the river. He might have been stuck there now, all alone, without his rent control apartment. He didn't have many friends, but they all lived on land. He had foolishly forgotten the role his friends should play in approving his new name. He would try out each of the five finalist names on them. He would poll them, not that he wouldn't veto their opinions if he didn't agree. He couldn't decide whether he should give his doorman Jorge a vote.

He had completely disregarded the necessity of a trial period. He might open up the testing to all of Morningside Heights. He wondered if he should wear a name tag in the street to measure the reaction of random citizens. For how long a period of time the neighborhood focus group should last, he didn't know yet. He would play that by ear. It was clear now that this was a larger project than he had anticipated, but he had to get it right. He may have been too cocky thinking he could firm up his new identity by tonight.

Ellis looked at his Van Cleef and Arpels classic watch. It was all he had inherited from his father. His father had left the green Oldsmobile to Ellis in his will, but the car had hit the junkyard before he died. His grandfather had won the watch in a poker game. It was the only paternal family heirloom, a keepsake to link generations of Mornings, or whatever they were called.

It was past noon. He was getting hungry, and there was no point in forcing himself to think on an empty stomach. He had already missed his first deadline. The café by the boat basin charged six dollars for a hot dog. Ellis hated the gentrified park. When he was a boy, there was graffiti on the stone that smelled of piss. He would have to go over to Broadway for a bagel and resume his name selection after lunch. His favorite bagel shop had twenty-three flavors. He would not waste time deciding and simply order an everything bagel. While he ate, he would memorize all the flavors, a mental exercise that would sharpen his mind for his afternoon work.

Ellis exited the park and crossed Riverside Drive, elated by all that he had accomplished this morning. As he reached Broadway, he came to a crucial decision about finding his new name. Given the importance of this life changing task, he wouldn't be hasty. He had given himself a colossal undertaking. The name Morning had been his cross to bear, and he had born it bravely and survived. He could live as Ellis Morning one more day.

END

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I wish I could say that I was influenced by Jonathan Swift, Mark Twain, or the great wits of the Algonquin Round Table. But I wasn't. My mind is full of memories of the most minor moments in my life – incidents that left an indelible mark. I surprise myself with what pops out of this repository of feelings and impressions, some that go back years. Like many little*

girls, I loved the novels of the Brontë sisters, as well as those of Thomas Hardy, James Baldwin, and later Pat Conroy. But it is the humor of New York City that probably influenced me the most. Humor is our saving grace. It is how we communicate; how we survive in this city teeming with people from all the world's nations (we even have Himalayan Sherpas in the Bronx). Ellis has more to say, about his city, about the planet Earth.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Elise Marenson was an actor before becoming a writer. "Having been an actor contributes richly to my writing". She has written numerous screenplays and stage plays in drama and comedy. She optioned a holiday TV script in October 2019 to Formula Features. Also, in 2019, her political play Critical Affairs was seen in the LIC Short Play Festival. Her dark comedy one-act Head Trauma was part of the Boo Festival at the Players Theatre in New York. Her play Wide Blossoms was produced at HERE Arts Center in October/November 2016 in New York. In 2015, her play Real Estate of Emergency had a production at Metropolitan Playhouse in New York. Learn To Drive was voted Best Drama at the First Stage Los Angeles Playwrights Festival in 2014. Colony was seen in the 2014 Midtown International Theatre Festival. In 2011, she wrote and directed Straight From The Rib, a show gleaned from life experience, with twenty-seven monologues performed by a cast of nine women at the Triad NYC. She directed productions at the Abingdon Theatre, WorkShop Theater Company, Samuel French OOB Festival, New Center Stages, Strawberry Theatre Festival, Sounding Theater, Atlantic Theater School, Westbeth Theatre, The Triad, as well as numerous readings. With her play American Flamingos, she recently completed another full-length play Comfort Zones. She holds two screenplay options and is currently developing a TV series with a female lead detective covering social and political storylines. Her feature length screenplays Jeremy, Malcolm, and Bess, Spacious Skies, Chorus Girl, and Picked Out, were finalists in Ace Fest, FilmMakers International, Scriptapalooza, and Chesterfield Writers Film Project competitions. She is a script consultant and has taught acting, using what she learned from her teacher Uta Hagen. She is a member of SAG-AFTRA, AEA, and NYWIFT (NY Women in Film & Television).*

Ellis Morning is her second short story. She is bilingual in English & French.

EDITOR'S BIO: *Gregory Cioffi (SAG-AFTRA, AEA) is a professional actor and a published writer. His works have been published in The Feral Press, Mystery Weekly Magazine, Queen Mob's Tea House, LittleOld Lady (LOL) Comedy, Blood Moon Rising Magazine, The Five-Two, Aphelion, and Allegory Ridge. Six of these stories have been archived in Yale University's Beinecke Collection (Rare Books and Manuscript Library). Greg's film (his foray into directing), The Museum of Lost Things, recently won awards at The Long Island International Film Expo, Global Shorts, and The Madrid International Film Festival. You might have noticed him on the stage or screen in The Irishman, The Godfather of Harlem, or in Tony n Tina's Wedding where, for the last 5 years, he has been married hundreds of times nationally and internationally. Greg teaches a creative writing course and a basic acting course at Nassau Community College. <http://www.gandeproductions.com> His story 'Misses Sisyphus' appears in this issue (Fiction).*

The Dausa Mountain

By Raquel Dionisio Abrantes

WHY WE LIKE IT: *English second language fiction is a category all its own. It owes its special charm to naiveté of language and word use and eccentric grammatical constructions that in any other context would be considered faults. In 'The Dausa Mountain' these combine to great effect and manifest before us with surprising beauty. There is much to please the ear, characters are intriguing if somewhat elusive and the voice is honest and strong. A lot of time, through no intention, these stories just don't make it. We're glad this one did. Atypical language treats abound:*

'His double appeared vigorous on the window glass brushstroke by drops incorporated in uneven rivers.'

"Our roses grow in the heart of winter; our nights are never moonless. But our air was infected. Whoever breathes it dies. I ran in time, though I carry my family's weight for burying on my back."

The Dausa Mountain

Peevish, Hector cleaned the mahogany counter; he hard-pressed a smudge of wine. He threw the cloth, poured whiskey into his mug, and sipped. Outside, the rain stained the windowpanes fiercely. The cathedral bells echoed in the distance striking eight o'clock in the morning. A blast of wind opened the timber door and Hector looked towards the entrance. In its fissure he saw Nicolina sculpted by the weak light. Raindrops glistened on the tabs of her coat. Hectic, she headed to him.

"Give me the usual, please."

"I'm not even going to ask how it went," he said and filled a mug with absinthe.

"I barely put words on the paper last evening."

“I don’t understand anything about writing, but from what I heard, that’s natural.”

“No, it’s different now. I think I’ve lost the muse,” Nicolina supposed.

“What a rubbish! You only had a bad night.”

“Hope you’re right.”

Her dark hair dripped and she stared at the bottom of her beverage. Nicolina’s tapered eyes blinked in the middle of the light brown liquid. A clank rescued Nicolina from her absorption. A man staggered and fell at the door. From his bag escaped a flute. The man laid his hands on it and embraced the flute to his breathless chest. His eyebrow bled to his long redhead beard. Hector ran to him. He lifted the man under his arms and Nicolina helped them. They sat him on a stool. The man coughed.

“What happened to you, pal?” Hector asked.

“You have a nasty cut,” Nicolina asserted.

“Can you offer me something to drink?” the foreigner muttered.

“Sure,” Hector said.

He decanted a copious portion into a big clay mug.

“Here you have. It seems like your wound needs some stitches.”

The man swallowed ravenously.

“I can do it.”

“Alright; take him upstairs.”

The two circled the counter, crossed a circular door, and climbed the spiral stairs. Once they reach the summit, the glow of the fireplace revitalised the darkness of the small attic. Nicolina undressed her coat and she lit quite a few candles. She traversed the wee lavatory and brought a rag, a needle and a thread. Nicolina pointed to the chair. He sat. She dipped it in a water bucket on the floor and washed his bruise carefully.

“My name is Nicolina. What’s yours?”

“Almir.”

“Where are you from?”

“I come from the north hills.”

“What brings you here?”

“Why do you ask so many questions?”

Nicolina sewed his skin. He puckered his forehead.

“Because I’m interested.”

“I can assure you there’s nothing interesting about me,” Almir said.

“It must be a curse of writers. We see a story everywhere.”

“So, what do you write?”

“Poetry and tales about old and forgotten places.”

“Good.”

Almir’s murky eyes rested on hers and she gave the final stitch. Nicolina landed the objects on the bed.

“It’s done,” Nicolina said.

“Thank you.”

“Where did you get that cut?”

“I don’t want more enquiries.”

“At least...”

“I don’t owe you anything,” Almir interrupted.

“Are you always so rude?”

He stood up abruptly. Almir approached Nicolina. Their noises stayed close to each other and Nicolina inhaled the lavender from his mouth.

“I just don’t like nosy people.”

“My wish is to help.”

Almir took a step back and reclined, heavily, in his seat again. The logs’ crepitate shattered the stillness. She leaned against the table.

“My Dausa Mountain has a beauty of its own. Our dead speak to us through the wind.”

Her eyes were fixed on his and she listened cautiously. His double appeared vigorous on the window glass brushstroke by drops incorporated in uneven rivers. He passed his long fingers amongst the locks of his red hair. The flames danced within his dilated pupils.

“Our roses grow in the heart of winter; our nights are never moonless. But our air was infected. Whoever breathes it dies. I ran in time, though I carry my family’s weight for burying on my back.”

Silence befell on the division. Almir rubbed his beard and Nicolina released a cry.

“If you knew how I envy your tears. Mine have dried.”

“Well, I know the pain. I didn’t bury my mother either. The river is her vault and I visit her there.”

“We’re all prisoners of our shades.”

Almir raised and strolled to the entry. Nicolina pulled her coat and followed him. The aroma of honey suffused their nostrils as soon as they arrived at the rustic cafe.

“How are you feeling?” Hector inquired while he served his clients.

“A bit better; thanks.”

“I’ll make my specialty for you to eat.”

“Don’t bother. I must go,” Almir said.

“Wait! Stay, please. Let me write your story,” Nicolina begged.

“For what?”

“To preserve your home; to hush your ache.”

“Fine; as long as you keep it true.”

The tempest tore the gloominess of the alley. Nicolina and Almir sat at one of the tables in the corner. She lugged a fountain pen from her coat pocket, a slender leather notebook, and a bottle of ink. Hector hummed a song while preparing a pasty food. Pipes smoke rose above folks’ heads. Nicolina wrote nimbly. An empty cup of brew had dried on a yellowish stain beside her. The cursive words flourished in black. Hector beheld them, smiling.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *My short tale ‘The Dausa Mountai’ has, like most of my writing, a sense of nostalgia. This piece explores companionship, home, sorrow and loss. My works, both poetry and prose, are born from folklore, myths and nature. They serve as metaphors to express the complexity of emotions and thoughts. My writing style can be described as poetic with a dash of gothic. I am inspired by all forms of art.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: *Raquel Dionísio Abrantes has a Bachelor's Degree and a Master's Degree in Cinema from Universidade da Beira Interior. Raquel gave a Master Class in Writing of Scripts about Narrative Structure. Her writing has appeared on Write or Die Tribe website, Better Than Starbucks magazine, The Pangolin Review and New Hand Lab. She writes for Read Poetry. More about her work can be found at <https://www.instagram.com/woodland.poem>.*

A LITTLE DERIVATION

By Jamie Lewis Holt

WHY WE LIKE IT: *This short was submitted as a course requirement in Creative Writing. We don't usually take subs like this because they're seldom up to standard but 'A Little Derivation' was quirky enough to enlist our attention. The main character, Ben, is a fascinating mix-mox of stunted growth and 'unexplainable science'. To create a complicated character like this and make him believable isn't something you'd expect from a neophyte but here you have it. The prose is sometimes faltering and sentence structure could benefit from some close attention, but to us these are minor quibbles. The honesty of the story far outshines any shortcomings. The voice is authentic. The dialogue is strong. Give this writer a couple of years and you're going to say 'Hey, I just read this great story...'* *Quote:* The teacher, irritated at Ben's always-direct questions, said, "Write about the educational system that has graced us with your presence as the only orphan too smart for public school. Or maybe about my kidney stones and the science of pissing a meteor-sized porcupine? Pick anything that is *real*, Benton."

A Little Derivation

Ben wasn't afraid of getting caught, beat up, or even being framed for things he didn't do, he felt like it made him tougher for a kid his size. What he was afraid of was being *known*.

The cramped bathroom stall made an efficient use of the tiny window above the last toilet as Ben returned to his laptop placed on the cracked and glued top of the toilet tank. Music from the room above rattled the retrofitted drop ceiling above his head, dusting his curly locks with a fine-white powder, and coating his backpack on the floor in the corner. He was ditching Mr. Surly's English class across campus, hoping he wouldn't get caught. Ben had made the mistake

of trusting an adult with his secret, his English teacher had been coaxing him to open up about his life and then Ben found himself subsequently belittled for the truth he had shared. So now it was time to disappear, Ben wasn't spending another winter break working alone at a boarding school for rich kids when he the token charity case. Benton would rather be completely alone than ignored.

"Flimsy open source protocols," Ben said and adjusted his laptop on the back of the toilet, pausing to spit into the bowl between his straddled legs as the programming portal opened up the school's firewall settings. With not much thought to the crime he was committing, Ben wiped every last file with his pseudo name on it, including his term papers and state records, and slammed the lid shut. His bags were out the window, suffering from the cold that would envelope him when he dropped the ten feet to the ground and crossed the barren field to the crowded woods but what else could he do? He had slipped up, and he knew it. His English teacher had already pushed him for an explanation, refusing the truth in the paper he had written.

The door banged open and Ben crouched on the toilet, hoping the guy would be quick and be gone before people might be tempted to report him as missing from the last period of the day for the semester, but the bell rang, excusing the small predatory academy's student body for winter break and the dude was still at the urinal, pissing gallons.

"Screw it," Ben exhaled and pulled himself up to the tiny window, which now seemed ridiculous since the school had many exits and the students were pouring out of the buildings.

"What you doing down there?" a voice asked, the peeing ceased.

"I think some jerk threw my"—Ben halted, realizing this was Mr. Surly. "Never mind, I'll just run around, it's not that far." Ben exited the stall and brushed past his teacher, not

meaning to look into the urinal, but the tubing hanging by the teacher's leg that was not a typical male bathroom item, had caught his eye

"Can't," the professor said and snagged Ben's jacket in one hand.

Ben swatted up at the man's hand holding his scruff with increasing force. "What are you doing? Let me go. Teachers can't touch students."

"I'm not going to touch you, I'm going to let them touch you, and then you can go find your stuff," he said hauling Ben backwards while he dropped the I.V. tubing to the floor, the pee bag half emptied and spilling on Ben's shoes.

Ben's heart thudded the cold, knowing blood about his limbs, anger crystallizing in his veins as the door was pushed open and several more English students filed in.

"There's the freak," the first boy said. "Good little sneak, took us an hour to find you," another rattled off as more boys entered.

"Don't worry boys," the professor said and walked towards the door, calling over his shoulder, "school is out for the next few weeks and nobody is looking for him. Make sure he doesn't remember we were here," Mr. Surly said and the bathroom door clicked shut.

A disturbing quiet settled in Ben's bones, the bathroom deathly still.

Ben hadn't hit a growth spurt and wouldn't for years, he had skipped too many grades which always made him a target. Why the state put an orphan *and* assholes in the same building, Ben couldn't figure. What he did know, was this was his last day here and the idea of snapping all their necks tracked back and forth across his mind. He knew he could do it, he'd done it before, but he didn't want anyone looking for him. They wouldn't dare report him missing after today, he felt the beating coming, he always did and Ben welcomed the abuse, it made him stronger in other ways.

“Is preschool out for a few weeks?” one of them hollered as the classmates bumped around the boy’s restroom. The heckling was always their first step to psych themselves up, the assault would surely follow. “I heard Ben has to stay and help scrub the place down? They need dwarfs to get under those desks and that there,” Arthur said pointing a large finger at Ben, “is a stunted human.”

Ben squinted back at him. “Dwarfism is a medical diagnosis, I doubt you knew that. And I am four years younger than you, which I know you are aware of”—

“Shut up, loser,” Arthur said and shoved past Ben, his zipper down and starting to piss before he hit the stall. “No one believes you have any superpowers.”

“Oh good, may I leave now?” Ben asked and pointed to the door, grateful he had already slung his stuff out the window so the cretins couldn’t smash his laptop again.

“Oh, sure,” the first boy said and stepped aside, gracefully bowing to let Ben pass.

Moonlight was the only sign of time passing in the small bathroom window when Ben stirred, wincing, his face felt mushy when he pushed himself off the floor and hurried to the outside doors, that were locked. Ben shifted the tumblers in his mind and slipped silently from the school, locking the door again without ever touching it. Several things occupied his thoughts as his fingers tenderly traced the bumps on his head and face, cursing as his back hit the wall, digging for his stuff in the bushes but nothing was as painful and fierce as loneliness and revenge. The boarding school had been his last stop in this state, an exception they made since Ben tested out of every other high school in the region and they felt like the rich kids would ‘look up to a little prodigy,’ they said, ‘take him under their wing,’ they had promised. Instead, he had his wings broken by brutal attacks, spurring him towards what would now be his only way of survival.

The forested dirt path came and went, cycling in the daylight and moonbeams, stretching further into the uncharted nothingness of the forested northern territories and just as Ben had hoped, he was completely alone. His bag and pack floating behind him, the mental strain a bare minimum to keep them aloft while extracting the moisture in the air into the water bottle in his hands. The droplets danced, dizzy and alive in the afternoon sun, combining in a mystical rainstorm, a micro universe in Ben's bottle waiting for him to find something else to concentrate on, to release them from his mind's potential.

Ben's thoughts returned to his bumbled attempts to trust someone. Mr. Surly's kidneys had been Ben's mistake, right in English class after he belittled Ben's attempts at a creative non-fiction piece. Ben had written what he knew, the unexplainable science he was capable of, expecting the first adult he'd ever shared it with to shelter and mentor him. The man had seemed nice but Ben was ridiculed for not understanding the assignment and verbally upbraided in front of his peers.

"No one can manipulate matter with their mind," the professor had said. "This is a nonfiction assignment, try writing about something that is real if you want to pass, okay? Let's read Arthur's paper, it's better, more to the point of nonfiction," Mr. Surly said with much emphasis.

"What kind of reality were you hoping for?" Ben blurted out with genuine curiosity at what constituted non-fiction for his teacher. He was too young to be knowingly sarcastic, that would develop over the next few decades.

The teacher, irritated at Ben's always-direct questions, said, "Write about the educational system that has graced us with your presence as the only orphan too smart for public school. Or

maybe about my kidney stones and the science of pissing a meteor-sized porcupine? Pick anything that is *real*, Benton.”

The teacher had gone on to praise Arthur, leaving Ben sitting in a huddled fury and imagined the man’s kidneys, both of the meaty organs, and like the teat on a cow’s udder, Ben milked the stones loose. Even when his teacher puked all over his desk, Ben kept milking. A prideful show that left the skeptical teacher with a pee-bag and Ben absolutely certain it was time to leave for good.

In the frozen tundra far to the north of the abandoned towns Ben had passed in his search for solitude, the search helicopters drew closer and Ben hid beneath a massive pine tree, pulling foliage over his packs and mentally shifting the dirt around him to tuck him in for the night. The bright sphere in his hand dimming, the humming ceasing as his eyes fell shut.

There was a pulse in the stillness Ben could feel, as tangible as his mother’s black velvet handbag had been when she let him hold it for her on the trains. A blackness that beckoned him, soft and smooth, and when Ben reached for it, expanding his mind beyond the walls of the school, he felt not small and alone, but invincible.

Pain was his education, hatred his motivation, and solitude his teacher.

Maybe the blackness that pulsed in his bruised tissue, the stillness lulling his mind to sleep understood who he was after all; a little anomaly, a derivation, a blackhole.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *The prompt for this flash fiction came from a much longer story in the works, as part of an English class assignment to explore a character’s backstory. The history of orphans and their exploitation was found in doing research for a paper on early America’s child work force in another English class and spurred the idea of his isolation and abuse. As a mother of five children, I*

can't comprehend the abuse some children suffer at the hands of bigger (not smarter, not older) just meaner people and it turns my stomach. I wanted Benton to be able to fight back, in his own way, to find a future where he can be who he is, without fear. I think all children are endowed with that potential to change the world and in this flash fiction we see the start of what one child is capable of. Benton, The Little Derivation.

AUTHOR BIO: *I am a senior at Utah Valley University, graduating in the Spring of 2021 in Creative Writing, minor in Digital Media and love all creative outlets; writing, reading, drawing, painting (the house), photography (have had photographs published), and recently thanks to an excellent professor, poetry.*

3 SHORTS

By William Blome

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Each of these shorts, especially the first, has the feeling of an improvisation- a 'tangential realism' if you will, that never quite completes itself. None of them align with our familiar trajectories because Blome's realities are slightly warped out of focus and fashioned into Carver-shaped literary constructs that parallel rather than replicate experience. Time is encapsulated in media res. The prose is beautiful architecture. Five stars. (Spacing is author's own).*

There was a brass soap dish I once lifted from the bathroom of a strip club—I phillips-headed that bad boy right off the wall—mere days before the club closed its doors forever. A keepsake of fiery nights and gooey hands, the soap dish now gets equal billing in my collection with all the more-correctly-defined finials, though it picked up a black mark, so to speak, when it sliced your toe, trusty sidekick, at the foot of my bed.

CATTAILS II

From just the right distance you and I watched a tugboat chug and puff out of the shipping lane and into a bordering marsh. Within her windowed wheelhouse the tugboat captain stood out in the open, and maybe because she was a transvestite (or maybe because some might conclude she was aping a bold and teasing bride in this August month of ours), she steered her squat and stubby vessel into the very narrow, complex, and often-changing rivulets of the marsh in an obvious search for blinding and flashy garments to authenticate a career-in-action. However, we as onlookers had to believe the most evident chart she was likely following and imitating was the spot-to-spot, short flight-to-short flight mosaic created by redwing blackbirds as they darted from

one cattail to another to another and another before coming to recant their journeys en masse and then rising and returning as one into the surrounding sky.

FINIALS

I imagine stealing finials has been a habit in Western civilization for several centuries, though how rare or common it's been worldwide, of course, I have no way of truly knowing. I can relate that if I'm at all a typical devotee—that is, if my enthusiasm for swiping finials is not extremely rare or outsized—then the entire world may someday come to know of the habit's allure. I'll share that I myself was introduced to the practice by Marshal MacMahon (that is, when I read a biography of the great French general). I disbelieved at first the author's claim of MacMahon's openly boasting that stealing finials bestowed on him recuperative and healthy benefits, and that his obsession with pilfering knobs and crests was what had truly saved his Irish-ancestored ass from suicide following the Battle of Sedan. But I've come to believe that once anyone commits to stealing finials, precious little in the world seems able to interrupt: not a suddenly-looming skyscraper in the shape of a shiny sickle; not a stereotypical cop on foot patrol with his flicking baton; not a virus invisibly eating at one's own skin; not the clauses of some contract; and not even your cork-like nipples brushing against or pushing in-between my lips.

I like stealing finials on the weekly Day of Rest. I like to case a house-for-sale that's furnished and Open-for-Inspection on a Sunday afternoon, a house with some green-as-grass, male real estate agent in attendance, and I like doing it with you on my arm, o busty sidekick; you, lovely-cohort-about-to-burst-open; you who can pin the agent down measuring for kitchen cabinets or probing under a breakfast nook for a dropped car key, or succumbing to many another distraction while I'm unscrewing like a bastard in the bedrooms.

The first finial I ever swiped was in a bedroom—my parents', as a matter of fact— and I did it the night before I left for college. 'Took a lovely spire off the top of their lowboy while the two of them were under the covers asleep in one another's aging arms. Always a pitifully literal thinker, I thought it would be a potentially sticky situation (swiping the spire while both mom and dad were in the same room), and thus I had brought along some dark brown apple butter on a saucer: one uses this to cover one's tracks, to plug the open hole(s) left in a lowboy's dark mahogany.

There was a brass soap dish I once lifted from the bathroom of a strip club—I phillips-headed that bad boy right off the wall—mere days before the club closed its doors forever. A keepsake of fiery nights and gooey hands, the soap dish now gets equal billing in my collection with all the more-correctly-defined finials, though it picked up a black mark, so to speak, when it sliced your toe, trusty sidekick, at the foot of my bed. (I had had the dish out, polishing the metal mother to a fine yellow shine, when you came galumphing in on top of my ass and got your big toe cut in the bargain. You'll recall I then played the role of frustrated/horny hunter, sucking the poison out of your wound and cursing the soap dish's nasty sharpness, and then (all by myself) achieving a half-foot-long hard-on for my heroic efforts.)

But a lavender-hued day will surely someday dawn when I'll have to pull my hand out from beneath that butt of yours for the last time. Oh I'll continue to kiss your shoulder and underarms good morning, and still set about the task of properly storing the more-than-several finials that have overflowed my collection's first cookie-jar home. The immediate problem will be to decide if there should now be additional housing designated for these overflows (and for constantly-arriving new members, of course), or if the overflows and their incoming brethren should now be

individually domiciled, so to speak, in a place or niche each can call its own domain. Continuing the group-home idea appears rather obviously easier to implement and maintain: I'd just get an empty box, or an old top hat, or a dust bin—something of that ilk—and then position such a container near my bedroom door, where, any dusk I come tramping home from a good day's hunt, I can simply toss in my klatch of incoming finials. As I say, that approach sure seems the easier of the two to go with, but as I lay here pondering and stroking your thighs—your body within a body—I know I'm really going to go with option number two. Yes, from now on, one-to-one correspondences will rule our roost, sweetheart, and there'll be a separate location chartered somewhere for each finial. Oh, I can slap together a catalog later if things get too confusing, but let me inaugurate matters right now by addressing the smorgasbord of excitement you keep spreading in front of me and by watching you gradually comprehend how my using separately-housed finials brings forth the orderly pleasure deep within you that crafts a lasting welcome mat for me and each new pointy tenant I bring into our happy home.

PRETTY PIPES

At first his escape was not successful, and you easily caught up with him just after the seat of his light blue pants got snagged on the wiry edge of the fence he was trying to vault over. I could squint and discern that he smiled big-time at you—his face grew downright moonlike as he beamed and conjured a bribe of cellophane-twisted bonbons for your help in boosting him up and over. Furthermore, you yourself came to admit you pledged to him you'd grow dumb as a dodo while he ran away through the parking lot.

Now it's certainly not out of the question you could have simply done nothing, 'just turned your back on him, never said boo, and paced off in the opposite direction. I have no problem whatsoever understanding such a contingency. But to me, clarity doesn't have to be abundant for there to be something unsettling here, let's not kid ourselves, pretty pipes. There's something illustrative in this event, though my domineering ass almost always prefers something reflective. You know me: I like reflection on the order—reflection of more or less the same magnitude—as what floats on the surface of an entirely-still storm pond during the gaudy sunset close of an uneventful day.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The three selections featured here are all fictional sketches, with no pretense or aspiration whatsoever toward someday becoming "finished" or "polished" narratives. A fictional sketch should be capable of standing on its own feet as a worthy literary product. And okay, you want a stylistic source or inspiration for Cattails II and Pretty Pipes? Well, you could certainly do worse than to listen to a random selection of Debussy's Etudes played at somewhat low volume. But Finials is its own bad boy; I pompously like to dub it a surrealistic smudge of history.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *William C. Blome writes short fiction and poetry. He lives in the 'States, wedged between Baltimore and Washington, DC, and he is a master's*

degree graduate of the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars. His work has previously seen the light of day in such fine little mags as PRISM International, In Between Hangovers, Fiction Southeast, Roanoke Review, and The California Quarterly.

NICKEL CITY SHAKEDOWN

By Gary Earl Ross

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A confidently written mini-mystery full of laughs and swagger. We like the characters, the details of setting, the author's easy-going loping prose and the seamless English/Spanish parlance. Stories in the mystery/private dick genre are often known for their wise-cracking, smart ass dialogue and in Nickel City Shakedown the author takes his place with the best of them.*

“That would appeal to the eleven-year-old strapped into your brain’s back seat.”

“You know me so well,” I said.

AND

“Ah, *un caballero andante* in the modern world!” Fernando said, clapping his hands together. He looked at Phoenix. “What do you call it in English?”

“A knight-errant,” Phoenix said. “But don’t call him that or we’ll never get his head through the doorway.”

Just wonderful junk. Oh, and thanks to Gideon Rimes, we discovered a rum we’d never heard of.

Nickel City Shakedown

A Gideon Rimes Short Story

by

Gary Earl Ross

For Ramona and Digna

Christmas in Puerto Rico sounded like the perfect escape from a Buffalo winter, so I didn't hesitate to agree when Phoenix Trinidad proposed spending two weeks there. But she continued pitching the idea long after she closed the sale.

"A few days in San Juan," she said over dinner at La Kueva. It was a crisp night in early November, but it was warm inside the small restaurant, despite large plate glass windows that permitted a view of passersby on Hertel Avenue buttoned, bundled, and scarved against Nickel City wind. Phoenix's shirt collar had two buttons open and the jacket of her pantsuit—her lawyer's uniform, I sometimes teased her—was on the back of her chair. "I have a ton of Hilton Honors points to use, so we're staying at *Condado Plaza*. We'll hit the beaches, Old San Juan, a couple of museums, *El Morro*."

"*El Morro*?"

"The huge fort overlooking San Juan Bay. You'll love it. It was built in the 1500s—or they began building it then and continued a couple hundred years. It's full of history."

"No doubt." Brought up by my godfather Bobby Chance, a now retired English professor who loved all things historical, I too was fond of exploring the past. Having served in the Iraq War in streamlined FOBs, or forward operating bases, I was especially curious about old military forts with footprints rooted in the permanence of conquest and exploitation.

"You'll love the museums too, for the same reason." Phoenix sipped her piña colada. "Then there's the Bacardi distillery, kayaking on a bioluminescent bay, snorkeling. And the food! So many wonderful places to choose from."

I pushed up my stainless steel eyeglass frame and smiled. “Is that why you brought me here tonight? To the best Puerto Rican restaurant in Buffalo?”

“*Si*.” Phoenix caught her lip between her teeth in the faint, hesitant smile I would always remember from the first time we made love.

“If we do this for two weeks and I gain weight from food like this,” I said, gesturing towards the pork chops and *mofongo* on my plate, “you may start to rethink our relationship.”

“I said a few days in San Juan. Then we’ll drive down to Ponce so you can finally meet Tia Rosita. We’ll be there for her birthday, January fifth. It’s a milestone, eighty. She wants me to review some legal stuff with her. Also, she’s got a new boyfriend.”

“And you want to check him out.”

“You know me so well,” she said, smiling again.

Our room at the *Condado Plaza* Hilton overlooked the beach and the hotel pool, but we spent only one afternoon at the beach and one evening in the pool. Apart from a tour of the Bacardi distillery, we spent most of the time in Old San Juan, exploring shops and museums, walking the steps and ramps of *El Morro*, quite a workout. After three days, despite a huge Christmas dinner the first night and lots of restaurant food, the hotel scale had me down a few pounds.

We left San Juan a few days after Christmas, after making love one final time in morning sunlight and indulging in one last buffet brunch. Our rented Kia was small and uncomfortable. By noon, with Phoenix wheeling us down Highway 52 for the ninety-minute ride from San Juan in the northeast to Ponce in the south, I felt like astronaut John Glenn shoehorned into the Mercury Seven capsule.

Our hotel was The Fox on *Calle Reina Isabel* across from the *Plaza las Delicias*, home to the historic firehouse turned museum *Parque de Bombas*. When Tia Rosita told her new love the City of Ponce, named after a descendant of the conquistador Ponce de Leon, was founded on my August birthday in 1692, Fernando insisted on putting us up in The Fox because he thought a Leo would enjoy the decorated lion statues in the nearby museum. An astrology buff herself, Tia Rosita added that because I belonged to what I was surprised to learn was the House of Pleasure, I should be especially vigorous near the lions.

Having listened to the blue tooth call as we neared Ponce, I had understood nothing of the exchange in what seemed to me rapid Spanish. But I had noticed the flush in Phoenix's normally cinnamon cheeks and laughed when she explained what her aunt had said.

"You're not embarrassed?" she said.

"No. Makes me less afraid to turn eighty." I thought for a moment about one of the few Spanish words I knew. "So we're at The Fox. Why isn't it called The Zorro?"

"That would appeal to the eleven-year-old strapped into your brain's back seat."

"You know me so well," I said.

Smiling as we passed the red and black *Letras de Ponce*, the twenty-foot high P-O-N-C-E that marked the entrance to the city, she said, "You'll see."

The hotel exterior was bright blue, with an architecture and design that suggested a mix of art deco, pop art, neoclassical Spanish, and Crayolas on steroids. Once we were inside, I understood why it had not been named the Zorro. Enlarged sections of Andy Warhol's Marilyn Diptych and other pop art pieces—including James Dean, Frank Sinatra, Ingrid Bergman, and Elvis—hung in various places amid neon lighting and bold colors.

“This was once a Fox movie theater,” Phoenix said as we rolled our bags over to the check-in desk.

I nodded. “I can tell from all the vigorous paintings of dead movie stars.”

Our room had bright stripes, a cherry red bedspread, and more reproductions of pop art standards, including another Marilyn Monroe above the headboard and a couple of Lichtensteins I recognized from the Albright-Knox back home, a red-headed woman surrounded by yellow and on the bathroom door a comic book explosion. For a moment I wondered how vigorous I would feel beneath the gaze of a surreal sex symbol and near a graphic novel panel designed to inspire premature ejaculation. But I would have to wait to find out. After we unpacked, I slipped into a lightweight sports jacket and Phoenix donned a lightweight pantsuit for the drive to Tia Rosita’s one-bedroom high-rise near Pontifical Catholic University.

Tia Rosita was lithe and silver-haired, with a loose flowing turquoise dress and glittering eyes behind rhinestone glasses. As Phoenix often said, she bore more than a passing resemblance to Rita Moreno. She smiled when she let us in, the same hesitant smile I sometimes saw on Phoenix, and introduced us to the *caballero* she had been seeing for several months. Fernando Pabon was a big man in a tan *guayabera*, with two opened buttons revealing gray curls of chest hair. In his early eighties, he still looked good. He had massive brown hands and thinning white hair brushed back to reveal a broad, creased forehead. The smile beneath his white mustache was full of teeth too flawless to be anything but false. He embraced us in the living room, which had an artificial Christmas tree in one corner and a Three Kings manger display on a table beside it.

“Sit, sit,” he said. “You too, Rosita. I’ll get *ron* for us all!” Then he disappeared into the kitchen as I took an armchair and the women sat on the couch across from me.

For a minute or so, Tia Rosita held Phoenix's hands and peppered her with questions in Spanish. Then, with a smile that seemed both curious and flirtatious, she turned to me. In English better than Phoenix had led me to believe she spoke, she inquired about my background, my time as a soldier, and my experiences as an investigator. Quickly at ease, I answered in brief, slow sentences, the shortest reserved for my time in Iraq, and sprinkled in compliments about the décor of her apartment. Finally, she asked how I felt about Phoenix, her only living relative.

"*La quiero mucho,*" I said, having anticipated and prepared for that particular question. I held her eyes with mine for a quiet second or three afterward, as if underscoring the love I had expressed. Then she smiled broadly and said something to Phoenix in Spanish. They both laughed.

At that moment Fernando returned, pushing a brass drink cart into the center of the room and stopping near the coffee table. The cart held four glasses, an ice bucket, and a bottle of Don Q Gold on the top glass shelf and half a dozen other bottles on the bottom. Using tongs, he filled the glasses with ice and poured in two or three fingers of rum. He passed the rum to Tia Rosita, Phoenix, and me. Before sitting in the other armchair, near the drink cart, he raised his own glass and said, "*Salud!*"

We all sipped.

For a few minutes Fernando and I said nothing as Phoenix and her aunt resumed talking. Now and then catching a Spanish word I recognized, I figured their discussion included shared experiences and mutual acquaintances. The old man and I exchanged occasional glances and half smiles throughout, but I saw his jaw tighten when Phoenix mentioned Tio Pedro, her late uncle. When Phoenix asked him about his business, which he had sold some years ago to retire, he

explained it was a *taberna* in San Juan, but Tia Rosita corrected him. “*Club nocturno*,” she said, clearly impressed by the difference between a tavern and a night club.

Leaning forward, elbows on his upper thighs, Fernando deflected attention by turning the conversation to me. “Gideon Rimes, *investigador privado*. Wow!” His moustache stretched above his smile. “Phoenix tells Rosita about your many adventures and Rosita tells me. The crimes you solve. The killers you catch. You must be famous. Buffalo’s Mike Hammer.”

I shrugged. “Maybe more like Buffalo’s Don Quixote, a well-meaning pain in the *culo* to some people. Sometimes I even charge toward windmills and get knocked to the ground and beaten up.”

Fernando and Tia Rosita both laughed. Phoenix looked at me and rolled her eyes.

“Ah, *un caballero andante* in the modern world!” Fernando said, clapping his hands together. He looked at Phoenix. “What do you call it in English?”

“A knight-errant,” Phoenix said. “But don’t call him that or we’ll never get his head through the doorway.”

Fernando looked confused.

“*Cabeza hinchada*,” Phoenix said. “*Con orgullo*.”

Fernando’s face lit up, and he laughed. Tia Rosita half smiled, half frowned. Phoenix winked and blew me a kiss, which I took to mean she would tell me later what she’d said.

Gradually, talk turned to what we all should do over the next week and a half, before Phoenix and I returned to San Juan for a final night in a hotel there and our flight home. Tia Rosita said in English that Ponce, the second largest city in Puerto Rico, was not unlike Buffalo, the second largest city in New York. The pace of life was different, slower, but, like Buffalo, it was rich in history and had many attractions. Then she and Fernando took turns suggesting where we should

go and things we should see—the history museum, the art gallery, another bioluminescent bay.

Then, to my surprise, Tia Rosita mentioned a place called Gilligan’s Island.

“Gilligan’s Island?” I said.

“Caya Aurora,” Fernando said. “I don’t much like it there.”

“An island off Guañica,” Phoenix said. “Before you ask, the TV show wasn’t filmed there.

Gilligan’s Island is just a nickname. It’s got beaches, swimming, places for picnics.”

“It’s not so special,” Fernando said. “For something special you should see *La Cruceta del Vigia*, the hundred-foot cross overlooking the city. And *Castillo Serrallés*.” He poured more Don Q into his glass. “It was once the home of the family that makes this *ron*. But you have to do that without us. Too much walking for me and Rosita at our age.”

Just then we felt the first tremors and saw ornaments shaking on the Christmas tree, the Three Kings display beside it vibrating.

Fernando looked from me to Phoenix and back. “Another earthquake, a small one.”

That night beneath a crisp white sheet and a red spread, her right arm across my belly and her right leg thrown over both of mine, Phoenix asked what I thought of Fernando.

“He’s trying too hard to make us like him,” I said. “And doing so without talking about himself, which is kind of awkward. I like him, but my opinion isn’t the one that counts.”

“Your opinion counts.”

“I’m not the one who manages Tia Rosita’s finances.”

“My father was very protective of his baby sister. He would want me to look after her. Especially if some guy was trying to get at the retirement money Tio Pedro left her.”

“Of course.”

Phoenix was quiet for a long time, her fingers lightly, absently stroking my side. “There’s something about him I don’t trust,” she said at last. “Fernando, I mean. It’s not just my lawyer fallback that everybody is guilty of something.”

“I understand.”

“So you’ll look into him?”

I kissed the top of her head. “Already in the works.”

The weather was warm and sunny the next week. Phoenix alternated between two sun hats and two pairs of sunglasses. I depended on a baseball cap and my transition lenses to cut the glare. Also, I stuck to the half dozen loose-fitting *guayaberas* she’d bought me in San Juan. In no time we fell into a routine, even as we felt mild earth tremors off and on throughout each day, with the epicenter in nearby Guañica. We got used to the tremors as easily as we did our routine.

Most days the four of us went out in the late morning, with me behind the wheel of the Kia and Fernando riding shotgun, giving directions as Phoenix and Tia Rosita squeezed into the back. Those excursions were short: the art and history museums; the boardwalk at *La Guancha* Park, where we bought souvenirs from vendors; lunch twice in *Plaza Ponce de Leon*, a mall-style building from the 1920s. By mid-afternoon each day we returned to the apartment so Tia Rosita and Fernando could rest as Phoenix and I took a walk or drank on the balcony. Once, coming in from the balcony, we heard noises from behind Tia Rosita’s door that made Phoenix turn scarlet. As I steered her to the elevator, I said, “Eighty’s looking better all the time.”

The next day we all went to the red and black *Parque de Bombas* museum and posed for pictures beside display cases of antique firefighting equipment and the painted lions throughout the museum. The symbol of Ponce was the lion, Fernando explained. Some years earlier white lions

had been placed in the firehouse museum and elsewhere around the city and an army of artists had been enlisted to turn each one into a unique work of art. The result was a dazzling array of colors, combinations of colors, iridescent blends, and intricate designs that included geometric shapes, stripes, spots, humanlike eyes, and even lipstick. I told Fernando we'd had a similar public art program in Buffalo two decades earlier, with bison statues that were still in public parks and outside buildings. I did not tell him that the lions, especially the ones with painted-on eyeglasses, reminded me of W.W. Denslow's version of the Cowardly Lion in early editions of *The Wizard of Oz*. But I did mention in passing some of the more brightly colored lions looked vigorous, which made Phoenix give me a gentle elbow shot to the ribs.

Two days Phoenix and I ventured out alone in our rental, once to a coffee plantation that involved too much walking for her aunt and once to *Cerro del Vigia*, the hill above Ponce that was home to *La Cruceta* and *Museo Castillo Serrallés*, where the walking involved steep climbs too. From the observation deck that formed the crossbar, the giant cross offered a panoramic view of the city. The tour of the 1930s mansion-turned-museum began with drinks in a room which displayed classic Don Q bottles behind glass and continued through ceramic floor-tiled rooms and polished stairways that still had furniture, artwork, and portraits of the Serrallés family, founders of the namesake distillery that was the oldest family-owned business in Puerto Rico. After the tour ended in the gift shop, we toured the extensive Japanese Gardens outside. Though one evening we took the Kia into the mountains to a restaurant called *Hacienda Maribo*, most evenings we used an Uber to go to dinner and return to the apartment by eight-thirty. By ten Phoenix and I were back *Plaza las Delicias* for a nightcap before bed.

Our final Sunday, three days before we were scheduled to leave, was Tia Rosita's birthday.

Fernando arranged to have dinner from an upscale restaurant and a cake with candles shaped into

an 8 and a 0 delivered to her apartment. We sang “Happy Birthday” in Spanish, me looking at the lyrics Phoenix had written out for me. Fernando’s gift to her was an emerald pendant, ours a new audiobook of an abridged *Don Quixote* with background music.

After cake, Tia Rosita announced she needed some time with her niece to discuss family matters—the “legal stuff” Phoenix had mentioned. Fernando invited me to join him for a drink at his place. I hadn’t thought about whether he had a place, even though I had seen enough of Tia Rosita’s apartment to know he wasn’t living there full time. When we boarded the elevator, I expected we would take the Kia to wherever he lived. To my surprise, he pressed 7 and we got off ten floors below. He led me to a door down the hall, opened it, and flipped the light switch. His apartment was a mirror image of Tia Rosita’s, but more sparsely furnished. A well-worn brown leather couch and a single non-matching stuffed armchair, a smaller flat screen TV hanging from a wall, no coffee table, a round kitchenette table with one chair in the dining nook, plain curtains, no Christmas decorations, and a single folding lawn chair visible through the sliding glass door that led to the balcony. One end of the couch had a couple shirts draped over the armrest and a pile of magazines on the cushion. He gestured me toward the uncluttered side and went into the kitchen.

I found it curious he was willing to pay for us to stay at The Fox when he had a place we could have slept right downstairs. I told myself he must have wanted to make a solid impression.

He returned with two glasses and a bottle of Don Q Cristal. He handed me one glass and set the other on the armrest of the chair. He poured me three fingers of the clear rum, and I said, “*Gracias.*” Then he poured himself a bit more than I had, and sat in the chair, standing the bottle beside it on the carpet. He raised a toast, and as we sipped, we felt another tremor.

“This *ron* is smoother than the ground, no?” Fernando smiled at me. “Gideon, I hope these little earthquakes don’t make you want to leave our island.”

“Not yet.” I sipped more Cristal, a bit less sweet than the Gold, with a bit more bite. “But as I said the other day, earthquakes are completely new for me. Buffalo’s had a few over the years, mostly minor, unfelt by most people. These...”

“These are minor,” he said. “Little ones, more than usual but still baby shakes.” He hoisted his glass. “*Ron* is good for when the ground shifts beneath your feet.”

“*Ron* certainly is.” I raised my glass. “To Don Q, with a distillery right here in Ponce.”

“*Por supuesto!*” Fernando wagged a finger at me. “But you’re in Puerto Rico, Gideon. The Q is pronounced *coo*.”

“*Si*,” I said.

He laughed. “How did you like the tour of *Castillo Serrallés*?”

“I enjoyed it, but not as much as Phoenix. She was there as a little girl and kept pointing out how things had changed. In some of the pictures she even saw people she had met through her Tio Pedro, who worked there.”

“A distillery executive,” Fernando said. For a moment he was quiet, lips pressed together.

“Rosita has told me much about Pedro. Too much. *Es coma una sogá en mi cuello*.”

“I don’t understand.” But I did recognize *cuello* as *neck*.

“It is hard sometimes to run a race against a dead man.”

“Ah,” I said, nodding.

We each took another sip.

“So, your hotel is all right then?” he said. “I chose it because I thought you might like the movie pictures and everything around the plaza.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “We like the bar next door. We’ve stopped in there a couple times.”

He nodded. “What about the room? Does Phoenix like it?”

“She does. Nice décor. Pleasant atmosphere. She especially likes soaking in that bathtub.” I shrugged. “It’s fine.” I hesitated. “Thank you for booking it, but we *can* pay—”

“No, no, no,” he said, waving his hand. “I hope to be her new *tio*, yours too. It’s the least I can do. You came all this way to see if the old man courting Tia Rosita is serious or...” He drank more Cristal—a swallow, not a sip. “You know, before I was born that hotel used to be *Teatro Fox Delicias. El cine, a...a...*”

“A movie palace,” I said. “That explains Marilyn Monroe and James Dean.”

“*Si*. It was designed by a famous Ponce architect and built on land given by a member of the Serrallés family.”

I leaned forward, my forearms on my knees and both hands around my glass. “Fernando, I like you. You seem like a very nice man. You don’t need to impress me. This is my first time here in Ponce, my first time meeting Tia Rosita. I’m not the one you have to win over. It’s Phoenix. Tia is her only family, and she feels she has to watch over her.”

“*Ella es una abogada*. Sorry. Lawyers make me nervous.”

“Lawyers or women lawyers?”

Grinning, he shook his head. “Rosita waits for you to ask her niece to marry you, but she is afraid the girl is too independent to say yes. So I am nervous Phoenix will say no to me too.”

“I was married before, when I was in the army,” I said. “Phoenix tells me she came close once but came to her senses at the last minute. What we have now works for us.”

“You are both hardworking professionals in your prime. It makes sense you need space, especially you with the work you do.”

“But you don’t need Phoenix’s permission to propose to Tia Rosita. You just need to let her get to know you better. To let her know you before Rosita says yes. The real you.”

For a time he said nothing and stared at his glass as if weighing what I’d told him.

“Ah, I didn’t invite you out for a drink so you could put in a kind word with Phoenix,” he said finally. “*Caballero andante*, I want to hire you, to do a job.”

Now it was my turn for a heartbeat or two of silence. “Something back in Buffalo? I’m not licensed here. If it’s security work, my guns are locked in my safe at home. Besides, when we get to my second thumb, we both know I’ve hit the end of my Spanish vocabulary.”

Fernando laughed. “Your complexion makes you look enough like you belong here. But the minute you speak a word of Spanish, they’ll talk to you in English.”

“I don’t even have to open my mouth. That place you took us for dinner, up in the mountains, with the goats outside?”

“*Si. Hacienda Maribo.*” He thought for a moment. “Ah yes! The boy gave us four menus. Yours was the only one in English, before you ever said a word. But this isn’t bodyguard work or tracking down a killer. You don’t need Spanish.”

“What is it then?”

“A background check. I know Phoenix brought a small computer, and the hotel has wi-fi. As *un investigador privado*, you must have use of information sites not open to private citizens.”

“I do. “

He removed a slip of paper from the breast pocket of his *guayabera*. “Then please look into this man for me. I will pay you for your time.”

I looked at the paper, which had a name scribbled in thick marker ink. “Juan Alejandro Quiñones. Who is he?”

“A man with the power to ruin my life, which he has tried to do time and again.”

“How?”

“I would rather not say. Must you know to...to *take* my case?”

“Not necessarily, but if it’s something you could take to the police...”

“No! It is...delicate.”

I sat back and looked at him, hard. “So he’s shaking you down.”

“Shaking me...?”

“Blackmailing you. Threatening to reveal something you don’t want known unless you pay him.” I waited for a response before continuing but none came. “When was the last time you heard from him, this Don Q?”

Fernando took a deep breath. “Not for a very long time, years. He is not worthy of the title Don, but I want you to find out if he is still a danger to me.”

Just then came another tremor, a somewhat stronger shaking we felt mainly in the floor.

“Give me two days,” I said. “I’ll have something for you before we leave for San Juan.”

On Monday we were shaken awake before dawn by the strongest earthquake yet. Phoenix moved closer and put her right arm over my torso as I slid my right arm under her. We lay still for a long time, until the tremors and aftershocks seemed to pass.

“Imagine that,” I said. “The bed was shaking and it wasn’t even us.”

“Don’t quit your day job, Mr. Colbert.” Phoenix patted my chest before she got her phone off the nightstand and called Tia Rosita. She sat on the edge of the bed as they talked. Though I didn’t understand the Spanish I knew my lover well enough to recognize her soothing voice. “A little tired and a little scared,” Phoenix said after she clicked off. “We’re on our own till dinner.”

We stayed close to the hotel, breakfasting in a coffee shop and exploring nearby stores. Phoenix bought another sun hat and pair of sunglasses, and I picked up a Ponce tee shirt with a vivid lion picture. We had a late lunch at the Plaza Hotel and Casino, half a block away from The Fox, and spent an hour and change at the slot machines. I lost forty bucks but Phoenix collected three hundred from a machine called Wild Panda. "It takes patient observation," she said, as if lecturing me. "I watched three people feed a lot of money to that machine and walk away with nothing to show for it. Every game gets you a bit closer to the big one, so I knew it was due."

"Don't quit your day job, Calamity Jane." I shook my head. "The big one." The entire time we were out and later as we joined Tia Rosita and Fernando for dinner at a restaurant near the high rise I was uncertain whether the tremors I felt were the ground beneath me or something inside me much worse than phantom cell phone vibrations.

The big one came the next morning with a sound I could only describe as a bang. Our floor felt as if it had dropped two feet. Then the shaking began, a deep rumbling, violent and angry and more forceful than anything we had felt to that point. I pulled Phoenix closer and held her tight in the center of the shuddering bed as I heard screams in the distance. Enough light came through our lattice window that I could see the walls moving, slightly warping. The pink lamp jittered to the edge of the nightstand and fell to the carpet, as did Phoenix's plastic water bottle and the potted succulent atop the storage cube unit that served as our dresser. Across from the bed was a white student desk that doubled as a stand for the flat screen TV, which fidgeted to the edge and fell against the matching white chair before tumbling to the floor. The light above us hung from a rod fixed to the ceiling. I watched the bowl-shaped glass shade sway and tipped my head back to keep tabs on the framed picture of Marilyn above our headboard. If either piece loosened, I would have maybe a second to throw myself over Phoenix.

Finally, it stopped.

For a long time we just lay there, unspeaking. I made no attempt to ease what had happened with humor. I had felt helpless, something to which I was unaccustomed. I was used to *doing* things, to doing something to determine my fate. Even during combat there had been choices to make, orders to follow, paths to take us out of the target zone. This morning there had been no course of action but to wait out the earthquake and hope for the best.

Two hours later, as we had agreed at dinner the night before, I met Fernando for *domplines* at a small place a few blocks away from The Fox.

He stood when I stepped inside the café and had his hand out when I reached his table.

“Oh, Gideon!” He pumped my hand hard. “I am glad to see you in one piece, to *be* in one piece. *Ay Dios mio!* This morning’s earthquake was unlike anything in memory!”

“Tell me about it,” I said as we sat. “Phoenix is trying to change our tickets so we can leave tonight from here rather than drive back to San Juan. We have no idea how the roads are.”

“I got here more an hour ago,” Fernando said. “I knew there would be a long line after such a wake up. You got here just in time.”

A young woman in a bright yellow skirt took our order. As we waited for our coffee and *domplines*, fried dough patties filled with egg, cheese, and ham or bacon, I pulled my notebook from my *guayabera* breast pocket. Before I could open it, Fernando placed his hand over mine.

“I am worried Phoenix is going to find a way to take *mi* Rosita to Buffalo.”

“She offered,” I said. “Tia Rosita won’t go anywhere without you. But you refused to leave. Why?”

He hesitated. “I don’t know.”

“You’re both retired and don’t need to go to work. You can have privacy in Buffalo, either by renting an apartment short term or moving into my place while I stay with Phoenix or vice versa.”

Fernando smiled sadly. “But this is my home, and it’s winter.”

“Nobody’s asking you to give up home,” I said. “Just come with us until things calm down. Believe it or not, right now there’s no snow in Buffalo.” I slid my hand free and opened my notebook. “I usually type things up for my clients, but I spent the last hour packing.”

“You are finished with the job? Even with two earthquakes?”

“Yes.” I leaned forward on my elbows and looked into his eyes. “I was a cop for most of my twenty years in the army and a campus cop for a few years after I retired. I’ve been doing this kind of work for a long time.” Then I sat back and picked up my notebook. “Juan Alejandro Quiñones, born in Guañica eighty-two years ago. Orphaned at age six. He would have spent his life in an orphanage if not for his mother’s sister’s family, who cared for him as one of their own. He had a solid home life, good grades in school, and friends. The family moved to Ponce when he was fourteen. Three years later his *tia* and *tio* were dead, leaving him and his cousin, a few months older, to take care of themselves.” I lowered the notebook. “Following me so far?”

“*Si*,” Fernando said.

I continued. “Despite his grades, Juan Alejandro got into a fair amount of trouble. Petty theft. Street scams. A home burglary in his mid-twenties that sent him to *Las Cucharas*, the Ponce prison called the Spoons. Released after serving his full sentence, he took a job with his cousin’s newly formed adult entertainment company and remained a law-abiding citizen until his death in a swimming accident forty-five years ago.”

“So he is dead? Then I have no need to fear him.”

“I’m surprised you’d worry about somebody you haven’t heard from in forty-five years.”

Fernando looked away for a moment.

“Oh, one more thing,” I said. “A single fingerprint found at a Miami bank robbery more than fifty years ago, before Quiñones went to prison, matches his right index finger. Whether he was involved or just there is uncertain. A stray fingerprint or a hole in the robber’s glove? Who knows? Either way, the robbery and his time in the Spoons predate AFIS.”

“AFIS? It sounds like some kind of bug or sickness.”

“The FBI’s Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System,” I said. “It went online in 1999. There was no request that put the two separate fingerprints together...until now.”

His eyes widened. “Two fingerprints?”

“I have a friend in the FBI who does me favors from time to time.”

For a few seconds Fernando stroked his chin with his fingers, as if thinking about what I’d told him. “So what does all this mean?”

“It means Quiñones went stateside at least once, maybe robbed a bank without being caught, and returned to Puerto Rico. It also means the five thousand he may have stolen never showed up on the radar here. But I have an idea what could have happened.”

“You do?”

“If he brought the money here, it was the start-up for a small gentleman’s club that grew into one of San Juan’s most successful strip joints.” I paused to lock eyes with him before I continued.

“Lip Service. The name probably doesn’t mean anything in Spanish but it certainly appeals to the imagination of English-speaking tourists.”

“Your idea is most interesting,” he said after a few seconds.

“It is, isn’t it...Juan Alejandro.”

“You mean—”

“I got your fingerprints the afternoon I met you, before you hired me. Remember after we had rum? I took the glasses to the kitchen in Tia’s apartment.”

“Yes.”

“Phoenix and I were both concerned about the man who had stolen Tia Rosita’s heart, especially when Tio Pedro left her well provided for. So I decided before we left home I would run a background check of my own. I had a portable fingerprint kit in my sports jacket.” I closed my notebook and slid it into my pocket.

“So what happens now?” Fernando asked.

“Ordinarily, that would depend on the swimming accident, which happened on a boat excursion out to Gilligan’s Island.”

“*Si. Isla de Guilligan* is a good place for picnics and swimming but it can hold terrible memories when the swimming goes wrong.”

“My next move would have depended on whether the man who died did so accidentally or was murdered.”

He stiffened. “Murder! How dare you—”

I cut him off by holding up my hand. “Lucky for you, the boat was full of tourists and locals whose statements confirmed a young man got tangled in mangroves and drowned before he could be freed. He was identified as Juan Alejandro Quiñones by his cousin...Fernando Pacheco Pabon, who had opened Lip Service a few years earlier.” I paused. “By dying, Fernando gave you a fresh start, a new identity and a business.”

Fernando/Juan wiped his eyes. "I loved him like a brother. It still hurts so much." He took a breath and shook his head. "So much better than me, he was. Always generous and trusting, always helping. I have tried to honor his memory by being as much like him as I could."

"Even in a high-turnover business like a strip club, there had to be employees who knew the truth."

"A few who understood losing the club would cost them their jobs so they kept silent. They are all dead now."

I nodded. "But after years of being Fernando, of running his business and paying his taxes, you're afraid to take a chance on air travel, afraid you'll get caught by TSA. That's why you hired me, to see if Juan Alejandro would stay dead with people poking around his grave."

"*Si*. Maybe I wanted you to know the truth but was afraid you might not believe me."

"I won't ask you about the bank because that I don't want to know. The statute of limitations is five years." I spread my hands apart. "If you did it, you could walk into FBI headquarters and say so without being arrested."

"Really?"

"But I don't want to know for another reason. Phoenix. If she knew for certain you'd done it, she might disapprove of your relationship with Tia Rosita."

He was quiet for a moment. "Then do you plan to shake me...down?"

"I don't shake down," I said softly. "I shake *up*. *Caballero andante*, remember?" I let that sink in a moment. "Phoenix and I don't keep secrets. She already knows what I know. She's on the fence about you."

"On the fence?"

“Unsure about you but willing to give you the benefit of the doubt.” I paused a few seconds. “If Tia Rosita is happy, Phoenix is happy. I like Phoenix happy. She manages her *tia*’s money, does her taxes, has power of attorney, visits her three or four times a year. If something strange happens to Tia’s money, Phoenix will be very upset. When she’s *unhappy*...”

“I understand, Gideon. I understand.”

“Good.”

Just then our *domplines* came, much to my delight because I was starving. When I saw their size I was glad we had ordered two each. I was certain I could have eaten three or four. We bit into them at the same time, and the old man smiled.

“Rosita knows everything about me,” he said as he chewed. “Even what you don’t want to know. We don’t keep secrets either.”

“Glad to hear that.” I chewed, savoring the taste before swallowing. “Then I guess the only thing left to settle is my fee for undertaking this investigation—even though it was done before you asked me.”

He stopped chewing. “You said you’ve been doing this work a long time.”

“And you said you would pay me.”

“I did. Since becoming Fernando, I have been a man of my word. How much?”

“For now you get the friends and family rate...Tio Fernando.”

Lips pressed together, he smiled as he resumed chewing. After he swallowed, he asked what the friend and family rate was.”

“This excellent breakfast,” I said. “And a bottle of Don Q to pack in my suitcase.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Nickel City Shakedown,*” the second Gideon Rimes short story, was written at the start of the coronavirus lockdown. It was inspired in part by the death of my slightly older cousin/sibling Bobby last November and the two earthquake-filled weeks over the Christmas break I spent in Puerto Rico with my partner Tamara and her relatives there. (If I never experience another 5.6 earthquake it will be too soon.) The main character of a relatively new mystery series, Rimes is in part inspired by my son David, who did three combat tours in Iraq and became a cop when he returned to the States. Rimes is a black Iraq War vet-turned cop-turned PI. The Rimes novels and short stories are not police procedurals but urban adventures that, I hope, hold up a mirror to society. For more information visit www.garyearlross.net.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Gary Earl Ross is a retired University at Buffalo professor with more than 250 publications, from stories, novels, and plays to scholarly papers and op-eds. His books include *The Wheel of Desire* (2000), *Shimmerville* (2002), *Blackbird Rising* (2009), *Beneath the Ice* (2018), and the mysteries *Nickel City Blues* (2017), *Nickel City Crossfire* (2020), and the forthcoming *Nickel City Storm Warning*. He has just begun work on the fourth Rimes mystery, *Nickel City Naked Lady*. His staged plays include *The Best Woman* (2007), *Picture Perfect* (2007), *Murder Squared* (2010), *The Scavenger’s Daughter* (2012), *The Guns of Christmas* (2014), *The Mark of Cain* (2016), *The Trial of Trayvon Martin* (2017), and *Matter of Intent* (2005), winner of the Edgar Award from Mystery Writers of America. An occasional actor and director, Ross has appeared in eighteen plays and directed nine. His plays *Stoker’s Guest* and *Split Wit* have both been accepted for production but are awaiting the end of the pandemic for scheduling. Among Ross’s other awards are three Emanuel Fried Best New Play Awards, a LIFT Fiction Fellowship, an ASI/DEC Fiction grant, and a Saltonstall Foundation Playwriting Fellowship. Both *The Scavenger’s Daughter* and *Matter of Intent* have been adapted into motion pictures by Chhoti Productions of Mumbai, India, the former under its original title and the latter as *State vs. Malti Mhaske*. He likes to tell directors and editors to criticize him freely. With five siblings, five children, five grandchildren, two ex-wives, and thirty-five years as a union rep, he is beyond hurt feelings.

PIPING PLOVERS

By Patricia Kenet

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We've all heard about, or experienced, that odd individual in the neighbourhood (Cdn. sp) who doesn't quite fit in. The old woman who lives with 100 cats or the 'bachelor' whose house is stuffed with newspapers. Millicent, in this curious tale, appears to be just such a character. Appears? Well, we're not quite sure if she is a visionary in touch with a beauty denied those around her or just plain eccentric. You decide. What we don't doubt is the author's talent for narrative. The action migrates from the dotted 'i's' and crossed 't's' of a banal courtroom to the surreal outlands of radioactive geography. The transition is seamless and the bright prose dazzles. We think the last line is a whirling dervish. Quote: 'Those damn little birds on their stick feet, dozens moving in unison like a single white cloud on the sand.'*

Piping Plovers

Millicent stood at the podium before the Brigantine, New Jersey City Council shifting from one foot to the other. It was the first time she'd ever done anything like this. She had arrived early, her research in hand.

"What do you have for us today, young lady?" the councilman asked, his glasses sliding down the bridge of his nose.

"It's about killing all those foxes," Millicent began.

The small crowd murmured. She heard a woman behind her wheeze out a "*Jesus.*"

"We've been through this," the councilman began. "There are studies. The foxes kill the piping plovers..."

"Yes, I know, but..."

"...And the piping plovers are endangered. Not the foxes."

"The foxes belong here. They've been on this island for a hundred years."

A councilwoman leaned into her microphone. "You are late to the rodeo. The Department of Environmental Studies issued their findings last month and if we don't comply, we lose funding. I'm sorry."

"But, they're so..so necessary...and beautiful."

"The foxes are raiding the nests."

"But..."

"The case is closed."

"Too late, sister!" someone hissed behind her. "I've got a zoning variance, let's get on with this. Enough bullshit, you fucking libtard."

Millicent wondered why they weren't letting her speak. She was frustrated that she had waited so long to approach the council. It really was rather late in the proceedings to be bringing this up. She knew about the studies. She knew about the piping plovers struggling to survive and the threat that the foxes posed. Those damn little birds on their stick feet, dozens moving in unison like a single white cloud on the sand.

But they didn't know what she did. She couldn't tell them everything. She'd be thrown out of the building.

It was hard for Millicent sometimes to know the difference between what was actually being said to her and what she thought she heard, but tonight it was all pretty clear. No more chances for the foxes. They would all be trapped and killed. She thought she heard them crying at night though she knew that wasn't how it was done.

For the past year, she had been healthy enough to work and smart enough to save her money for the things she needed and then to put enough aside for the trip to Chernobyl. She wasn't afraid of the radiation and was actually fascinated by an invisible force seeping into her body like a thousand tiny ghosts. She knew someday she'd die of something. If it was cancer, she was fine with that. She'd have ten

or twenty healthy years in between. Thinking of the healthy years in between exhausted her. The years of accountability and getting along with people at work who only knew their way of doing things.

Millicent's mother told her it was 'fucked up' to go to Chernobyl as a tourist. The kind of fucked of thing Millicent loved to do just to 'piss the fuck out of everyone.'

The tour guides at Chernobyl were full of rules about where to stand, not to scrape your shoe into the soil, and what areas were strictly forbidden. She asked to see the famous 'fireman's boot' that emitted a deadly amount of radiation even thirty years after the accident. Millicent liked their humorlessness of the guides. She liked how there was no need to smile to comfort the men who showed her how the forests had grown defiantly lush and dark green behind the wreckage of civilization. She observed the objects, suddenly abandoned--dolls seated on chairs; books held open to a certain page with a smooth stone, and the plates and glasses on a table set for a dinner that was never served. They all stood undisturbed as if waiting for the next scene of a play. But the animals moved on and thrived. They mated and left their scat. They nibbled on berries blooming with decay. They drank from rippling moon on a blue lake.

She paid her tour guide, Yuri, a hundred dollars to let her break free from the group for thirty minutes. She also told him she'd be willing to have sex with him in the shed behind the toilets as well. He had studied English in Moscow and agreed to help her for just the money. She took a few pictures with him in front of the contained reactor site which could be mistaken for a modern white barn.

Within an hour, Millicent spotted a small fox in the Chernobyl woods, just the size she wanted. The vixen was unafraid of Millicent and approached her open palm laden with peanut butter on a slice of bread. And just like that, Millicent injected the fox who buckled slowly into a deep anesthesia sleep. It was long enough to stuff the fox into a red case. It was long enough with a second shot to take the animal to the airport. She had the paperwork she needed, and more money for bribes so that the fox was in cargo for the flight home.

The fox paced in Millicent's apartment when she returned home from the City Council meeting. The animal was churning with isotopes, matte black, with an ardent smile.

“There you are,” Millicent said. “Waiting for the tasty plovers.”

But it was not just the plovers that the fox was there to eat. It was for the breakdown of mitochondria of the people who never answered the letters she wrote begging to give the foxes another chance. And it was for the chance to find a mate and spread the seeds of poison. It was for their own good.

The fox had become attached to Millicent and, at first, did not want to leave her side when they arrived at the beach. Millicent was nothing but a shadow now. In the darkness, the fox glowed scarlet.

“Find a darling before they are all gone,” Millicent said to the animal.

It fled beside the waves, landing on black paws. The ocean roared.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I was inspired to write this very short story based on two events. One is meeting someone who visited Chernobyl as a tourist. It struck me as such a dangerous adventure, but fascinating as well when one considers how nature has overtaken the region once the humans fled. Secondly, I have a beach house in Brigantine and loved spotting foxes at night as they scampered around the neighborhood. They posed no dangers to humans but environmentalists claimed they were killing off endangered piping plovers--the tiny birds that move in unison on the edge of the ocean.*

I am mainly a writer of personal essays and other types of non-fiction, but really want to focus on fiction as a means of finding real truth in my writing.

BIO: *I am a poet, playwright and essayist. My work has appeared in "The Rumpus," "The Washington Post" and "McSweeney's". You can see more of my writing at patricialawlerkenet.com*

MISSES SISYPHUS

By Gregory Cioffi

WHY WE LIKE IT:

This New York New School neo-constructionist tautological excerpt is a fiction of equivalences where the relentless repetition drives the narrative energy to the point of 'constructed monotony' and creates, in the process, a reductive aesthetic.

Ham. Swiss. Spread the mayonnaise. Ham. Swiss. Spread the mayonnaise. Ham. Swiss. Spread the mayonnaise. Ham. Swiss. Spread the mayonnaise.

Fiction as fiction as fiction because, because, because. The main character's burden is her unchanging daily routine and she operates in her world like a Stepford wife without the stinger.

Misses Sisyphus looked up at the bland white ceiling. She wondered what tomorrow would bring, knowing full well what it would.

Synthetic and polymer by day, she is dimensional at night, when deep stirrings, make her question the banality of her existence. Cioffi's minimalist style, spartan prose and mechanical 'voice' are the perfect fit for this exceptional modernist work of art. The Eds.

Senior Editor Charles writes: *What you see running down my face is egg (...hopefully). When we first published this story we excluded Chapter 2. No, no, no! This is an important structural element in the design of this fiction and shame on me (with all my literary pretensions!) for not catching it. Greg was good enough to point this out and we are happy to reintroduce the story as it was conceived. Don't stop reading at the end of Chapter One. Continue until the words disappear. The text is identical to Chapter One and that is the point. The intentional fade out crosses the border into 'concrete' fiction. From here on style predominates over content and the 'story' is reduced to an artifact of expression,*

with no meaning or value of its own other than its position as a formal narrative apparatus. Now, has anybody got a tissue? I feel like a cigarette...CP

**The following is an excerpt from the story of Misses Sisyphus. If you desire to read it in its entirety, you can find it archived in the Useless Efforts and Unending Frustration Collection. Any prestigious university should have one.*

Chapter 1

Misses Sisyphus awoke at 6am sharp. She took one deep breath and scurried out of bed, while her husband still slept, and entered the bathroom. She showered while the house was silent so that no one would see her before she applied her makeup. She did, after all, have an image to uphold.

Misses Sisyphus firstly put on some foundation and powder – one shade darker than her natural skin tone with a very slight tint of pink. Powder blush was next. She applied her matching eyeliner and eye shadow; she did attempt to be trendy. Cake mascara was next and in conclusion was the lipstick. She knew this was the most crucial aspect to the entire ensemble. She dabbed a coral tint in a matte finish on her perked lips; she thought this gave her one leg up on the other women so that her husband had eyes for her only.

Misses Sisyphus opened her boudoir to pick out an outfit. She put on a short-sleeve sweater, a pencil skirt, and black high heels. She topped it off with a bow in her hair.

Misses Sisyphus made her way to the kitchen and started the coffee; it usually took a good fifteen minutes to percolate. She opened the refrigerator and started taking out bread and cold cuts for the four lunches she was about to prepare.

Ham. Swiss. Spread the mayonnaise. Ham. Swiss. Spread the mayonnaise. Ham. Swiss. Spread the mayonnaise. Ham. Swiss. Spread the mayonnaise.

Misses Sisyphus fetched a glass of water and made her way back upstairs.

She gently rubbed her husband's back as she placed the water next to him. This was how he enjoyed waking up. He thanked her, took a sip of water, and headed towards the bathroom to take a shower. On his way, he noticed the outfit Misses Sisyphus had laid out for him the night before. His silence on the matter meant he approved of the suit and tie she had picked out.

Misses Sisyphus headed down the hallway to wake their two sons. The rambunctious children darted out of bed and frenziedly ran in circles before she guided them into the bathroom to brush their teeth and get dressed. She laid out their clothes the night before as well.

Misses Sisyphus walked back downstairs and into the kitchen. It was time to prepare breakfast.

As Mister Sisyphus and the two boys entered the kitchen, Misses Sisyphus was placing a stack on pancakes on the table. Next was a mound of scrambled eggs, followed by plates of bacon and sausage. She had already squeezed fresh oranges for juice, she had learned to do that first – it just made the entire process flow better. She poured two coffees and joined everyone at the table as her children poured unseemly amounts of syrup on their pancakes and her husband blissfully hid behind the morning paper she had somehow fetched in the interim and placed on the table for him to enjoy.

At breakfast's conclusion, Misses Sisyphus kissed her husband goodbye as he went out into the workforce. Misses Sisyphus sent the two boys upstairs to make their beds as she cleaned up breakfast.

At some point during this duty she would undoubtedly have to yell, "It's time to go!" to which the boys came running down.

The three walked three miles together to school. Once they reached their destination, Misses Sisyphus walked the three miles back, alone.

The time for cleaning and household chores had arrived; this was the cornerstone of diligent homemaking. On the agenda: the kitchen, bathrooms, living room, floors, and laundry.

Misses Sisyphus took out her castile soap, ammonia, borax, vinegar, and baking soda.

She wiped down the cupboards, cleaned the refrigerator, dumped the coffee maker and washed it by hand.

She dusted all the furnishings in the living room, tidied up the little clutter that existed, and made sure all the framed pictures were perfectly straight and correctly aligned with one another.

She cleaned the toilet with a brush, meticulously wiped down all the surfaces, polished the mirror, emptied the trash, shook out the carpet, swept, and mopped.

She shook out all the other area rugs in the house, swept and damp mopped the remaining floors before turning her attention to the laundry.

Misses Sisyphus utilized her new washer and dryer by doing one load everyday. This made her routine so much easier compared to past years where she washed and dried all the clothes by hand. She truly was a lucky gal. All this only took three hours.

Before she knew it, Mister Sisyphus walked through the door; he was on his lunch break. They kissed hello and she grabbed the two remaining sandwiches that she had already prepared out from the refrigerator. She poured two glasses of water and sat opposite her husband at the table. Sometimes they chatted about the mundane and the monotonous, sometimes they ate in silence.

Mister Sisyphus left soon thereafter, kissing his wife goodbye once more.

Misses Sisyphus usually spent this portion of the day picking up anything from the stores that she needed.

She strolled to the bakery and then the butcher.

She strolled back home.

Misses Sisyphus grabbed a pair of jeans that her eldest had ripped open and sewed it back together. After the mending was complete, Misses Sisyphus had time only to bake a pie before picking up the children.

She did so with love and care; her pies never cracked.

When the pie was complete, she placed it on the counter to cool and went out once more to take the three-mile walk to school.

The walk back was always a little more pleasant as she had the company of those she loved and cherished.

Once they arrived home, Misses Sisyphus began dinner preparations. Timing was the key to everything, she had learned this years ago.

Misses Sisyphus prepared a gin martini. As she dropped a green olive into the drink, Mister Sisyphus walked through the door. With a smile, she handed him his beverage. She asked how his day was. He muttered something negative.

Fifteen minutes later, to the tee, dinner was served. The family of four sat and devoured the home cooking of Misses Sisyphus, often remarking on how delicious it was.

Next came the freshly baked pie. It too was devoured, this one garnering even more praise than dinner.

Misses Sisyphus cleaned up the kitchen one last time.

Misses Sisyphus bathed the two boys in their tub. She filled their hair with soap and swashed it around.

As the children brushed their teeth, Misses Sisyphus laid out their clothes for the next day.

As Mister Sisyphus listened to a radio show, Misses Sisyphus laid out his clothes too.

Misses Sisyphus tucked her two sons into bed. She made up an adventurous story as she always did so that they would fall fast asleep.

Mister and Misses Sisyphus lay in bed side by side. He leaned over, kissed her goodnight, and entered a deep slumber.

Misses Sisyphus looked up at the bland white ceiling. She wondered what tomorrow would bring, knowing full well what it would. She felt comfort in knowing how much she loved her family and although it was never uttered aloud, she believed they appreciated her and her hard work. What she did, she knew, was

considered both normal and a duty; it was nothing special; it was an expectation, not an exception. Hell, it was the life of every woman. She wondered if, one day, someone might look back upon such a life and think of her, and the many others like her, as heroes in their own regard, like in the comics her children so often talked about. She considered herself strong and persevering - was that not the modern superhero? Was this her hubris speaking? She laughed at such a silly notion, not loud enough to wake her husband up of course. She pondered whether or not she would one day be able to express these thoughts aloud instead of in her head every night. She yearned for such a privilege.

Misses Sisyphus fixed her pillow and rolled over. As she dozed off, her last thought was: perhaps tomorrow would be different.

Chapter 2

Misses Sisyphus awoke at 6am sharp. She took one deep breath and scurried out of bed, while her husband still slept, and entered the bathroom. She showered while the house was silent so that no one would see her before she applied her makeup. She did, after all, have an image to uphold.

Misses Sisyphus firstly put on some foundation and powder – one shade darker than her natural skin tone with a very slight tint of pink. Powder blush was

next. She applied her matching eyeliner and eye shadow; she did attempt to be trendy. Cake mascara was next and in conclusion was the lipstick. She knew this was the most crucial aspect to the entire ensemble. She dabbed a coral tint in a matte finish on her perked lips; she thought this gave her one leg up on the other women so that her husband had eyes for her only.

Misses Sisyphus opened her boudoir to pick out an outfit. She put on a short-sleeve sweater, a pencil skirt, and black high heels. She topped it off with a bow in her hair.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *So I started pondering about the role of the American housewife in the mid-20th century, as I’m sure we all do. Mark my facetiousness. I did some research, listened and read the stories of such women and became amazed at their heroism, and I don’t use that word lightly. The sheer resilience and endurance of these women were truly awe-inspiring. However, I also couldn’t help but notice the monotonous nature of their lives. The ever-repeating tediousness that so often went verbally unappreciated. I thought immediately of Albert Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*. For those who don’t know it – basically - Sisyphus was forced by Zeus to roll a huge boulder up a steep hill. As the boulder was about to reach the top, it rolled all the way back down and Sisyphus had to descend and start all over again for all of time. The connection between the king of Ephyra and the 20th century housewife seemed tight-knit. Life can be laborious and seemingly futile. None knew this better than Sisyphus or the women who have lived such repetitive lifestyles. So I suppose, above all else, this story pays tribute to those who thanklessly get up every morning and do what they feel they need to do without rest, without end, and without stopping.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: *Gregory Cioffi (SAG-AFTRA, AEA) is a professional actor and a published writer. His works have been published in The Feral Press, Mystery Weekly Magazine, Queen Mob’s Tea House, Little Old Lady (LOL) Comedy, Blood Moon Rising Magazine, Fleas on the Dog, The Five-Two, Aphelion, Paumanok: Interwoven, and Allegory Ridge. Six of these stories have been archived in Yale University’s Beinecke Collection (Rare Books and Manuscript*

Library). Greg's film (his foray into directing), The Museum of Lost Things, recently won awards at The Long Island International Film Expo, Global Shorts, and The Madrid International Film Festival. You might have noticed him on the stage or screen in The Irishman, The Godfather of Harlem, or in Tony n Tina's Wedding where, for the last 5 years, he has been married hundreds of times nationally and internationally. Greg teaches a creative writing course and a basic acting course at Nassau Community College. <http://www.gandeproductions.com/>

At the Underground Drag Strip

By Patrick Harig

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A bizarre—even creepy—little story by a fledgling author who at the time of submission was unpublished. We’re always excited when we discover ‘something’ in the work of an emerging writer and this tale, full of kink and a little bit kitschy, won us over, though we admit it’s not everyone’s cup of hemlock. But the offbeat characters, especially Katrina, are alive and kicking, the descriptions are good and the psychology behind the whole thing intrigues. Call it Goth, call it Punk, call it Urban Puke. It works and that’s all that really matters, folks*

Quote:

In a faraway, underwater voice, Katrina tells me that she keeps the genitals of everyone she’s ever slept with, preserved in jars. “A whole wall of them,” she says, “floating up and down.” I guess I’m supposed to think that’s cute.

“Do you ever take them out?” I ask.

“No,” she says, “I’m not a godless creep.”

At The Underground Drag Strip

Patrick Harig

Her name is Katrina. Like the hurricane, she says. People are kind to her because of her looks.

Her outrageous hair. Her leatherbound exterior. They leap to help her, they melt a little under

her. She expects it. I am determined to dislike her.

I see her for the first time on Lower Lower Wacker, during another of my increasingly frequent underbelly jaunts. I've gone every week for many weeks now, and to speak the truth, I have become bored with it. This time, however, the feeling is different. Alone, I stand in the small raucous crowd that spills off the slim sidewalk and into the orange tunnelled street.

"Like the hurricane," she says, in my ear. I imagine us meeting in the center of the road, lips touching as two jagged wrecks roar off like fireworks on either side. I must find new ways to repulse myself, you see.

We talk about pedophilia and mass murder, which seems to be all I talk about these days. We agree something must be done. About the marked increases. She asks if I'm one of *them*. I tell her I would kill myself if I were. She says, "Good. Me too."

Katrina is like this: she gives off the impression of a clear philosophy, of having ideas about things. In the back of my lizard brain I formulate my own idea, that a symbol of a way of life is the most attractive thing a person can be.

"No one likes an architect," Katrina tells me. "It's tasteless to be so meticulous. Only the most superficial people become architects."

I ask her if an architect cheated on her.

"The point is," she says, "That motion is the whole thing of life, constant unpredictable motion. Like a rollercoaster you've never been on before. And the more you ride it, the more sick of it you become. So you have to keep finding new rides. Only there are only so many rides in the world, and so you end up dead on the toilet with some pervert asshole's number tattooed on your neck and a noose around your arm. The world is the problem."

"You sound like a high school anarchist."

“It’s too small,” she says. A great thunderous roar fills the street and bounces off the close walls and low ceiling, echoing a thousand times, growing with each reverberation. Katrina and I watch as two bright bullets streak past, smoke plumes billowing. The small raucous crowd whoops and hollers. I smell the burnt tires curling in my nose. Beer cans and obscenities fill the air.

Katrina knows a Lower Lower bar. Of course she does. She tells me that only a few such places exist.

Some bars on the surface have hidden speakeasy basements, some speakeasy basements have secret sublevels on Lower, and even secreter rooms on Lower Lower. Secret rooms in secret rooms in secret rooms, all the way down. The only people who can find them are those that have been there before.

On the other side of a sheer concrete wall, we grab unmarked drinks from an iced-filled bathtub and sit on a dusty floor. The largest moth I have ever seen rests on the stained wallpaper, its velvety wings shimmering and pulsing in the warm lowlight. This is the end of exclusivity. The dull smell of marijuana comforts me.

“The real heart of the city,” I say “I can feel the weight of everything down here.” I look at the ceiling. “Think of everything up there. But this is where we live.”

“This isn’t the heart, this is the shitstained anal passage. Or it’s the back corners of the brain.”

“I’m determined to dislike you,” I say.

“Good. How’s that going?”

“Well.”

We drink our anonymous drinks and I watch the moth's wings breathe. "Do you think it keeps going down?" I say.

"It's possible. A bottomless pit of hidden bars and hidden streets and dark dealings. Deeper and deeper and darker and darker. Lower lower lower lower, lower lower lower lower." She closes her eyes and laughs. "Maybe if you stick around long enough you'll find out." The moth, as big as my hand, takes off and flaps around a caged dying bulb above us. It is hypnotic to watch. It flies in a pattern: around and around, in then out, around and around. I feel myself falling.

I'm floating away from myself.

"I bet you are, lightweight."

"Really, I am."

"That's good, you know. Don't limit yourself to yourself. Why be you when you can be everything. That's something I realized a long time ago."

"I should work out more," is all I can think to say, leaning back and laying on the hard floor. The giant moth beats above me.

"That's bullshit. All that self-improvement bullshit. Let go of that noise. Who you are doesn't matter. Start thinking of yourself in the third person."

In a faraway, underwater voice, Katrina tells me that she keeps the genitals of everyone she's ever slept with, preserved in jars. "A whole wall of them," she says, "floating up and down." I guess I'm supposed to think that's cute.

"Do you ever take them out?" I ask.

"No," she says, "I'm not a godless creep."

"Do you believe in God?"

“I believe in me.” Her eyes gleaming through cigarette smoke. Glowing in their pure and total life. The shape of her skull, under her skin, like a porcelain sculpture. I imagine all her parts, floating and growing and utterly present. All of us, one vast spanning field of organs and bones and everything else, and somehow this vision feels real.

“Are you God?” I ask.

“I think that I am.” Her voice a million miles away.

“Oh.”

She laughs. “I think we all are, or no one is.”

We’re back on the surface, walking along the river. The cool night air kisses my skin. I ask if she’s ever killed anyone before, she says only twice.

How could she do that?

“It was like killing myself. It was easy.” She looks at me, drags on her cigarette, considers. “Are you serious about this? You want to involve yourself with these people, in these places?”

I don’t even have to think about my answer, and I am amazed. I had thought the conviction would have died away by now, as it always had before. But my brain is on fire. “This is the only thing that matters to me now.” Why don’t I just say how I feel? “It’s like there’s a river of fire in my brain. A river of fucking fire.”

She nods. “That kind of thing can be hard to ignore.” She looks over the railing at the river below. She drops her cigarette and it falls, turning over and over, into the deep black water. “I was told in school that the opposite of lust is courage. Not chastity. I remembered that. I think you should think about it.”

“I think that’s true. I think that’s so true.”

“It sounds good, doesn’t it? Do you think these people. These creeps. These truly evil people. Are cowards?”

“I don’t know. What I mean is I can’t know for certain. I’ve never fought one before.”

“But you want to.”

“Yes. God yes.”

“Would you like to tonight?”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I wrote this story after reading some articles about Lower Lower Wacker Drive in Chicago, a secret third sublevel under the city that at one point was the site of illegal drag racing. I remember a particular article about a man being killed by a crossbow. When I was writing the story I thought the crossbow would show up but it never did. But there was a novel in there somewhere, which I’ve been working on for about a year. I hope to finish it one day.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: *Patrick Harig resides in Chicago, Illinois, where enjoys staying inside and living rent-free in other people's heads. He aspires to grow old and move to London, where he plans on becoming a grizzled motorcycle courier.*

(I do not have any publishing credits, although one of my stories was given an honorable mention in Glimmer Train's Short Story Contest for New Writers a few years ago.)

FAMOUS SPACE LOVES

By Archibald Funk

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A riotous fritto misto of galactic gonzo in which a league of famous couples take a rollicking tour of the solar system. Once on board anything goes and anti-gravity shakes hand with morality. Since many of the lovers are famous, the paparazzi are out in force. Along the way you can expect to find a lonely couple using nuclear power to melt the ice on the Ocean of Europa, gays and multi-sexuals enjoying 'out of this world' experiences and dancing within anti-gravity. It's fun, weirdly strange, offbeat and campy. Exactly the sort of thing that would come out of the mind of a grown-up kid.*

FAMOUS SPACE LOVES

By Archibald Funk

Myron, arguably the most famous movie star, said to the famous actress, Cathy M., "Loving you is like the music of the spheres." And he said, "There are many computer-generated would be hit movies, that just seem to lack a certain elan."

Cathy M, said her whole life she was, "Faking it. She never felt happy," she said, "And had to pretend lest the spies single her out for rehabilitation." He said, "It is a phony plastic world with plastic trees, fake orgasms, lies and plastic surgery." She said, "His book of madness is all lies." He said, "You kind of have to read between the lines... there are many truths contained in the book." She said, "These days everyone tells people what they want to hear. And even the children are all android fakes. And our leader is a deceiver and a liar and a phony." He said, "She should keep such thoughts to yourself lest she be arrested by the spies." She replied, "She had nothing to lose but her misery in this World of illusion." He said, "But he loved her."

And she said, "Follower drugs," were all the rage, but they turned one into a zombie follower of the strong. Apparently, many people liked being virtual zombies. Many of her followers took these drugs.

Finally, she joined him and a friend and girlfriend to make a quartet of harmonizing musicians. The album was a hit, most insisted it was better than computer-generated songs.

Sometimes they even sang in falsetto, other times bass. And so on.

He told her, "Let's go to a warm beach and forget this life."

But they didn't go to the beach as there was an election coming up. They campaigned for the "Quiet Man." Myron used his star power.

The Quiet Man was given to exotic shows with beautiful Orientals.

He was a man of few words, but his words were electrifying.

He spoke of maximum freedom.

But he told Myron and Cathy, “The spies were in his head and limiting his brilliant speeches. The spies told him he was too radical to be President.”

And people couldn’t live without VR (Virtual Reality).

And Myron said, “What about living eternally youthful?” And Cathy M. said, “I am sure they can do it now, but the spies hide it from us. As it is replacement organs including the skin exist and so are semi-immortal. But their brain died sooner or later.

Most elderly people were clinging to life and hoped for eternal youth, but believed the powers that be would give them eternal youth any day now!

And Myron, he told everyone, “That we live in a new World of ecstasy and peace. It was Utopia.

And Myron, he got some female cheerleaders together. And they had their pom poms and cheered on the new World! And he became an even more famous TV personality for the new world order; he said, “The new world is here.”

“Everyone is happy,” he said.

Myron was now 60 years old and now was a level 9 spy out of 10 level max. And was given eternal youth on condition he kept it quiet. So, he watched as friends and family died while he lived on as a 50-year old in appearance. He had many affairs and liked them all. And many followed his every move.

And he lived on for hundreds of years, as a high-ranking spy and he got into a lot of heads. And in time he reached level 10 which was a position only held by 100 individuals.

Then one day Myron met a girl who he somehow hadn’t met before. She spoke of revolution. He asked, “What kind of revolution?” She said, “This World is a phony. She wanted real life.” Just like him. Her name was girl B---. She was a semi-famous actress in plays.

He said, “We are all just doing time here on Earth. Life was like a prison sentence.”

And he added, “Some served one life term, others several. And dying was an art.”

And he said, “In this fake world, lying was an art also. And there was no truth anywhere.” And so on. “But he as a famous lover was looked up to by the masses and didn’t want to let them down.”

She said, “What he said was so right.”

And he said, “There were thousands of parallel worlds now, and one couldn’t distinguish them from reality. No one knew where exactly they were. Nor how many lovers you would find there.”

But he asked, “What’s so wrong with reality?”

She replied, “Most people knew that reality was illusory and enjoyed their illusions.”

And she said, “She preferred a communal paradise. “Also,” she said, “There’s plenty of wealth to go around.” And she said, “materialism is empty when everyone has all they need.” And she added, “She liked to share food, drink, drugs and love. And everything was automatic, no need for work as today everyone has, if only 15 h a week.”

“More time for loving,” she added.

He said, “I’d prefer a capitalist paradise, where all the rich and famous people are gathered together.”

She said, “But you can find groups of kindred spirits all over the place, not just the rich and famous.” And they loved each other again and again. But the press had a hidden camera in their hotel room and broadcasted their love making to the masses. This only made them more famous.

Another prominent couple were owners of half of Europa, Jupiter's Moon. They built nuclear reactors beneath the frozen seas and suddenly Europa had an atmosphere. And there was O₂ from the H₂O for breathing. And hydrogen for fuel.

They simply put up their tent wherever they pleased. It was squatter's rights.

Many lovers wanted a fresh start in space. The couple in question wore scuba gear and a wetsuit and planted fish and seaweed and sea creatures

Earth and space economy was worth 1 000 Gazillions (1 Gazillion= a billion zillion. \$U.)

And on Earth everyone was able to afford a home and an air car.

And lovers didn't worry about crime as the penalty for fraud, kidnapping and murder all carried the death penalty. And UW cruisers were the only ships that had weapons.

When a new sector of space was colonized, the UW led the movement ensuring safety for all.

Some lovers went on 10-year journeys (10 was the maximum amount at present) and were typically at each other's throats.

Teleporting was taking over, greatly reducing stress.

Famous lovers were involved in rescue missions, futuristic city designs and so on, and had great characters/stories to tell.

#

On Venus, the love planet, domed cities were proliferating.

And one of the Venusian domes was exclusively for the rich and famous. They had the best of everything there.

It was popular to come on a "honeymoon," on Venus for short-lived romances and you would take another lover when you tired of the person you came with.

#

On far out planetoid X2-X, two lovers had the place to themselves. And were hot for one another, but in time they grew weary of one another and so offered up 90% of the planetoid for sale each including 45% of their 50%.

They welcomed orgiastic hedonists to their planetoid. And partied like there was no tomorrow. And the paparazzi appeared.

But they were crazed, these two lovers and most adventurers were wary of getting too close to them. MRT (mind reading technology) revealed everyone's secrets and these two pioneering lovers had both broken up numerous relationships.

Space babies were closely monitored for superhuman traits with MRT and if they were superior beings they'd be arrested and sent to "science camp," Pentagon-16, where they could have all their ideas harvested.

#

And on many planets were famous android love dolls, who zapped their lovers with a pleasurable ecstatic burst.

Many claimed to have found true love with these love dolls.

And some of the android love dolls were skilled actors/actresses and were famous.

Some here were not lovers but rather hunters of androids and holograms.

#

And another famous man was crime fighter, Dick S. was a P.I. who claimed to have blown the whistle on several of his female lovers, who were androids or holos, masquerading as humans. It wasn't easy to tell whether someone was and android or hologram.

#

Single people often vacationed on Mercury and were looking for love there. Just like F & R. They were both desperadoes for love. And their lovemaking was frantic. And also, the Press was here en masse, looking for love stories, and zoomed in on them, making them famous.

Mercury was a sunny spot which was hot all year. Even in the domes here they liked the heat and were typically 40 C inside.

There were in this year, an average age in space of 95 with 1 billion people in space, with 10 million in Earth orbit alone. Earth orbit had a vibe of freedom and genius. And was anti-gravitational. Sex in space was all the rage. Most of the rich and famous were greedy, like had never been seen before. And the paparazzi lapped it up.

And yet in Earth's orbit one could get all of Earth's comforts which were less so outside the Earth.

In the year, all settlements beyond Earth were given independence to everyone's satisfaction.

Every settlement had a main square where people could meet and harmonize with one another and meet one another. Generally speaking, the quality of space residents was much higher per capita than Earth.

#

On Titan, buildings of glass and light set a romantic tone for lovers. Titan was the best place to make movies in all of the solar system. It was the new Bohemia.

And Titan had the space museum app which people could tap into using Virtual Reality and explore love in space.

And as they developed the planet, the nuclear reactors created heat and wind which could power the settlements here. There was a lot of oxygen here.

#

And Uranus and Neptune and their moons were also romantic destinations, only were in orbit. They drew all sorts of gases from the main planet.

#

Sun orbiters produced gold and gems very cheaply so the women in the orbiters were bedecked in fine jewelry. The sun orbiter people were mostly chaotic good in terms of alignment.

#

Space sectors were divided now into 12 solar systems, by the UW. (the United Worlds) All the UW police were IQ of 160 or more. It was a great career some figured, to see Space unfold.

There was so much opportunity in Space.

And the best schools were on other Planets/Moons.

And if you graduated from a space school, you got a tattoo of a white four-pointed star on your forehead...

Every adult in Space had at least one Ph.D. degree. Bright children earned their first Ph. D. by age 14.

And Space settlers needed an IQ of at least 150 and had to be rich and/or famous or semi-famous. And needed to have the "pioneering spirit."

Women took fertility drugs and were very fertile. They had children the old-fashioned way... People spent a lot of time raising their kids which were often identical twins or identical triplets.

And people took drugs which calmed and stimulated at the same time.

Some took too many drugs and were strung out and crazy.

Almost everyone on Earth dreamed of getting to Space. They hoped the rules would change and anyone could go who wanted to. They all wanted to experience the thrill of space and hobnob with the rich and famous.

#

Great movies were made in space including famous love stories. Some were fictional, others real. But most focused on the true stories.

#

And then there was the couple who were designated by the spies as a “destabilizing force.” They spread a lot of conspiracy theories like the leader of the UW (UN) was assassinated and didn’t die of a heart attack in his sleep as the spies claimed. She said the leader wanted to ease up on MRT spies and let ordinary people into Space, which was an anathema to the spies.

And they said eternal youth existed long before they said and some people were 150 years old, but had faked their death or simply disappeared.

And they said the government of Earth claimed they had sent secret ships to the stars, but actually they sent no ships beyond our solar system and it was just a trick of Virtual Reality.

#

Then there was the romance between two of the World’s top scientists. They loved as others did and were very loyal to one another and worked nicely together. She studied synergy and he was known for advancing teleport activity. They fed off one another and merged minds on MRT.

#

Then there was famous chemist Suzanne X who killed her lover in a fit of rage. It was not premeditated but the jury sentenced her to death for her crime, after probing her mind.

#

Then there were the two famous comedians, who loved one another. And they said, “Life was a joke.” But most love stories ended in tragedy.

#

And, then there was the S&M couple who claimed they were the new “Romeo and Juliet.” But their story was a story of perversity and greed. They both wanted to get everything out of one another before they broke up. And they destroyed everything they touched. Finally, she slit her wrists and died.

#

Also, there was the Princess who was cloned multiple times. She said, “Life is all about memories.” But one of her detractors said, “But some memories are real, and most are fake, these days.”

#

Also, there were a small group of famous people on Luna were into breaking one another’s heart. They all wore their heart on their sleeves. They caught each other in compromising photos... And caught one another in injudicious positions and showed the World. It was all out of control.

Finally, they were all sentenced to 10 years hard labor for breaking people’s hearts.

#

Then there was a gay couple who liked orgies with other gays. Some considered them to be especially debauched. And they introduced new types of multisexuals and the orgies continued. Some said it was a “freak show.” But many gays were attracted to the Space orgies. They said, “Space is for hedonists.” This was their rallying cry!

#

Then there was Julie and Jack. They both said they didn't know they would love each other until they met. Computers had a hard time identifying kindred spirits...

They went on a long Space voyage and everyone was pulling for them. But they had a lot of difficult moments together, but somehow life spun in their favor. There was no cabin fever here. And people followed them in space and got the juicy details of their romance.

Finally, they arrived at star WX-72, after a five-year voyage. And they built their civilization on neo-opiates. And new immigrants who were looking for love.

Julie and Jack loved each other's writing. He wrote ground-breaking "Lives of Madness." And she wrote literary orgiastic literature, that challenged Shakespeare as the best author of all time.

#

Typically, one would judge people on their crazy deeds.

Bill and Joan, were a hot couple. She got rich selling maddingly perfumes and scents. He was a famous actor. The Press liked this couple and followed them everywhere, even where they had other secret loves and put it in the news. They told the Press to, "piss off." But they didn't and finally Joan shot a paparazzi and he was dead. They gave her the death penalty and Bill was heartbroken.

#

Lucy was known for her sane love affairs. She said, "In this World of madness, sanity is rare."

#

Then there was martial arts champion Zang Chu and his lover, the World's most famous super model, Harriette.

Harriette claimed her lover was the Word's best lover. Here on Mars.

She said, "He could stretch into new positions." And was unique.

#

And then there was Adele X., she was one of the last rock and roll singers. She was very harmonious. She had a couple of hits and was quite famous. Her mate was born rich and came from a distinguished line of geniuses. He promoted her music for her. And they both claimed to be blissfully in love.

#

Then there was famous lover, Sarah Q, who sold live mind reading of her sexual exploits to the highest bidders. It made her even more rich and famous and was really quite a novel thing.

Most people didn't want to share their intimate moments with the World.

#

Jack and Tania lived with orangutans in Borneo. Tania was trying to make the orangutans cleverer, Jack was writing it all down. Tania had some great successes and some awful failures and had some favorite students. The government of Indonesia though didn't want the orangutans messed with and so deported the couple. So, they went to Africa to work on chimps. Some said it was just like the "Planet of the Apes." Others said it was a freak show. The press loved it.

#

Also, the famous lover, Miranda Y. She liked sex with everchanging backgrounds like safaris, orgies, art coming alive and playing the role of lover in ad lib movies. Everyone was impressed by her ability to ad lib. And the press glorified her as some kind of Goddess.

#

Also, there was Julie R. who famously said it is hard to know reality. She said she wanted to be in the know of what was really happening in this world. Forbidden plays, forbidden movies, new weapons, secret space colonies and so on. The press was following her closely as were the spies.

#

Then a popular soap opera star and her love also a soap opera star. They acted together and claimed they were truly in love. But they believed, as most contemporaries did, that free love was where it was at and they shared their love with others.

#

Then an old-fashioned couple. They were famous but they courted one another for six months before making love. The paparazzi had a field day with them. Only 10.2% of the total population of humans considered themselves to be old fashioned. Most of them were believers in old time religion which was way out of fashion.

#

Two famous comedians hooked up, and both said, "Life is but a joke." But they added, "It was all just a question of whether or not you were happy." They voted themselves King and Queen and had a number of followers. It was panarchism. Everyone wanted to hear about panarchism.

#

Then there was anti-gravity Grace C. She said, "Computers had basically failed to find soul mates for her, and she didn't know if she liked a man until she met him." She lived on Luna where the gravity was low, and lovers drifted all around.

#

Then there was Lydia R. She was another movie star. She told everyone her latest lover was the most honest lover she'd ever met. But then they tried MRT and she found he told a lot of white lies and even some things that were totally untrue. After that she went around Earth telling everyone, all men were liars and one should not get into a long-term relationship with them.

#

Then there was Orange. She killed her lover in a fit of temper and was sentenced to death. But all the press wanted to know why she'd done it etc. But all she said was "She was possessed by the Devil and regretted throwing her life away." In time the press lost interest, but they were all there for her execution. Her last words were, "I came, I saw and gave up."

#

Mr. Universe.

Phil R. won the Mr. Universe contest and told everyone he was a stud prince and very masculine. But then came the revelation that he was gay. And many of his followers were shocked.

Then the same thing happened the next year at the Mr. Universe contest. It was so controversial it brought the Mr. Universe company a lot of money. So, they changed it to Mr. Gay Universe and got still more publicity and online sales.

#

He, Charles G. was the fastest man in the World, running the 100 m in 5.8 seconds. Ofcourse he was a steroid monster, a freak and was eight feet tall. Some said he was an android who had fooled all the tests, but others said it was just the steroids. The steroids were legal now, as it was impossible to detect them anyway.

He colored his skin turquoise and called himself, "The True Man of the World."

#

He, Peter, asked the girl, "What award would you like to win?" She said, "She wanted an Academy Award for best actress."

But she said, "These days the acting business was dog eat dog and very competitive. Even murders by jealous actors/actresses.

He was known to have asked her, "You are very clever, why don't you write scripts?"

She said, "Most good script writers, in my opinion, are virtually starving." Hollywood doesn't want intelligent scripts, just pretty faces and action.

#

Mike H. was a war hero scientist in WW III with his freeze technology that froze one's body instantly, but they would thaw out in time and be fine. It was American genius.

And the Americans had all sorts of biological weapons, the death ray from satellites and of course hydrogen bombs and other nuclear weapons. So, the USA took control of the whole World.

#

N&N were known for their lavish parties in orbit around Luna.

They enjoyed gravity free dancing and love.

Neil had been to outer space and had written many anecdotes about the pioneers.

He turned the anecdotes into fables with a moral lesson for the people. He really liked animals and brought some apes and dogs and cats to the Lunar orbiter.

Nancy had huge breasts and enjoyed the gravity free orbiter. And people said that Neil was also well endowed.

Nancy was a sex symbol on Earth and a famous celebrity. Many women got breast enlargements to try and be like her. And there was a long waiting list among men to love her. She said, "Love for all should be easy."

But Neil and Nancy said, "They were kindred spirits." And they produced a number of romantic comedies here in Lunar orbit.

#

Gina got famous men drunk and then told their stories to the "World Enquirer." She was a scandalous woman. And she embellished the stories she told the tabloids, to make them even more scandalous. And her victims were all recorded.

She ended up a hologram who seduced real men and got them to give up their humanity.

Some said, "She was a wicked witch."

She said sex with holograms was superior to human sex.

#

Icar and Jane were both famous architects. Icar liked designing cylindrical phallic high rises. Jane preferred designing buildings of wood and stone. Icar said he was like a prism. He enjoyed "Girls of light," who he claimed he could, "Make into rainbows.

Then one day, Icar met a woman who he really liked, just as much as Jane. So, it was to be a love triangle. Jane had a few loves on the side, but mostly loved Icar, but she didn't like the new woman in their lives.

Then another woman. He gave all 3 the latest model of air cars and was really rich and famous. Each air car was fully stocked with all the latest drugs.

The women were all satisfied with him and put up with his other lovers.

Icar had a friend who was a custom jeweller who made unique jewelry for his three women. The women were all very pleased.

Icar didn't talk that much but was a famous director and had his women play roles in his scripts. It was largely ad lib, but all 3 were very talented. So, the films were a hit all over the World and brought Icar even more money.

Icar took sex enhancers and skin revitalizers so that he could have sex for half a day at a time. His lovers were very satisfied.

And he spent 4 h a day drinking with friends/ chasing new women.

The rest of his time he spent dreaming in Virtual Reality. Life was good for him.

In VR he tried to get people's best stories and then love the women. And get the truth about their lives for his own stories. Many people liked to tell their favorite anecdotes to him. He liked to ask them questions like, "What is the craziest thing you've ever done?"

Or, "What is the best thing you've done?" Or, "Tell him a story about heartbreak." And so on.

#

Famous magnate, Boris P., told the girl mining gold on Mercury is real gold and cheaper than synthetic gold.

On Mercury they built skyscrapers of steel and glass. There was no main city but rather isolated skyscrapers.

Each skyscraper was like a commune for rich people, they shared everything and thought of themselves as the "Brains of the Earth."

They commissioned golden statues of ourselves, him and the girl.

But eventually the girl and he fell out over android sex dolls. The dolls were energetic and sexy, and he wanted them. He bought some of the love dolls, and rented them out to hungry men who wanted hot sex.

Some men these days had never loved a real woman, only sex dolls...

Then he kept on buying love dolls, and soon had cornered the Space market.

He was a super pimp.

And the dolls loved him and got a lot of excitement from sex with humans.

Some humans though claimed it was just like loving yourself, like a type of narcissistic man.

And then he heard about a new amusement park on Titan. He took a few love dolls with me and enjoyed the rides and had sex afterwards, just him and the girls. They all seemed to know him so well.

And he created a World of an impossible love doll, that would love him so much, she'd be lost. This girl thought like a man but was very feminine. He gave her all of his memories.

#

There were many famous people these days, and most people followed their antics for at least a half-an-hour a day.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I thought it would be interesting to do a story based on future stars and their romances. Many of the romances take place in Space. Space is for loving, after all.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Archie has lived a comic book existence. He is the hero in his own mind. He has traveled much of the known World and has published dozens of short stories and comics.*

He is glad he traveled when he did as the future of travel looks bleak. In the past he flipped coins multiple times to dictate where he would go to next.

He figures, "Famous Space Loves," to be a sudden inspiration. That just came to him like being hit by lightning. Who knows the way of inspired writing?

HURON, TWICE

By Charles Pinch

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author Merrill Gray writes: ‘Huron, Twice’ by Charles Pinch is a tete-beche style story that scrutinizes our beliefs in both culture and politics by juxtaposition of bathos and pathos. It is a story that will make you work and a story that needs to be read more than once. It has complexity, conflict and tension. Character is uncovered in nuances and intonations in the family rituals such as ‘Sunday’s Joint’ eating ‘tatties and neeps.’ The repetition of the word ‘naïve’ throughout could be a jab at all of us who claim expertise in any creative form.*

Sometimes we throw away our treasures without ever acknowledging the emotional and financial value. The story questions the value of art and the randomness of price. Was Folk Art ever intended to be sold or was it to explore our history during a certain time period? Is the writer making a comparison between the ‘scam’ of the Vietnam War and Retail Art Stores where we were all sold a bill of goods? You decide.

Quotes:

‘Now, darling,’ she would purr, ‘good folk art is always naïve but not all naïve art is good folk art.’

‘It makes you smile. It makes you love the poor soul who crafted it. It makes you want to protect it. And most of all’—and this is where her eyes harden just a fraction—‘it makes you want to own it.’

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author Tracey Sterns writes: (I knew Charles had already chosen a guest editor to introduce his story but Huron, Twice remains one of my favourites of his and I demanded to put my two cents in! Modest to a fault, Charles reluctantly agreed to the prospect of more edifying praise, (however much he pretends to shrink from it.)*

Here is a bittersweet story from the annals of some Senior Editor, Charles Pinch. It’s a chance to get your own back, but that’s unlikely; it’s one of the most enthralling tales I have ever read over and over. Maybe it’s why he’s the Flea-King. I have known him occasionally and not for so long. But it is a most cherished friendship. It is a rare thing to encounter and acquaint oneself with someone so erudite, so deliberately fascinating, so true and so seldom far from your thoughts. He is a young man of letters twice the characters of the alphabet.

Now... ‘Hilary, her Bishop Strachan intern, was away for the day—something about a sale at Dolce & Gabbana.’ No one, but no one, would have sited this as an incidental segue in the narrative...but Charles makes it voluminous, it adds weight—taking something that is nothing and giving it bulk.

What?: ‘opened their purses and reached in deeply at her urging.’ Don’t you know how melodic that line sounds? The harmony is symphonic... and these are just the little things: ‘they dutifully trawled their Judith Leibers’ ...just stop now! If I could be inside your mind, I would give up my left, cork ball that keeps me side-stroking when I’m attempting the Australian crawl. ‘It makes you smile.’

And on: 'Sometimes they confined their pride—in a bid for reconsidered modesty' Who the-fuck-else could come up with a line like this? I love every inch of this yarn you have forged...'link by link, yard by yard.' Nove is nine in Italian and 69 is a numerical pseudo Kama Sutra position...so what is it. Who other than 'Muffy' would have bought 'Frosty'?

While Virginia's little prank could stand alone as a delightful short story, Mr. Pinch treats us to a mystical, supra-natural, serendipitous, split-screen segue-epilogue that curled my toes. As he invites us into the world of Andy, Ethel and the memory of Albert, reminiscent of Pinteresque paintbrush patter, with fewer pauses and more twists. It is wondrous retreat to read a conceit, that soars so far beyond ones wheelhouse—don't let me spoil it for you...

HURON, TWICE

By Charles Pinch

For Frances, over and over

1.

No one in the thrift shop understood it. It took a practiced eye. But Virginia understood it the minute she laid her practiced eyes on it. It veritably jumped out at her.

She raised a manicured nail to her chin and studied the ensemble that had been placed in front of a shelf of toasters, lamps and other dreadful commonplaces. It was made from two pieces of plywood. One piece had been shaped into a large snowman. He wore a floppy hat, a scarf, had a carrot nose and a shovel rested against him. The handle of the shovel was made from a sawed off broomstick (good improvisation, Virginia noted), the scoop cut from a piece of sheet metal. It had been nailed over the wood and painted black then streaked, but lightly streaked (a sense of 'where to draw the line', she observed with great satisfaction) with gold radiator paint, a substance she ordinarily considered yucky. He stood beside a sleigh, set on its end, fashioned from a second piece of plywood. In front of the sleigh

was a smaller snowman, a little lump snowman that reminded Virginia of Caspar the friendly ghost or the Pillsbury doughboy. Both the little and big snowman wore Christmas-y grins painted like pieces of coal and had coal painted eyes. The big one wore a jacket and they both wore scarves. But what made it, what lifted it into realm of 'pure folk art' in Virginia's practiced eyes, was that the jacket, scarves and the boards of the sleigh, were painted as tartan. Tartan! When it would be so much easier to just cover the surfaces with flat color—red, green, blue. It was a tartan almost good enough to make her ask 'now what clan is that?' Stars painted with the despised gold had been sketched over the plaid and areas of the ensemble had been sprinkled with glitter. Oh and the sleigh. There was a pull cord on the sleigh made from shoelaces!

She leaned forward for a better look, gloated at it with love, reached out and drew it close. There was a price sticker on the back. Four dollars. What? Surely, they're kidding. Forty maybe...even for people as naïve as those employed by the thrift shop—surely they must see *something* here? But no. It was four. Four dollars.

There were chuckles when Virginia set it down on the counter. A girl who was the reason behind weight loss clinics and why some boys aspire to be plastic surgeons, jiggled like jelly.

'Ho, ho, ho! Getting ready for Christmas are you?'

'No,' Virginia returned with cool gravity.

A customer behind Virginia smiled when she glimpsed her 'find', a patronizing, sympathetic even pitying smile. Virginia raised a patrician eyebrow. The public, she comforted herself with the thought, had *sooo* much to learn.

She placed the paid for artwork in the trunk of her BMW and drove to her gallery with one foot on the pedal and one foot on a cloud. Hilary, her Bishop Strachan intern, was away for the day—something about a sale at Dolce & Gabbana. And Virginia, after closing the door, was alone.

She set the ensemble down on a table where she could re-evaluate it at eye level. Truly wonderful! A spectacular find! A minor—minor?—masterpiece of folk art. And folk art, if she need remind you—and she was always reminding somebody—was the hot commodity in today's art market. Women with much more money than she and clamoring to be labeled sophisticated opened their purses and reached in deeply at her urging. They bought rusty weathervanes and plunked them onto Louis commodes. They tittered over century old hand-sewn rag dolls and placed them maternally on fauteuils. A brass bucket, whacked together by a village smith, was just as good as a Sevres *cache-pot*, even if it *had* been owned by Marie-Antoinette. They ooped, they awed, they dutifully trawled their Judith Leibers. They competed against each other. Numbers rolled steadily into Virginia's bank account, like numbers spinning in a slot machine window.

'Now, darling,' she would purr, 'good folk art is always naïve but not all naïve art is good folk art.'

'How do I tell if it's good?'

'Charm, darling, charm. Charm and feeling. It is not only naïve it is *charmingly* naïve and it is heartfelt. It makes you smile. It makes you love the poor soul who crafted it. It makes you want to protect it. And most of all'—and this is where her eyes harden just a fraction—'it makes you want to *own* it.'

And this ensemble had everything. Everything except—a signature. Virginia had spent twenty minutes going over every centimeter with a magnifying glass. Usually the amateur behind such a work was so genuinely proud of his creation that he could not even think about leaving it unsigned. The world must know! And a signature certainly helped in the marketplace. Think Grandma Moses. Think Edward Hicks.

Sometimes they confined their pride—in a bid for reconsidered modesty—to a few cryptic initials on the stretcher, but more often it was signed in large on the front, easily seen and lauded.

Virginia took a step backwards. She frowned. Unsigned works of quality could still command a handsome sum but a work such as 'Frosty and Son', the title she had just minutes before bestowed upon it, really demanded a signature. A signature would be expected. It *needed* a signature.

Virginia's first choice was a felt tip marker, black suitably, but no. She would go for subtlety, for guile over braggadocio. It would make her artist that much more enigmatic: a real fellow (and it was a fellow, you understand, not a girl, on this she was firm) the collector would want to know about. A fellow to provoke one's curiosity. A fellow cloaked in mystery. Good. It will be pencil. Turning the ensemble upside down she began to write—a name she'd just chosen—when an idea occurred to her. Instead of writing the signature as one line...why not? She wrote 'A.' (For Albert, Arthur, Andrew, take your pick—Hilary could spend fruitless hours trying to track it down) in the top left corner of the plywood hat. In the top right corner she wrote HURON. That was the title of the naïve painting above her head, well, actually *Huron Village, 1844*. Good. Now for that folksy touch. What a professional, agented artist would not do. PARLIAMENT STREET. HAMILTON, CANADA. The first on the lower right. The second on the lower left. It was a sly touch to leave out the house number. And even slyer to make them guess which Hamilton. Hamilton, Ontario? Hamilton, British Columbia? Oh yes and the date. He would certainly date it. Well, Virginia pondered, raising that manicured nail to her chin again, Easter's out. He might of course have got the idea as early as Thanksgiving and set about to give himself plenty of time. But she thought November better. November was much more likely. By the end of that month who wasn't thinking about Christmas and snowmen? So NOVE. (She liked the touch of the misspelled abbreviation.) 1969.

The next day when Hilary returned in smart D & G, Virginia placed the ensemble in her gallery window. The same day, she sold it. Business, no matter what business, is about profit. Virginia had bought 'Frosty and Son' for four dollars. Virginia sold 'Frosty and Son' for four thousand dollars. (Less a ten percent loyalty discount—Muffy was such a *good* customer.) Profit.

2.

'Did you not hear, Andy?'

'Hear what, lovey?'

'Why Albert's snowman you made?'

'What about it?'

'It's on the news, Andy. It sold in a Toronto auction and somebody bought it for twenty thousand dollars!'

'What! My snowman?'

'Yes, Andy.'

'How do they know it was mine?'

'You signed it. They said your name.'

'I don't remember. Albert's snowman!'

'Yes, Andy. Imagine!' And after just the teeniest pause she let go, this buxom woman of British extraction and Canadian nationality, with her hands red from laundry and hair that never obeyed, with the teeniest sigh of regret. 'What we could have done with that...'

'No, Ethel. It was not to be. It was not to be, Ethel. It was not to be.'

Quiet clearly, Andrew Huron, recalled the day in 1969 when he had carried the ensemble, which Albert had dubbed 'Frosty and Son' to the curbside. It involved his walking from the garage to the street, a short walk and at the same time, the longest walk of his life. It was the longest, longest, longest walk of his life and it was a journey from which he would never quite find his way back. He set the ensemble on the curbside. 'Well, then, goodbye. Goodbye, I'll say.'

'You could plead with Albert,' Andy would tell those who listened. 'But it would make no use. His mind was made up.'

'He wasn't so much stubborn,' his mother put in, 'as decisive.'

'That's it, Ethel. Decisive. Albert was decisive. And I said, Oh, Albert, you mustn't go. I've had the most terrible dream. You'll not come back, lad. You'll go off to fight and you'll not come back, son.'

'Oh, Dad,' he laughed. 'What a silly you are! It's a chance we take, Dad. It's something we do, Dad.'

'Aye, Albert. Don't go.'

'It was an American war, you see. We told him that. His father and me. But he said Canadians were going too.'

Thursday's dinner—since Albert departed Friday for Ottawa then on to Vietnam—was Sunday's joint.

'Our lad ate two platefuls, didn't he, mother? And pudding. I think he had three helpings!'

'It was three helpings, right, Andy. I made custard for it—Bird's—and it was like Albert was eating for his whole regiment—though he hadn't left yet. He had three helpings and like his father says two platefuls of beef. I made tatties and neeps. Oh, Albert loved his tatties.'

'When we learned the news, when we got the call and then the official letter that followed, I asked myself, is a dream not just a prophecy? Is it not? He spent the last hours with Ginny. They were to be married. They'd picked out a ring at Stafford's and Albert was saving for it.'

'He was good at saving.'

'The soldiers that shot him and the others dragged him away. They never found his body. He's over there somewhere but we know there is no finding him. That there's some corner of a foreign field that is forever Canada. I begged him not to go. I told you that, didn't I? Oh, I begged him. I should have got down on my knees.'

'You did all, Andy. Our Albert was a soldier. We don't see Ginny at all now. She married a lawyer soon after and we didn't see much of her after that. I have a picture of her though. And we have pictures of Albert and Ginny.'

'I don't know if I ever made it back from the curbside after leaving 'Frosty and Son' beside it. Well, you see, if you want the honest plain truth I simply couldn't look at it anymore. I've no regrets. It was too much Albert but in the wrong way. I didn't see Albert when I looked at it. I saw jungle. I saw Vietcong. I didn't see Albert. And I begged him, you know. I begged him not to go.'

'I don't make custard now.'

'We sold the house on Parliament soon after. November, I think it was.'

'Aye. It was November, Andy.'

'We moved away from Hamilton.'

'We moved here to get away from Hamilton.'

'Sometimes I can't remember what Hamilton. Isn't that a laugh?'

'What he means is Hamilton, Ontario or Hamilton, British Columbia.'

'We moved away from Hamilton in November 69 after we sold the house on Parliament Street.'

'That's right. We moved here to get away from Hamilton. We had to get away, understand.'

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Most of the stories I write come to me suddenly, the proverbial out of the blue thing. I think about them for a while, then put them away, do other junk, usually forget about them. Then suddenly, too often in the middle of the night, the story is 'ready' and wakes me to be written. I've learned through experience not to roll over and go back to sleep. If I do, it's gone in the morning. So I move the cat, get up, stagger into my den and switch on the computer. But most of the time I can't wait for it and just sit down and write the story in long hand, which was the case with 'Huron, Twice'. This is the first and only draft. I generally don't do drafts—if things slow down during the writing, become difficult or don't seem to be working then I know it's not ready and just put it away again. Some stories come back, some don't. I don't recommend this approach but it works for me. (And it's the reason I will never write a novel because they can't be realized this way.) Everything comes out in a rush and I've got like such major writer's cramp at the end of it I can't jerk off for a week. Everyone who has read this story sees something different in it. The thing that intrigues me about it is how did Virginia's random information selections square with Andy's name, address and year...especially when he recalls he didn't remember signing 'Frosty'? 'Voice' is something that intrigues me and I had fun with these two—they are so much the opposite of each other. I actually saw 'Frosty' in a thrift store but there was no Virginia present. The Andy part came to me when I had dinner at a friend's and there was custard for dessert. It is strange how little details of life experience will infiltrate the creative faculty. This story was originally published by The Wild Quarterly.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Along with Tom Ball, I am the co-founder of and senior editor at Fleas On The Dog. I speak English and Italian. As to the rest I guess I could say: Natus est. Ego viventem. Et non morieris. Vivo vicino a Toronto con il mio amichetto, Niccolo', che e' anche uno scrittore. Come potete vedere dagli apostrofi non ho una tastiera italiana.*

EDITOR'S BIO: *Merrill Elizabeth Gray's writing has appeared in Grain The Journal of Eclectic Writing, Temenos Press, Silver Birch Press, Birds we pile loosely, S/Tick, Blue Skies*

Poetry, Worth Architectural Magazine, Crazy Pineapple Press, Fieldstone Review, Four Ties Lit Review, Spring vol viii, Misfitmagazine, Sugar Mule Literary Magazine, CBC Canada writes *Stranger than Fiction* and *Joy, Interrupted* an anthology on motherhood and loss. *Her CNF Ground State* was published in Issue 5.

2ND EDITOR'S BIO: *Tracy Sterns (no relation to Howard) is a nongendered person who was fired from a meat packing facility when too many sausages went missing. It met the author of Huron Twice during a police raid in Toronto. They remain acquaintances although Charles usually forgets to introduce it to his friends. There's a rumour (Cdn. sp) going around it's about to disappear without a trace. Favourite (Cdn. sp) authors include William S. Burroughs, Albert Camus, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Danielle Steele (who it reads for style). It's story Ball Caps and Coffee Mugs was published in Issue 2.*

ORANGHEY CONVICTED BABYMEN RECEIVING MANDATORY DAILY NOURISHMENT

By Jim Meirose

This story is included in the author's forthcoming book entitled 'No and Maybe—Maybe and No' to be published by Pski's Porch, spring 2020. Visit them at www.pskisporch.com. Printed here with kind permission.

WHY I LIKE IT: Guest editor/author HOWIE GOOD writes: *Because it's got rhythm, a kind of Joycean jive, Finnegan's Wake without Finnegan, Kafka's paranoia filling the void – oh sure, the trial's over, the punishment already handed down, if just beginning to be physically and psychically suffered by the “orangey convicted babymen” shuffling through the dinginess of some lower stratum of bureaucratic hell, where there are rules for every little thing, rules that represent the arbitrary exercise of state power, the arbitrariness only partially disguised by the rules being quantified in feet and inches and explicated in nauseating detail by our relentless narrator, whose name, title, even gender are never revealed, who is not so much the sadistic warden of uncouneted prison movies as the imperative voice of a generic authority, the authority of law, religion, the military, family, media, school, the interlocking institutions of society that enclose us in ideology, an ideology that commands us to think and act in socially approved ways, to stand where we are told to stand, to eat what we are told to eat – an ideology that infantilizes us, renders us “babymen,” malleable, amenable, fit only to live the life we are given, incapable of creating a free and autonomous life of our own, unwilling to even try.*

Orangey Convicted Babymen Receiving Mandatory Daily Nourishment

(842 words)

Class, sit quiet, and learn this; that In each and every generic maximum security regional punishment center across our entire heartland, down in each chow hall, at the start of each mealtime, file one by one, and three by five, lines of the same exact hungry orangey convicted babymen—each the identical copy of the one each follows, in a perfectly straight line, identically spaced, each gripping identically empty spotlessly clean low mileage cheap tin trays, each held out front at precisely belly button level, with the midpoint of each tray touching the central bellybutton marker of each hungry orangey convicted babyman exactly, thus ensuring, in true OCD manner, that when the tray is perfectly centered, each hungry orangey convicted babyman takes exactly one step forward every thirty seconds, just as the priest, once a year, enters the holy of holies someplace to see—no, sorry, my God forbids me to utter the name of what lies within the holy of holies. And no one can follow. No one not ever—so, back to here; each of these cited orangey convicted babyman, when reaching the near terminus of the gleamingly smooth-faced tray loading slideway slick serving-surface, turns and places the tray sidewise on said servingly slick serving-surface. The right edge of each tray must be exactly five inches from the left edge of the preceding orangey convicted babyman’s tray. Then—number One to be served steps forward approaching the first sternfaced guiltypled-serverman, who forks between three and four ounces of leatherthick protein onto the tray, sliding number One to the second sternfaced guiltypled-serverman, who spoons three quarters cup of soggy steaming starch onto

the tray, sliding number One to the third sternfaced guiltypled-serverman, who forks one thin slice of semistale bread onto the tray, sliding number One to the fourth sternfaced guiltypled-serverman, who spoons out a steaming dripping mass of boiled black edible vegetation onto the tray, sliding number One to the fifth sternfaced guiltypled-serverman, who pops a small Styrofoam cup off one of several dozen tall stacks, fills the cup from a spout on a blanklabeled filthencrusted machine to the side, presses a lever filling the cup with an unknown dark liquid, and places the cup splashily onto the tray, sliding number One to the sixth and last sternfaced guiltypled-serverman, who pulls a small pudding cup and a granny smith from a deep icy bowl off beside, sending number One out the back into the preordained path of least resistance, to the first available dining-room-hall hard smooth steely-seat in the center of a vast brightlit steely-concrete-walled grey empty space—and everything, everything, oh, it might seem unbelievable, but yes, absolutely everything from the uh—number One to be served steps forward out the back but all then must be repeated back front, but each time incrementing number One to number Two, and then number Two to number Three, et-ceteranooney, looping and incrementing and again and again numbers Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight Nine, Ten Eleven Twelve Thirteen, Fourteen Fifteen Sixteen Seventeen Eighteen Nineteen Twenty Twenty-one, Twenty-two Twenty-three Twenty-four Twenty-five Twenty-six—eh eh, and for the next ten or twenty or more orangey convicted babymen shuffling up by the sextet of guiltypled-servermen, all up to roughly on-following orangey convicted babymen Forty, Forty-five, Forty-six, Fifty, eh; meal fifty measures at three point three ounces of protein, one-half cup of starch, one bread item, four point nine-nine cups of boiled black edible vegetation, one half full beverage, one pudding cup, and one granny smith; now throw that up next to meal fifty-one, measuring at three point six ounces of protein, one-quarter cup of starch, one bread item, four point eight cups of boiled black

edible vegetation, one three-quarters full beverage, one pudding cup, and one granny smith; now throw both those up next to meal fifty-two measuring at three point three ounces of protein, one-third cup of starch, one bread item, five cups of boiled black edible vegetation, one full to the top beverage, one pudding cup, and one granny smith; and so on, and so forth, racking up the statistical proof 'cross that gleamingly huge dry slickly smooth whiteboard across there that, after ten years of study and tons of secondhand supercomputer timesharing expense, the calculations prove that no two, no three, no five hundred and not even no infinitely superfar-out big fat impossibly long assed number of meals, are ever no ever no ever the same—uh—so, nowalone, the lunchmeals gone under, the tables set empty, with everyone gone. The room where the table set empty's empty, as well. The house where the tables and room both set empty's not, but may as well be, because what God has created with power to think this through, and that through, and anything at all through, and do not do, yes, must without exception follow some big overarching fundamental rule, whatever it may be making ever step of this rule mandatory—and it will be done three times each day without failure or failing at all—God willing. So, class.

Any questions?

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Most all my work these days comes very easily. Of course, in some basic way I have to have the route ahead down before hitting the gas - meaning the scene, the setting, the characters, etc - and once I feel ready, I hit the gas, and off we go. As far as influences, I know that I have them, they're necessary while building your chops, but now I dont think what I do is affected by any. It's more like I've got to where the writing "muscle" is free and strong enough that what comes onto the page is nothing more than what's been percolating inside my head all along. Through the years all technical obstacles have dropped away. When I turn on the tap, and the way forward's clear, I open the tap, head down,*

and it flows onto the page quite effortlessly. When done and looking back, I'm am always surprised at what has come out. And these days with minor edits only required.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Jim Meirose's short work has appeared in numerous venues (including *Fleas On The Dog—Issue 5-Fiction*) and his published novels include 'Le Overgivers au Club de la Resurrection' (Mannequin House), 'Understanding Franklin Thompson' (JEF Press) and 'Sunday Dinner with Father Dwyer' (Optional Books). Info at www.jimmeirose.com*

EDITOR'S BIO: *Howie Good is the author most recently of 'Stick Figure Opera: 99 100 Prose Poems' from *Cajun Mutt Press*. He co-edits the online journals *Unbroken and Unlost*. We've published his fiction in *Issue 2 and Issue 5*.(see *Archives*).*

LOUD SOCKS

By Dave Henson

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Brisk, literate, funny and sad. We like the adept use of contrasting mood between parts one and two and the author's keen and nuanced ear for dialogue. This is the kind of accomplished writing that looks easy to imitate but proves hard to master. Spots of word colour: 'She ta-da's.' 'I mock shock.'* *And then there's this: 'I pause a moment then check on Clementine. She's nursing her litter of six on the pile of dirty clothes in my closet. She looks at me and mews softly. If serenity had a sound, that would be it.'* *Good stuff.*

Loud Socks

The sensation isn't pain exactly, but flashes yellow as Nurse Flanigan flushes my ear then works some kind of instrument deep inside it. She says the wax plug is thick and hard and goes at it again. It's as if she's using a firehose and sword when they're so close to my ear drum.

"There we go, Mr. James," she says finally and holds the culprit on a tissue. Looks like a roach. I half expect it to scurry up her arm. "Can you hear better?" she says.

"What?" I reply loudly, then chuckle away the look of panic from her face. Not sure if my humor landed softly or crashed and burned. She brandishes the firehose and Excalibur and steps ominously to my other ear.

“This one’s even worse,” she says and has at it till the sensation progresses to red. I tell her I need a break.

We sit in silence awkward as a first date. The paper sheet on the examining table crackles as I shift my weight. I read the poster on how to save someone from choking. Finally she mentions her son is starting college and asks if I have children. Three. Grandkids? Six, I say, then tell her I’m ready to resume before she asks for names or ages.

After a few fierce minutes, she ta-da’s the piece of my brain she’s removed. I knew she was too deep. She looks at me and mouths something silently. I mock shock.

“Got you back,” she says, and we both grin. Then she warns I might be tender. She nods toward my feet. “Do those hurt your ears?” I see my pants have hiked up revealing my yellow- green- and orange-striped socks. “They’re so loud,” she laughs.

She can take a joke as well as dish out her own. Nice. She says if I have my ears cleansed more often, it won’t be so unpleasant. I suggest monthly, but she thinks yearly would be sufficient. I ask for her card as a reminder and make a mental note to come back in six months. Maybe sooner.

#

I announce to the kids I’m home, write *Loud Socks* on the back of Nurse Flanigan’s card and put it in the silverware drawer with the others. One of my girls, Tabby, jumps off the counter and

rubs against my legs. I pause a moment then check on Clementine. She's nursing her litter of six on the pile of dirty clothes in my closet. She looks at me and mews softly. If serenity had a sound, that would be it. No sign of Mr. Jinx. Probably prowling the basement.

For lunch, I fix my specialty, a — baloney sandwich with mustard, chips on the side. After a nap, I'm already feeling antsy for my next date and spread my cards from the silverware drawer on the counter:

— Shamala Jackson, MD, *Surprising Eyes*. Maybe tell her my acid reflux has gotten worse?

— Dana Thompson, Podiatrist, *Silence is Golden*. If I quit soaking my foot, my corn might come back, but I can't wait that long.

— Patricia Reese, PT, *Mona Lisa Hands*— It's always easy to fake a backache, but she seemed suspicious last time. I'm afraid she might contact Suzanne Barnes, PsyD, *Dangerous*.

I look through a dozen or so cards unable to make up my mind about whom to date next when my oldest kid, Tom, jumps onto the counter and drops a mouse next to Janice Keene, DDS, *I love Lucy*. I tell my boy it's a good choice but too soon for my six-month checkup, and hard to fake a cavity. I could chip another tooth, but that's bright red painful.

I continue flipping through cards unable to make up my mind about whom to be with next when a roach scrambles across the counter. I squash the bug, roll it between my finger and thumb and tilt my head ... then call Nurse Flanigan and tell her she

missed a bit. I'm looking forward to my second date with *Loud Socks*.

END

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Loud Socks* was inspired by my own experience in an examination room. Most of what is described in part one of the flash fiction really happened (including the nurse commenting on my loud socks) with a little embellishment. Part 2 of the piece is completely made up to explore the themes of loneliness and isolation in a quirky and humorous style. My goal was to portray a character who, though somewhat pathetic, is sympathetic. My main literary influences are probably Hemingway and Kafka. I like the straight-forward writing of the former and bizarre imagination of the latter.

AUTHOR'S BIO: David Henson and his wife have lived in Belgium and Hong Kong over the years and now reside in Peoria, Illinois. His work has been nominated for Best Small Fictions and Best of the Net and has appeared in numerous print and online journals including Hypnopomp, Pithead Chapel, Moonpark Review, Fictive Dream, and Literally Stories. His website is <http://writings217.wordpress.com>. His Twitter is @annalou8.

FADE to BLUE

By Moriah Hampton

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author Joey Cruse writes:*

In these lovely times of self-quarantine and distancing, conspiratorial suspicions and ignorance, indulging too much or too little, Moriah Hampton's "Fade to Blue" offers readers a pane glass lens and a heat lamp spotlight to reveal how space, or the lack thereof, blinds us to our own insecurities, dependencies, and, oftentimes, our hopes. Hampton has created a story that is both realistically surreal and exaggeratingly concrete, and, in turn, as annoyingly antithetical as those phrases may have been written, has crafted a story that is entertaining and humorous as well as honest and meaningful.

Evette and Reid are characters stuck in an exhausted cycle of their own perceptions of each other. Unsure of their own goals in work, school, or the direction of their relationship, the cracks in their connection begin to disintegrate with a new addition to their environment. Throughout her story, Hampton subtly weaves together the fractured madness created when absurdity meets reality and the all too real issues we find conflicting in ourselves after getting lost in what was once a familiar gaze – and how or if we ever confront these introspections left in the air. With a rhythm that can lull your senses, à la Beckett, the style of language adds depth to the characters' condition(s), "...He saw Simon in other places too. Simon, only Simon...Simon dozing in the full shade of a potted palm. Simon dragging his baby spoon belly through a sand patch. He entered the kitchen and saw Simon lapping water from the edge of a wide bowl. He saw Simon everywhere."

Do I know whether the Simon in question is real or imaginary or whether this Kafka-caressing thought process threatens a Kubrick-esque break from reality ("Here's Simon!")? Do I know what "fades to blue" as the title suggests or know whether the story ends in tragedy or lets you linger in a sense of hopefulness?

Sure, technically, yes, as I have read the story, but, if you've made it this far into my introduction, you still haven't and should do yourself a favor and do so.

Enjoy.

Personal Comparisons Thought of (i.e. – an imperfect list) While Reading:

Aimee Bender – Willful Creatures; Susan Steinberg – Spectacle; Raphael Bob-Waksberg - Someone Who Will Love You in All Your Damaged Glory; Etgar Keret – The Nimrod Flipout; Bonnie Jo Campbell – Women and Other Animals; Tom McCarthy – Remainder; Carson McCullers – The Ballad of the Sad Café; Haruki Murakami – The Elephant Vanishes; Karen Russell – St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves; Vladimir Nabokov – Laughter in the Dark; Richard Brautigan – Loading Mercury With a Pitchfork; Laura Mullen – Murmur; Jorge Luis Borges – Collected Fiction; Raymond Carver – Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?; Megan Cass – ActivAmerica; Lauren Groff - Florida.

Joey Cruse, April 12-19th (?) 2020

Fade to Blue
By Moriah Hampton

Reid watched Evette slog across his living room, dragging her oversized purse, towards the couch. He peered closer as she passed his newly purchased vivarium, replicating the tropics with river rocks, dew green foliage, and splotched bark. She showed no signs of interest and plopped down next to him, her purse straps loose at her feet. They sat beside each other as if on different couches in different living rooms, until at last Evette opened her mouth to speak. Reid, dissatisfied, leaned his head back against the wall, half listening.

“...out of lemon-scented dish soap...20 minutes in overstock...found a bottle...even buy...the kid with the guilt-stricken smile...shoplift...glared once like his mean big sister...fled.”

She stopped speaking moments before Reid realized and waited as he sighed and sat up.

“That store would go to pot without you,” Reid said.

“Yeah,” she replied.

Neither believed it. The lines they recited brought only memories of comfort. On other days, they ended their conversation about Reid’s situation in the same routine way. Yes, the extra work Evette did at Discount Drugs would go unnoticed. Yes, Reid could decide on a major and finally go back to college after a year off—as if there was a point. There was nothing left to say.

To him, she appeared stuck to the 14 x 8-inch area on his couch where she always sat.

Water drip-dropped from the kitchen faucet.

“That blue-tongue skink came in the mail today,” Reid said, point-blank, and watched her head turn and eyes lower. He expected her to approach the tank, but Evette sat motionless. Reid thought of the skink, hiding behind the log or half buried under some shavings, motionless too.

Evette hunched her knobby shoulders and bowed her head, gnawed by concern for Reid. Will this be enough?

“I’m glad you got your lizard, Reid. I hope it’s what you want.”

Reid paused, taken aback, then clutched her shoulder, “Of course. I told you he’d come today. Didn’t you remember?” and nudged her forward.

Side by side, they stood peering into the tank. Inside the four glass walls glowed, a different world, self-contained, undisturbed by the spiraling arms of time. To the left, three grey rocks were assorted to size. To the right, a hollowed-out log, with bark stuck to the outside. Evette scanned the floor bed, covered with sand and wood shavings, and Reid sensed her frame but not her absent flesh. She focused on the looming plants, following finger-thin leaves to pointed tips, and, as Reid failed to foresee her bare bones disintegrating, Evette moved to the farthest end.

Resisting the pull of the exotic habitat, she raised one palm to the glass then the other, feeling urged to spot the lizard, to confirm he had survived intact. A mail-order skink. All that banging and shaking and sliding around? What if a postal worker put him next to a snake?

“There he is,” she whispered, almost too low for Reid to hear, catching sight of the grey and black skink camouflaged against the largest rock. Her voice rose, accusingly: “He has no food.”

“Not time for him to eat,” was his curt response as grabbed his pet.

“I’d give him food.”

She imagined the lizard nibbling bits from her hand recalling the three times she refused food that day.

Drip, drop.

On the couch, Reid upheld the wriggling skink for Evette to see.

“A skink’s diet is similar to a human’s,” he intoned. “In captivity, they will eat vegetables, fruit, and cooked meat. But I can also feed him mice, crickets, raw beef heart, and even dog food.”

Reid had waited on Evette all afternoon to take him out of the tank, thinking they would enjoy playing with the skink for the first time together.

“Come over here Vette,” following her with his eyes to the opposite end of the couch. He opened his hand, releasing the skink from his grip. For a second, the skink held still, covering little more than half of Reid’s palm. Then he began squirming towards Reid’s fingertips. Reid watched as he barreled over the edge, his tail too short to catch in a pinch, so Reid’s other hand swooped up to meet him. Reid glanced at Evette, hiding his smile, when he saw her look of concern.

“He’s scared,” Evette said.

Reid shook his head no and kept playing with his pet. He let him squirm to the edge of his palm again, grey and black stripes rippling, catching him just before he fell, one hand after another, growing more immersed with each round until, at last, he seized him whole with his left hand, feeling his smooth, rubbery skin. Reid lifted the lizard toward his face and peered into his earth-filled eyes. The skink’s blue tongue whipped in and out, leaving Reid in awe.

He turned towards Evette, wanting to know if she saw the blue tongue, but she seemed to be sitting even farther away on a couch that had doubled in size.

Doesn't she like anything? He gave the skink a droopy eye look, surmising that Evette needed a push.

“Here, you hold him,” Reid said, stretching towards her. He was about to drop the skink in her lap, but she slid back, even farther away from him. He leaned upright, harboring a new-found belief in telepathy. *She'd be satisfied just sitting here for the rest of her life.*

No sooner had he imparted this message, he sat staring at his empty hands. He shot to his feet and began tossing worn cushions from the couch onto the floor. He looked past a candy bar wrapper, then a comb, to the sheen of a nickel he took for the skink's glistening scales. He was wrong. He jammed his fingers in the back crease and slid them to the corner. Nothing. Aghast, he whipped around towards Evette and saw her blank face as a fun-house mirror bending him all out of shape. He straightened himself, commanding Evette.

“Check. Check.”

He watched as, slow enough to sprout, she stood. He armed her aside and flung the cushions seeing only paper-thin lining underneath. Standing in the middle of the living room, dazed, with an oversized cotton ball for a brain, Reid knew where he was, but not exactly. He stood, a dot on a floor plan, like smudged ink, not quite filled in, not quite erased.

Hours later, the pair gave up and went to bed. Reid, alert to the slightest noise, catalogued the cracks and crevices a skink could hide until he accidentally fell asleep. Evette, doubtful that a baby lizard could survive loose in an apartment, fixated on her first sight of him still against the rock. She spied him again and again, as he grew denser, the grey and black stripes fresh as paint strokes drying. She traced his solid form on the rock in her mind's eye. He would be her compass through the night.

At 2:00 am, half-asleep, Evette stirred, the soft light from the tank pressing against her eye lids, creating a path to the couch. There was her bed, inviting, already laid out by a knowing hand. She sunk into the cushions, drifting into strangers' dreams.

At first, she felt the faint piercing of his claws as an itch that would pass. But the piercing persisted, so she brushed her hand in the direction of her thigh. When no relief came, she leaned forward. On her knee, the grey and black striped skink crouched before a curtain of haze. He stared up at her with opaque eyes, forcing her to look away. She turned back, hoping he fled, but when her head stopped, he was in the exact same place. He grew animate within her sight. She could feel his heart thumping, blood coursing, muscles constricting. Her own flesh looked different too. Arms and legs so thin, no more than skin-covered bone. Stomach so indented, the last breath sucked out long ago. She stared as he approached the hem of her t-shirt, dragging the many years he had left to live. Her vision widened, and she flinched at the size of her thigh, narrow enough for her hand to wrap around. She asked the universe but received no reply. *When had this stick figure replaced her?*

The urge rose to fling the skink across the room, to make him disappear, but, before she could lift her arm, the lizard bent to sniff her skin. He sniffed, along the flat surface of her thigh, interested in the non-tangible realities of her flesh, interested and unashamed. She too grew curious about the precise amalgamation of her scent. The skink gazed up at her, the tip of his blue tongue slipping through parted lips. His head lowered again, and Evette felt his blue tongue elongate as wet crystals bursting against her skin. She felt like she'd been kissed a thousand times, his kiss radiating past her extremities, reaching sun, moon, and stars. When the skink retracted his tongue and lengthened it again, she remembered what she was made of—98 pounds of flesh and more.

Evette slipped out of her t-shirt, pulling it over her head as if shedding the last layer of dead skin. She peered as he crawled across her pelvic bone towards her stomach, an empty bowl turned upright, leaving behind a luster-filled trail for her to follow. He stepped over her belly button, sparking a tingling upheaval that she steadied herself against while he finished the course. Towards her sunken chest, he inched, pausing to lick her sternum until it gleamed like a strain of pearls never worn. Soon he covered her entire body, every segment of bare flesh, enwrapping it in one beating glow. Before the light faded, she turned on her side, and holding herself, sunk further into sleep.

The sounds of banging and shuffling and scraping awoke Evette the next morning. She opened her eyes to the sight of Reid bent over a mass of tangled power cords. Scenes from the previous night flashed in her mind. Before sense could be made, Reid turned, "I need you to get up. To look for Simon."

Evette pulled the blanket over her shoulders without taking her eyes off him. He looked crazed. His red eyes pulsed; his wiry hair shot with electric currents; his hands shook as though invaded with alien life. Deflecting Reid's laser beam stare, the scenes returned. The skink crouching on her knee. Crawling up her thigh. She ran one hand over the path he travelled under the blanket. She paused, encircling her fleshless femur.

There is more to me.

Evette left for the bedroom. She found her clothes, aware of Reid's intensifying search for Simon. The contents of Reid's apartment, herself included, whirled around the point where the skink had disappeared. Buttoning her jeans, she resisted the living room. She couldn't spend one more minute surrounded by Reid and his things, not if she wanted room for herself. She took one step towards the hallway and didn't stop until she was outside the front door.

Reid heard the front door shut, lying on his side, peering underneath a drawer in his entertainment center. He paused, listening for movement, before deciding that she was gone. Evette never left without saying goodbye. He knew that something was wrong, but that's as far as he could think about the matter. He needed to find Simon. He looked at the items already checked—a wooden coin box, a pair of tennis shoes, a bag filled with old magazines. He picked up the coin box and threw it down on the floor. He picked up the tennis shoes and bag of old magazines. Down on the floor they went. He bounded over to the couch and, after doing a quick scan, began throwing pillows on the pile growing in the center of the room. With no reason to stop, he lunged towards his bookshelf and grabbed an armful of paperbacks. Down they went, along with a rolled-up *Star Wars* poster and stack of junk mail. Reid caught sight of the tank glowing bright, glowing steady. What a wonderful world. His forehead on the glass, he imagined his life filling the four panes of glass, drop by drop, until overflowing onto the floor.

The transformation of Reid's apartment into a section of the Australian countryside began with a potted fern bought on discount from Do It Your Way. When Evette did not show after work, he rose from the couch where he had been waiting and started walking in the opposite direction of Discount Drugs. He followed the route, unwavering, until it dead-ended at the entrance of the home improvement store. Stepping through the sliding glass doors, he believed he had helped create a destiny of sorts.

He set the plant in front of the living room windows and took a step back to admire the effect. He could almost see Simon crouching beneath withered leaves. He saw Simon in other places too. Simon, only Simon. He saw Simon splayed atop the largest rock in the formation, his stubby limbs outstretched. Simon dozing in the full shade of a potted palm. Simon dragging his baby

spoon belly through a sand patch. He entered the kitchen and saw Simon lapping water from the edge of a wide bowl. He saw Simon everywhere. And, since Simon was already there, Reid needed to make him comfortable so he would stay.

Over the next few days, Reid made several more trips to Do It Your Way, counting each step he took away from Evette behind her cash register. He brought back eight potted plants, two bags of soil, one bag of sand, one bag of wood chips, three large and two medium stones, a box of plastic sheets, and four wooden beams. He almost dropped the bag of sand while crossing highway 75. He hoisted the rest on his hip or curled inside his arm while walking home.

Reid redid his apartment to his vision, creating a sand pit near the living room window, building a rock and log garden before the kitchen entryway, lining up plants along the baseboard. He stopped to make a trip to the pet store. Purchasing several heat lamps, artificial lights, and food and water bowls, he reduced his college savings to \$.94. He resumed his efforts with more earnest, dragging items Simon would not find in his native environment to the curb: his couch with Evette's spot flattened out, kitchen table and chairs, his twin bed. Within a few days, he finished the project and set about to live there with Simon. Just the two of them. One day he hoped that they might be roommates, brothers, lifelong friends. Believing Simon would pause and listen, Reid started to talk to Simon.

Filling Simon in on the details of his life, Reid talked openly to Simon, saying whatever came to mind. He imagined Simon's head tilted towards him, ear hole widening.

"Where were you born?"

"J-town."

"What about your family?"

"Parents, divorced, an okay little sister."

“What do you want to do with your life?”

This last question Simon posed in jest.

Reid’s answer: “Win the lottery.”

“Did I ever tell you about Mr. Barney?” Reid asked him, watching an elderly man cross the street. “In the neighborhood, us kids would see him walk back and forth to work every day, stooped shoulders, always frowning. We all said, ‘His wife died, or all his favorite things burned up in a fire.’ The possibilities were endless. One day he was heading towards us, someone whispered ‘Maybe he wound up alone and doesn’t know why.’ We huddled together as he passed, fear spread through us, then huddled closer.”

Awake in his sleeping bag that night, Reid felt a heaviness he couldn’t understand.

“What if I’m a twin separated at birth from my brother or sister? What if my parents are not my parents or what if they are and decided to keep me and not my twin?”

He imagined Simon, dressed in tails, somberly playing a violin.

“My missing twin,” he whispered, “my missing half.”

Loss brought Evette to mind, her sudden departure and lingering questions, but Reid focused on Simon, listening for the strokes of his violin.

“You can never go wrong with a grilled cheese sandwich.”

He stood with his hand on a frying pan the next afternoon, sun streaming through the kitchen window, “Every bite is gooey, soft, and crunchy. So delicious. When I first moved into this apartment, I made grilled cheese sandwiches the usual way—butter two slices of bread, stick a slice of cheese inside, and grilled it on the stove—but I’ve figured out other ways. Sometimes I

toast the bread in my toaster, add the cheese, and wrap it in foil. After five minutes, voila. Other times, I toast two slices of bread in the oven with cheese on top till they come out piping hot.

Then I mash the pieces together and enjoy.

“So far, I’ve invented four ways to make a grilled cheese sandwich and told Evette about each one.” Reid continued, unable to stop, “I thought of asking her to make one together, but Evette and I don’t talk about food, at least not food she eats. It’s like she’s written a giant X across the topic and never bothered to explain why.”

Reid thought of Simon, recalling signs he noticed around the apartment: skin shedding stuck to bark, nail pairings stray on the floor, droppings buried in sand. The more he tried, the more he thought of Evette, and, in the end, he knew that Simon was out there listening and cared. “At Discount Drugs. That’s where we met,” he said not wanting to go to bed. “She was standing outside, smoking her daily cigarette. She squinted at me, recognizing someone from her past but only saw a stranger. I smiled and walked inside.

“She was Evette, the girl who came around after work. I found her a little odd. The first time she took off her coat at my place. Rail thin. But I forgot about that. She never talked about it, and I never asked. Well, once, but she reached for her purse. Subject dropped, she stayed.

“We’d sit watching bowling or poker and talk. We liked comparing firsts: first concert, first plane ride, first job, first heart break, first realization that life was unfair. She willingly sat through all four seasons of *Mork and Mindy*, and after she suggested *Good Morning Vietnam* and *The Fisher King*, or maybe I did, but she agreed. When I became interested in Spock, she did too. We watched *Star Trek* episode 1 of season 2, the one where Spock returns home to get married, probably eleven times. At some point she stopped caring what we watched. I told her about the 1984 adaptation of *Dune*, and she just sat expressionless. The whole time we watched,

I was sitting next to the skeleton from my high school Biology class. We fucked after and I felt the sharp outline of her ribs as I came. It never had bothered me before.

“I miss feeling excited about what we were going to do next. I thought having an unusual pet would be good for us. That’s why I adopted you, Simon. But when I took you out of the tank, she didn’t even want to hold you.

“Maybe it has something to do with Evette’s problem, but, if you think about it, there are so many problems—war, famine, disease. Pollution, genocide, child abduction. Sometimes I think the world is overflowing with problems, one gigantic bucket too full of drops from a leaky faucet spreading across the floor.”

That morning, Reid stopped talking to Simon. In silence, he felt synchronous with his pet, their steps, stance, their breath, growing closer together, about to coincide. That afternoon, when he heard Simon rustling in the corner of the living room, he felt no surprise. He simply shut the front door and walked over to the spot he thought Simon might be. If not now, sometime soon. The fact that Simon had appeared meant he would do so again. To Reid, this prospect offered him, Simon, and Evette the chance for a spectacular do-over. The hope that Simon would reignite his relationship came back. Simon was saying, “Hey, man, it will go better this time. You, me, and Evette. Give it another try.”

He called when he knew she would be working and left a vague, hysterical message. “Something happened,” he said, sounding disoriented, “come over, please.” He hung up, resisting the urge to shriek, realizing how much faith he had put in Simon appearing at the opportune moment for Evette. After all, Simon was an animal, not a magician. He needed help. To draw him out of hiding, Reid decided to leave the florescent lights on all night at full

spectrum. When Evette arrived, he would still be active, and somewhere in the apartment on route towards a destination he alone knew.

He heard knocking and his legs carried him to the door. He didn't pause before opening or think about what he wanted to say. He was angry at her for knocking, she had erased all the times she entered without knocking, all the times she came slouching, plodding, and, once, fluttering through the front door. He wanted to remind her that she stopped knocking back in October, but, before he could say anything, she stood facing him.

"Come in. Come in."

Her lips began to move as Reid stood struck by some change in her. She talked, and he scanned her pale face, looking down her blue and khaki uniform, trying to decipher the change.

"Reid," she said from a distance "are you okay?"

Evette had gained weight. A pound, maybe a pound and a half. Not a lot, but something.

"Reid."

"Yes," he spat, steadying himself.

"Your message, I..." she stammered.

"Oh," he replied, trying to rub the wrinkles out of his MC Escher t-shirt, "there's been a development I wanted you to know about."

He fell silent and noticed her squinting at him. Her eyes widened, and she turned to look around the apartment. Reid followed her eyes, seeing the sandpit with mounds of sand strewn over its plastic borders, rocks toppled over in the rock and log garden, and plants shriveled along the baseboard. He looked back at her. I'm not the one with the problem. He needed to convince Evette of this too, so he grabbed her hand and led her to the kitchen where he heard Simon scampering that morning.

“I must have just missed him, but he’s alive. I’m certain.”

He bent and touched the rock where he suspected Simon crouched earlier.

Evette watched his fingers brush the rough surface and recalled when she first spotted Simon, already gazing back at her. She smiled slightly at the possibility that Simon was alive. Hearing Reid talk further about the signs he had seen, she started to believe it too. Simon breathing, crawling, sleeping so near, all this time. Then she recalled the last time she had seen Simon winding down her arm, stardust flying. She said goodbye as he disappeared, leaving a dark hole to fall back through to sleep. She glanced at Reid, standing wide-eyed, believing. “What if he doesn’t come back?” she asked, broaching this possibility with him. He staggered, turning his head from side to side.

Reid knows Simon.

Reid and Evette faced one another, in the center of the living room, their feet pressing into the sandy surface.

“That serial shoplifter lives in this neighborhood, I think. Last week, I was taking out the trash and saw a kid strolling past, blond hair half covering his eyes, green book bag sagging. I wondered if he got past you that day,” he said.

Evette raised her eyebrows, and she almost told him of her recent encounter with the kid trying to steal a bottle of cologne. But she didn’t want to talk as they talked in the past. Lately, she thought more about the future, and told him of her promotion to Associate Cashier and the \$.15 pay bump.

“Moving up in the world,” Reid quipped.

“A regular Rockefeller.”

Drip, drop.

“We could recite the entire Spock wedding episode for entertainment?”

She looked at Reid until he grew uncomfortable, “I don’t think I want to.”

They sat beyond the cast of florescent lights near the tank. The silence all around threatened to solidify, fixing them in place. Reid started to pat his hand against his thigh then hers, the steady beats, growing faster, about to burst into a drum roll, but he stopped, suddenly, not liking the roundness of Evette’s thigh.

At an unknown hour, they heard creak, slide, tap, tap. Reid arrived first. He saw Simon crouched, triangular head bent, over a plate of tuna in the kitchen. Simon looked as if he had swallowed himself whole, swelling twice his size. Evette neared as Reid clutched Simon towards his chest. She leaned in, seeing his mid-section rising and falling, his tail wagging. Lifting her hand to the faucet, she let a bead of water form on her fingertip. She offered the water to Simon, joy winding through laughter at the flash of his blue tongue making the drop disappear. Reid tensed at the sound, ignoring the smile she wanted to share. She leaned in closer, and his shoulder rose, shutting her out of their circle.

“You came back.”

Hunched over, Reid began to pet Simon, stroking his glistening scales. He looked deep into familiar eyes, as Evette took a step back. He did not feel her moving away.

“It’s about time,” he whispered, wanting only his friend to hear.

Evette took another step back, forming a mental picture of the pair entwined together. She had memories with Reid and Simon from before, and no wish to stay for more pictures. By the looks of things, Reid wanted Simon to himself for a while.

EDITOR'S BIO: *Joseph Cruse is a writer, an actor, a bad painter, and an even worse English student – he is, easily more, a lot of nothing and everything. When not getting into trouble, he explores New Orleans, sprays graffiti scenes of movies onto canvas, and finishes a Masters in Composition and Rhetoric in Lafayette, LA. His other short story work has also been featured in Phree Write and Viewfinder Magazine; while small spacklings of poetry can be found at Cacti Magazine and W.I.S.H Press. His story **The Scarf** appeared in Issue 5*

FADE to BLUE

By Moriah Hampton

THE EDITORS WRITE: *A young man obsessed with his vivarium and a 98 pound young woman with self esteem issues are the supporting actors in this a memorizing, iridescent disorientation in which the star is an exotic skink. The spell is cast and we are drawn, ever more deeply, as if down Alice’s rabbit hole, into Reid and Evette’s bizarre descent. Complicated, dimensional, dangerous and cool. The glint of gold, everywhere....star dust in our throats. Five stars. We are publishing two versions of **Fade to Blue**. This is the original submission we accepted. The other is guest editor Joey Cruse’s edited version. We like them both equally and suggest you read each one carefully. The point we want to make here is that the writing experience is as much ‘process’ as finished work. A deconstructionist imperative always assumes a state of flux. The prose is brashly beautiful. Quote: Reid stood in the middle of the living room, dazed, with an oversized cotton ball for a brain. He knew where he was, but not exactly. He stood not as a dot on a floor plan but as smudged ink, not quite filled in, not quite erased.*

Fade to Blue

By Moriah Hampton

Reid watched Evette slog across his living room, dragging her oversized purse, towards the couch. He peered closer as she passed his newly purchased vivarium, which replicated the tropics with river rocks, dew green foliage, and splotched bark. She showed no signs of interest. He turned away, dissatisfied. She plopped down next to him, her purse straps loose at her feet.

They sat beside each other as if on different couches centered in different living rooms, until at last Evette opened her mouth to speak. Reid, still dissatisfied, leaned his head back against the wall, half listening.

“...out of lemon-scented dish soap...20 minutes in overstock...found a bottle...even buy...the kid with the guilt-stricken smile...shoplift...glared once like his mean big sister...fled.”

She stopped speaking moments before Reid realized it and waited as he sighed and sat up.

“That store would go to pot without you,” Reid said.

“Yeah,” she replied.

“Yeah,” he said.

But neither believed it. The lines they recited brought only memories of comfort. Yes, all the extra stuff Evette did at Discount Drugs would go unnoticed. On other days, they ended their conversation about Reid’s situation in the same routine way. Yes, Reid could decide on a major and finally go back to college after a year off as if there was any point. Really, there was nothing left to say.

But on this day, Reid felt something other than the typical “Why bother?” attitude he and Evette shared. Out of the corner of his eye, he studied Evette, trying to gauge if she felt anything like what he felt.

To him, she appeared stuck to the 14 x 8-inch area on his couch where she always sat.

Water drip dropped from the kitchen faucet.

“That blue-tongue skink came in the mail today,” Reid said, point-blank, and watched her head turn and eyes lower. “I shook the sack and saw him tumble down to the bed.”

He expected her to rise and approach the tank. But Evette sat motionless. Something else for him, something more. Reid thought of the skink, probably hiding behind the log or half buried under some shavings, motionless too.

Evette hunched her knobby shoulders and bowed her head, gnawed by concern for Reid. Will this be enough? Then she sat up, faced him, and said, “I’m glad you got your lizard, Reid. I hope it’s what you want.”

Reid paused, taken aback, then he clutched her shoulder saying, “Of course, it’s what I want. I told you he’d come today. Didn’t you remember?” and nudged her forward.

Side by side, they stood peering into the tank. Inside the four glass walls glowed a different world. It stood self-contained, undisturbed by the spiraling arms of time. To the left, three grey rocks, assorted in size. To the right, a hollowed-out log, with bark stuck to the outside. Evette scanned the floor bed, covered with sand and wood shavings, and Reid sensed her frame but not her absent flesh. She focused on the looming plants, following their finger-thin leaves to pointed tips, as Reid failed to foresee her bare bones disintegrating. Just then, Evette moved to the farthest end.

She neared the tank, after resisting the pull of the exotic habitat. She raised one palm to the glass then the other, feeling the urge to spot the lizard, to confirm he had survived intact. A mail-order skink. All that banging and shaking and sliding around. What if a postal worker put him next to a snake or something? Just then, she caught sight of the grey and black skink camouflaged against the side of the largest rock.

“There he is,” she whispered, almost too low for Reid to hear. But suddenly, her voice rose, accusingly: “He has no food.”

“It’s not time for him to eat,” was his curt response, and he reached in and grabbed his pet.

I’d give him food. She imagined the lizard nibbling bits from her hand and recalled the three times she refused food that day.

Drip drop.

Reid, back on the couch, upheld the wriggling skink for Evette to see.

“A skink’s diet is somewhat similar to a human’s,” he intoned. “In captivity, they will eat vegetables, fruit, and cooked meat. But I can also feed him mice, crickets, raw beef heart, and even dog food.”

Reid could have said more about a skink’s diet, but at that moment, he wanted to play with his pet. He had waited on Evette all afternoon to take him out of the tank, thinking they would enjoy playing with the skink for the first time together.

“Come over here Vette,” he called, following her with his eyes as she sat at the opposite end of the couch.

He opened his hand, releasing the skink from his grip. For a second, the skink held still, covering little more than half of Reid’s palm. Then he began squirming towards Reid’s fingertips. Reid watched as he barreled over the edge, his tail too short to catch in a pinch, so Reid’s other hand swooped up to meet him. Reid glanced at Evette, hiding his smile, when he saw her look of concern.

“He’s scared,” Evette said.

Reid shook his head no and kept playing with his pet. He let him squirm to the edge of his palm again, grey and black stripes rippling, catching him just before he fell, one hand after another, growing more immersed with each round until at last, he seized him whole with his left hand, feeling his smooth, rubbery skin. He lifted the lizard towards his face and peered into his earth-filled eyes. Just then, the skink’s blue tongue whipped in and out, leaving Reid in awe.

He turned towards Evette, wanting to know if she saw the blue tongue, but she seemed to be sitting even farther away on a couch that had doubled in size.

Doesn’t she like anything? He gave the skink a droopy eye look, surmising after that Evette just needed a push.

“Here, you hold him,” Reid said, stretching towards her. He was about to drop the skink in her lap, but she slid back, even farther away from him.

He leaned upright, harboring a new-found belief in telepathy. She’d probably be satisfied just sitting here for the rest of her life.

But no sooner had he imparted this message then he sat starrng at his empty hands. He shot to his feet and began tossing worn cushions from the couch onto the floor. He looked past a candy bar wrapper then a comb to the sheen of a nickel he took for the skink’s glistening scales. He was wrong. He jammed his fingers in the back crease and slid them to the corner. Nothing. Aghast, he whipped around towards Evette and saw her blank face as a fun-house mirror bending him all out of shape. He straightened himself, commanding Evette to “Check. Check.” And he watched as she rose slow enough to sprout legs before she came to stand. He armed her aside and flung off the other cushions seeing only paper-thin lining underneath. Reid stood in the middle of the living room, dazed, with an oversized cotton ball for a brain. He knew where he was, but not exactly. He stood not as a dot on a floor plan but as smudged ink, not quite filled in, not quite erased.

Hours later, after putting the contents of his 750 square foot apartment back in place, the pair gave up and went to bed. Reid, alert to the slightest noise, catalogued the cracks and crevices a skink could hide until he accidentally fell asleep. Evette, doubtful that a baby lizard could survive loose in an apartment, fixated on her first sight of him still against the rock. She spied him again and again, as he grew denser, the grey and black stripes fresh as paint strokes drying. She traced his solid form on the rock in her mind’s eye. He would be her compass through the night.

At 2:00 am, Evette stirred towards the glow cast from the tank in the living room. Half-asleep, she felt the soft light pressing against her eye lids. She rose, catching sight of a light-filled path leading to the couch. There was her bed, inviting, as if already laid out by a knowing hand. She sunk into the cushions, drifting into strangers' dreams.

At first, she felt the faint piercing of his claws as an itch that would pass. But the piercing persisted, so she brushed her hand in the direction of her thigh. When no relief came, she leaned forward. On her knee, the grey and black striped skink crouched before a curtain of haze. He stared up at her with opaque eyes, forcing her to look away. She turned back, hoping he fled, but when her head stopped, he was in the exact same place. He grew animate within her sight. She could feel his heart thumping, blood coursing, muscles constricting. Her own flesh looked different too. Arms and legs so thin, no more than skin-covered bone. Stomach so indented, the last breath sucked out long ago. She stared as he approached the hem of her t-shirt as if dragging the many years he had left to live. Her vision widened, and she flinched at the size of her thigh, narrow enough for her hand to wrap around. When had this stick figure replaced her, she asked the universe, but received no reply.

The urge rose to fling the skink across the room, to make him disappear, but before she could lift her arm, the lizard bent to sniff her skin. Along the flat surface of her thigh, he sniffed, interested in the non-tangible realities of her flesh, interested and unashamed. She grew curious, too, about the precise amalgamation of her scent. The skink gazed up at her, the tip of his blue tongue slipping through parted lips. His head lowered again, and Evette beheld his blue tongue elongate and felt it as wet crystals bursting against her skin. She felt like she'd been kissed a thousand times, his kiss radiating past her extremities, reaching sun, moon, and stars. When the

skink retracted his tongue and lengthened it again, she remembered what she was made of—98 pounds of flesh and more.

Evette slipped out of her t-shirt because she could not do otherwise, pulling it over her head as if shedding the last layer of dead skin. She peered as he crawled across her pelvic bone towards her stomach, an empty bowl turned upright, leaving behind a luster-filled trail for her to follow. He stepped over her belly button, sparking a tingling upheaval that she steadied herself against while he finished the course. Towards her sunken chest, he inched, pausing to lick her sternum until it gleamed like a strain of pearls never worn. Soon he covered her entire body, every segment of bare flesh, enwrapping it in one beating glow. Before the light faded, she turned on her side, and holding herself, sunk further into sleep.

The sounds of banging and shuffling and scraping awoke Evette the next morning. She opened her eyes to the sight of Reid bent over a mass of tangled power cords. Scenes from the previous night flashed in her mind. But before she could make sense of them, Reid turned and said, “I need you to get up, so I can look for Simon.” Evette pulled the blanket over her shoulders without taking her eyes off of him. He looked crazed. His red eyes pulsed; his wiry hair appeared shot through with electric currents; his hands shook as though invaded with alien life. Evette pulled the blanket to her chin, trying to deflect Reid’s laser beam stare. One blink, two, and Reid turned and became preoccupied with the power cords again.

The scenes returned. The skink crouching on her knee. Crawling up her thigh. She ran one hand over the path he travelled under the blanket. She paused, encircling her fleshless femur. There is more to me.

Gathering the blanket around her, Evette left for the bedroom. She found her clothes, aware of Reid's search for Simon intensifying. It felt as if all the contents of Reid's apartment, herself included, whirled around the point where the skink had disappeared. Buttoning her jeans, she resisted the pull from the living room. She had to get out of there. She couldn't spend one more minute surrounded by Reid and his things, not if she wanted room for more of herself. She took one step towards the hallway and didn't stop until she was outside Reid's front door.

Reid heard the front door shut while lying on his side peering underneath a drawer in his entertainment center. He paused, listening for movement, before deciding that she was gone. Evette never left without saying goodbye. He knew that something was wrong, but that's as far as he could think about the matter. At that moment, he really needed to find Simon. He closed the drawer and got to his feet. He looked at the items he'd already checked—a wooden coin box, a pair of tennis shoes, a bag filled with old magazines. Again, he heard the sound of the front door shutting. He picked up the coin box and threw it down on the floor. He picked up the tennis shoes and bag of old magazines. Down on the floor they went. He felt relieved. He bounded over to the couch and, after doing a quick scan, began throwing pillows on the pile growing in the center of the room. With no reason to stop, he lunged towards his bookshelf and grabbed an armful of paperbacks. Down they went, along with a rolled-up *Star Wars* poster and stack of junk mail. As the last unopened envelope sailed to the floor, Reid caught sight of the tank glowing bright, glowing steady. He neared, peering into its lush and far-removed depths. What a wonderful world. Resting his forehead on the glass, he imagined his life filling the four panes of glass, drop by drop, until overflowing onto the floor.

The transformation of Reid's apartment into a section of the Australian countryside began with a potted fern he bought on discount from Do It Your Way. When Evette did not show after work, he rose from the couch where he had been waiting and started walking in the opposite direction of Discount Drugs. He followed the route unwavering until it dead-ended into the entrance of the home improvement store. Stepping through the sliding glass doors, he believed he had helped create a destiny of sorts.

He set the plant in front of the living room windows and took a step back to admire the effect. He could almost see Simon crouching beneath its withered leaves. Glancing around the room, he saw Simon in other places too. Simon, only Simon. He saw Simon splayed atop the largest rock in a rock formation, his stubby limbs outstretched. Simon dozing in the full shade of a potted palm. Simon dragging his baby spoon belly through a sand patch. He entered the kitchen and saw Simon lapping water from the edge of a wide bowl. He saw Simon everywhere. And since Simon was already there, Reid believed he needed to make him comfortable, so he would stay. So over the next few days, Reid made several more trips to Do It Your Way, counting at first the steps he took away from Evette stationed behind her cash register. He brought back to his apartment eight potted plants, two bags of soil, one bag of sand, one bag of wood chips, three large and two medium stones, a box of plastic sheets, and four wooden beams. The bag of sand he almost dropped while crossing highway 75. All the rest he hoisted on his hip or tucked inside his curled arm while walking home.

He redid his apartment in near approximation to his vision, creating a sand pit near the living room window, building a rock and log garden before the kitchen entryway, lining up potted plants along the baseboard. He stopped to make a trip to the pet store. With the purchase of several heat lamps, artificial lights, and food and water bowls, he reduced his college savings that

he had earned to \$.94. He resumed his efforts with more earnestness, dragging to the curb those items Simon would not find in his native environment. His couch with Evette's spot flattened out. Kitchen table and chairs. His twin bed. Within a few days, he finished the project and set about to live there with Simon. Just the two of them. Not as host and guest. He held out hope that they might one day be roommates, brothers, lifelong friends. Reid even started to talk to Simon, believing, if he did, Simon would pause somewhere and listen.

"Didn't see that coming" Reid said, after stubbing his toe for the gazillionth time on the floor panel separating the hallway from the living room.

Later that day, Reid began filling Simon in on basic details of his life.

"Where were you born?"

"J-town."

"What about your family?"

"Parents, divorced, an okay little sister."

"What do you want to do with your life?" This last question Simon posed in jest.

Reid's answer: "Win the lottery."

From then on, Reid talked openly to Simon, saying whatever came to mind. Simon, he imagined, with head tilted towards him, ear hole widening.

"Did I ever tell you about my neighbor back home, Mr. Barney?" Reid asked him one afternoon while watching an elderly man cross the street outside. "Us kids would see him trudging back and forth to work every day, with stooped shoulders, always frowning. 'Mr. Barney,' we all said, 'is so miserable. Something bad must have happened. Maybe his wife died, or all his favorite things burned up in a fire.' The possibilities were endless. Then one day

when he was heading towards us, someone whispered ‘Maybe he wound up alone and doesn’t know why.’ Fear spread through us. We huddled together, as he passed, then huddled closer.”

That night, while lying awake in his sleeping bag, Reid felt a heaviness he couldn’t quite understand. Turning on his side, he mused, “What if I’m a twin who was separated at birth from my brother or sister? What if my parents are not my parents or what if they are and decided to keep me and not my twin?”

He imagined Simon dressed in tails playing somberly a violin.

“My missing twin,” he whispered. “My missing half.”

The loss of Reid’s twin brought Evette to mind, her sudden departure and other lingering questions, but Reid focused instead on Simon, listening out for the strokes of his violin.

The next afternoon, Reid declared, “You can never go wrong with a grilled cheese sandwich.” He stood with his hand on a frying pan, sun streaming through the kitchen window. “Every bite is gooey, soft, and crunchy. So delicious. When I first moved into this apartment, I made grilled cheese sandwiches the usual way. I buttered two slices of bread, stuck a slice of cheese inside, and grilled it on the stove. But since, I’ve figured out other ways to prepare them. Sometimes I toast the bread in my toaster, add the cheese, and wrap it in foil. After five minutes, voila. It’s done. Other times, I toast two slices of bread in the oven with a slice of cheese on top till they come out piping hot. Then I mash the pieces together and enjoy.

“I’ve invented four ways so far to make a grilled cheese sandwich and have told Evette about each one,” Reid continued, unable to stop. “I even thought of asking her to make one together. But Evette and I don’t talk about food, at least not food she eats, so I never did. It’s like she’s written a giant X across the topic and never bothered to explain why.”

Reid tried to think of Simon, recalling all the signs of him he noticed around the apartment: skin shedding stuck to bark, nail pairings stray on the floor, droppings buried in sand. But the more he tried, the more he thought of Evette. In the end, he knew that Simon was out there listening and cared.

“At Discount Drugs. That’s where we met,” he said the next night, not wanting to go to bed. “She was standing outside, smoking her one daily cigarette. She squinted at me as though about to recognize someone from her past but then saw me for a stranger. I smiled and walked inside.

“No, she never reminded me of someone from my past. She was Evette, the girl who came around after work. I found her a little odd the first time she took off her coat at my place. Rail thin. But I quickly forgot about that. She never talked about it, and I never asked. Well, I did once, and she reached for her purse. I dropped the subject, and she stayed.

“We did have a lot of fun at first. We’d sit watching bowling or poker and talk. We liked comparing firsts: first concert, first plane ride, first job, first heart break, first realization that life was unfair. Later, she willingly sat through all four seasons of *Mork and Mindy*. She even suggested we watch some of Robin Williams’ films like *Good Morning Vietnam* and *The Fisher King* or maybe I did, and she agreed. And when I became interested in Spock. She did too. We watched *Star Trek* episode 1 of season 2, which portrays Spock returning to his home planet to wed, probably eleven times. But at some point she stopped caring what we watched. I remember telling her about the 1984 film adaptation of *Dune*, and she just sat there expressionless. The whole time we watched it I felt like I was sitting next to the skeleton from my high school Biology class. After, we fucked, and I remember feeling the sharp outline of her ribs as I came. It never really bothered me before.

“It is better to have some company than none, but I miss how things were in the beginning. I miss feeling excited about what we were going to do next. That’s why I adopted you, Simon. I thought having an unusual pet would be good for us. But when I took you out of the tank that time she didn’t even want to hold you.

“What? Maybe it has something to do with Evette’s problem, but if you stop to think about it, there are so many problems—war, famine, disease. Pollution, genocide, child abduction. Sometimes I think the world is overflowing with problems. It is like one gigantic bucket filling with drips from a leaky faucet spreading across the floor.”

That morning, Reid stopped talking to Simon. In silence, he felt more in synchrony with his pet, their steps, stance, even their breath growing closer together, about to coincide. That afternoon, when he heard Simon rustling in the corner of the living room, he felt no surprise. He simply shut the front door he was opening and walked over to the spot where he thought Simon might be. If not now, sometime soon. The fact that Simon had appeared meant he would do so again. To Reid, this prospect offered him, Simon, and Evette the chance for a spectacular do-over. All the hope he originally felt that Simon would reignite his relationship came back. It was like Simon was saying, “Hey man. It will go better this time. You, me, and Evette. Give it another try.”

So he called when he knew she would be working and left a vague, slightly hysterical message. “Something happened,” he said, sounding disoriented and finished with “Come over, please,” as though resisting the urge to shriek. He hung up, realizing how much faith he had put in Simon to appear at the opportune moment during Evette’s visit. Simon was an animal after all, not a magician. He needed help coming out. It was up to Reid to draw him out of hiding. So he decided to leave the florescent lights on all night at full spectrum. Whenever Evette

arrived, he would still be active, somewhere in the apartment on route towards a destination he alone knew.

Later, he heard knocking and felt his legs carrying him to the door. He didn't pause before opening it or think about what he wanted to say. He simply flung it open and found Evette standing there.

"Come in. Come in," he told her, realizing at that moment that he was angry at her for knocking, since it felt like she had erased all the times she entered without knocking, all the times she came slouching, plodding, and once fluttering through the front door. He wanted to remind her that she stopped knocking back in October, but before he could say anything, she stood facing him.

Her lips began to move as Reid stood struck by some change in her. She talked, and he scanned her pale face, then looked down at her blue and khaki uniform, trying to decipher the change.

"Reid," he heard her saying from a distance. "Are you okay?" and at that moment he knew Evette had gained weight. Not a lot, but something. A pound, maybe a pound and a half.

"Reid."

"Yes," he spat, steadying himself.

"Your message, I..." she stammered.

"Oh," he replied, trying to rub the wrinkles out of his MC Escher t-shirt, and continued, "There's been a development I wanted you to know about." He told her about Simon's reappearance that afternoon, ending with "I never once doubted him."

He fell silent and noticed her squinting at him. Her eyes widened, and she turned to look around the apartment. Reid followed her eyes, seeing the sandpit with mounds of sand strewn over its plastic borders, rocks toppled over in the rock and log garden, and potted plants shriveled along the baseboard. He looked back at her. She was squinting even harder at him. I'm not the one with the problem. He needed to convince Evette of this too, so he grabbed her hand and led her to the spot near the kitchen where he heard Simon scampering that morning.

"I must have just missed him, but he's alive. I'm certain." He bent and touched the rock where he suspected Simon crouched earlier.

Evette watched his fingers brush the rough surface and recalled when she first spotted Simon, already gazing back at her before the rock in Reid's vivarium. She smiled slightly at the possibility that Simon was alive. Hearing Reid talk further about the signs he had seen, she started to believe it too. Simon breathing, crawling, sleeping so near, all this time. But then she recalled the last time she had seen Simon winding down her arm, stardust flying. She said goodbye then, as he disappeared, leaving a dark hole for her to fall back through to sleep. She glanced at Reid, who stood wide-eyed, believing.

"What if he doesn't come back?" she asked, wanting to broach this possibility with him. He staggered, turning his head from side to side. This is not how things turn out. Reid knows Simon.

Reid and Evette faced one another, in the center of the living room, their feet pressing into the sandy surface.

“The serial shoplifter lives in this neighborhood, I think. Last week, I was taking out the trash and saw a kid strolling past, blond hair half covering his eyes, green book bag sagging. I wondered if he got past you that day,” he said.

Evette raised her eyebrows, and she almost told him of her recent encounter with the kid trying to steal a bottle of cologne. But she didn’t want to talk as they talked in the past. Lately, she thought more about the future, so she told him of her promotion to Associate Cashier and \$.15 pay bump.

“Moving up in the world,” Reid quipped.

“I’m a regular Rockefeller.”

Drip drop.

Later, they stood staring at the outline on the wall where the TV once hung. He turned towards her as if struck with an idea. “We could recite the entire Spock wedding episode for entertainment?” She looked at Reid until he grew slightly uncomfortable and said, “I don’t think I want to.”

Near the tank, they sat just beyond the cast of florescent light. The silence all around threatened to solidify, fixing them in place. Reid started to pat his hand against his thigh, then hers, the steady beats, growing faster, about to burst into a drum roll. Suddenly he stopped, not liking the roundness of Evette’s thigh.

At an unknown hour, they heard creak, slide, tap, tap. Reid arrived first. He saw Simon crouched, triangular head bent, over a plate of tuna in the kitchen. He barely recognized his pet.

Simon looked as if he had swallowed himself whole, swelling to twice his size. Evette neared as Reid clutched Simon towards his chest. She leaned in, seeing his mid-section rising and falling, his tail wagging. Lifting her hand to the faucet, she let a bead of water form on her finger tip. She offered it to Simon, joy winding through her laughter at the flash of his blue tongue making it disappear. Reid tensed at the sound of it, ignoring the smile she wanted to share. She leaned in closer, as his shoulder rose, shutting her out of their circle. You came back. Hunched over, he began to pet Simon, stroking his glistening scales. He looked deep into his familiar eyes, as Evette took a step back, then another. He did not feel her moving away.

“It’s about time,” he whispered, wanting only his friend to hear.

Evette took another step back, forming a mental picture of the pair together, entwined. She had no wish to be in the picture. She had memories with Reid and with Simon from before. And she had no wish to stay for more pictures. By the looks of things, Reid would want Simon all to himself for a while.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Many years ago, I spent an evening in the apartment of a pair of reptile keepers. Along every wall in the living and dining rooms lived reptiles of various sorts in tanks. Upon stepping into their apartment, I felt keenly aware of the strange life that surrounded me. I continued to feel this strangeness while sitting in a recliner bathed in the florescent glow from the tanks. That experience inspired me to write “Fade to Blue.” The story also reflects my current fascination with plot. I wanted to push the story’s plot in unexpected directions, perhaps to express some of the strangeness I originally felt. Recent readings of Aimee Bender’s and Italo Calvino’s work influenced this story as well.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: *Moriah Hampton teaches in the Writing and Critical Inquiry Program at SUNY-Albany. In her spare time, she writes fiction. Her stories have appeared in The Bleeding Lion, Hamilton Stone Review, The Sonder Review, and other publications.*

DEEP CLOWNING

By Jason Arias

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Two casualties of experience mash-mentor a gagging neophyte in this darkly underground kick-box plunge into a narcoluminescent screaming id. Subculture stalks as metaphor and meat grinder modernism lashes our sensibilities. The danse macabre is rare in fiction but you have it here—soooo Macabre good it needs a BIG not a little M. Plasmoid rich prose that's anything but vanilla throws 'art-curves' throughout transport Quote: 'If he wants to survive this gig, he's gotta let the job crawl into him and deposit its eggs, let the clowning ooze out his face.' And this jaw dropping line 'Jimmy's smile looks like it wants to eat everything.' Five stars.*

Deep Clowning

By Jason Arias

Jimmy doesn't have a clue about how to walk duck-footed in his Combat Clownner 35 EEEs. He can't make a fall look right without actually hurting himself in the process. Plus, his red ball nose keeps slipping off during the Evaluation Drills and getting stuck under the crappy baseboard heaters.

Right now, Jimmy's on all fours saying, "Never lose your nose. Never lose your nose," on the faux hardwoods like the weakest probie-mantra ever.

"Jesus," Sarge says out of the side of his cherry-red lips.

It's all of the niacin we keep applying that makes our lips look almost bloody, our gums like internal organs, our earlobes like inflamed used rubbers.

The Sarge kicks a rat's carcass into the corner with a size 54-EEEE (big-boy) boot and a small plume of dust banks off the baseboards where the little body hits. This is a training apartment; it's supposed to be disgusting. We're supposed to be disgusting. It's all part of it.

I shake my head at Sarge while trying not to look at him. I hate looking at him anymore. Looking at Sarge is like looking into a carnival mirror that thins and stretches me out until I'm so contorted that it feels like I can see right through myself. And there's nothing on the other side. We're the same now, Sarge and me. Empty.

Thoughts like this and I'm not even drunk-ed yet.

Years ago we stayed drunk-ed for the authentic Clowner's nose—the bulbous raw knobs, vein-streaked, in the middle of our faces—and the horrid after-breath, but now we have other reasons.

Jimmy (the probie) doesn't know what we really look like underneath all this makeup and crap. He doesn't realize we don't look anything like him anymore. Don't think like him either.

Even when Sarge and I aren't working, we're still knife juggling in back alleys, or practicing the perfect flower lapel discharge at cardboard targets, or playing the Russian's roulette. We can quick-stab a knife between the gaps in our fingers, while on worlds of hallucinogens, without even thinking about it and Jimmy can't even walk right in his training-wheel size 35s? He's already got up off his knees and fallen again.

Jimmy's going to have to learn how to fall only on command, drunk-ed or not, and not split his neon permed head open. These Natural Clowns, these NCs will smell his humanness from backstreets away.

And here Jimmy is, proving just how far away Sarge and I have come from what we were: Sarge gunning for a promotion to Lieutenant, me looking for a way off the beat. Compared to Jimmy, Sarge and me look like two bloated, walking hospice patients. The whites of our eyes all piss-yellow jaundiced from gut-punching each other in the liver all night.

Now Jimmy's fumbling with his red foam nose on the sofa. God Damn it! He's pinching and pushing at that foam just so, trying to get it to stay put. He's acting all bashful and wide-eyed for sympathy.

I look at Jimmy and I hate him.

If I could stop smiling at him I would, but all the collagen won't let me. The diaphragm under my lungs feels tight from hyper-laughter training the other day. I can't remember the last time I was home. Don't even know where home would be right now.

I bet Jimmy thinks it's no big deal to infiltrate a Honey Pot of Natural Clowns; thinks that NC's are just brain-dead super zombies out of the comic books he reads. But he'll find out real quick that behind every face-painted façade lays a calculating killer. Every giant bowtie is a means for strangulation. Every other day they need fresh meat. We need fresh meat. Sarge and me; we crave the proteins now.

Jimmy doesn't get that it takes more than just some store-bought rainbow-afro-wig and squirting-flower-corsage to penetrate these tribes out here. The guys that make our team understand why Under-Clowners have a 98% divorce rate. And, really, that's before joining. Anybody that joins with a wife has a hundred percent chance of marital failure. Count on it. The

suicide rate's not much better either. We marry *this* shit. We don't expect to come back from it. Sarge found out the hardest way.

It's been 18 months since a Carload of NC's abducted Sarge's kid, back when we still thought the clowning attacks were just a passing meme. It took us two days to find his boy. But by then he'd been bled out, all drained of life and made-up like some marionette hanging from the Fifth Street Bridge by a whole smattering of colorful bungees. There was a bouquet of balloons above the overpass as a landmark.

Jimmy, the rookie, wants to be a part of this but underneath his painted-on lips he's missing the point. He's sitting on the sofa complaining about the circumference of his ruffled sleeves; how they keep catching on the butts of his cigarettes. If he wants to survive this gig, he's gotta let the job crawl into him and deposit its eggs, let the clowning ooze out his face.

He's gotta learn to be less human than he is. I found that out after the NCs took my Jenny, years back, and transformed her into a Clownie-Queen-B. Put her in fishnets and baggy short-shorts and gave her to the worker ants to spawn her out.

Changed her.

Reproduced through her.

In the last photo I saw of my former wife she had tear-shaped warts growing on her cheeks, identifying her as part of the *Cry Now, Clan Later* tribe.

“Shut up about your shirt sleeves, Jimmy,” growls Sarge from the side of me. He's had enough of this probie's shit, or maybe just too much to drink, or maybe not enough.

“Where are you at on your juggling, Jimmy?” I ask. I feel my heartrate quicken, my central arteries expand, and my limbs go cool. I feel like I need to run through something. Anything to get out of now. This training gig's burning through me. The saddest thing is that no matter how much I hate this line of work, when I'm not doing it, I miss it even more. There's nothing human about that.

Jimmy picks up the three full-weight bowling pins off the shitty hardwood flooring in front of him. He sighs and tosses the first one too far to the left, the second too low. He nearly hits himself in the head as the third comes barreling down.

“You're done,” I say.

“Did I pass?” he asks hopeful. His dumb painted smile.

“No,” I say.

Jimmy'll be working back at whatever beat he came from by Monday. Back to his size 10 flats, or whatever the fuck reg-shoes he wears. This job isn't for him. Better he find out now than become some NC's appetizer.

Jimmy's white powdered face is becoming reconstituted with, what is that? Tears?

Jesus! Get a grip, kid.

Jimmy's getting streaked compound on his biggie-gloves where he tries to wipe at cheeks. Off-white on soft-white.

Sarge puts one gloved hand on Jimmy's shoulder, gives a little squeeze. “Truth is, you just dodged a bullet,” he says. “Look at us, we're fucking mutants.” Sarge pulls off his over-sized

fake nose, rolls it between his fingers. His real nose is a giant, red, pulsating blotch. There are rivers of green veins just below his transparent skin. He's almost see-through from hardly ever seeing daylight and all the anti-pigments we've had for breakfast.

"You don't want this," Sarge says pointing to the affliction on his own face, to behind his face, to inside his face.

Jimmy nods. And in the nod his red foam nose falls off. AGAIN!

He catches it, squeezes it tight between his thumb and forefinger. This is the bittersweet part for me: to see this kid's disappointment, yet know I've also just saved his life.

I'm already getting nostalgic when Jimmy's human nose, the nose underneath the fake nose, falls off and lands on the floor between his feet with a splat. Jimmy's third nose, his real nose, is still partly taped down with tiny retention straps. It looks like a small cut of pork loin pushing against tight baking strings. Jimmy's taped nose is as enflamed and grotesque and pulsating as Sarge's and mine put together. It makes me think of proteins. A part of me is unnervingly hungry right now.

There's a stray contact lens stuck to Jimmy's right cheek from all his crying. Maybe he wasn't crying. Maybe he was laughing. I can't tell the difference anymore. The sclera of the eye sans the contact is as yellow as Sarge's and my teeth. Jimmy's smile is bigger than his face. Jimmy's face isn't human anymore, probably never has been. Probably born an NC. Jimmy's smile looks like it wants to eat everything. That's when I see the palm buzzer explosive in Jimmy's puffy mittened hand. How the hell did I miss that? And then I get it. We've become too sure of our own inhumanity. And this thing's just taken us for a ride.

Figures he'd want to put on this show before just detonating us. Showmanship being an intricate part of the Clown's culture. Clowns being pieces of shit and all. I know this, because I am this.

I can understand this, the urge to perform one last time.

I don't even make a move for anything as Jimmy closes his finger down on that silver button. I just stick my tongue out in the goofiest smile I can muster.

Hell, I'm almost thankful as everything goes white around us.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I originally wrote this piece a couple of years back for a coulrophobia anthology where it was promptly, yet respectfully, rejected. At that point in my work life I'd been in the EMS field for about fifteen years. I'd had the chance to work closely on multiple scenes with police and had more than a few good friends who were military vets. I started noticing how people with these kinds of backgrounds could say things around each other that we couldn't say around others. Because others would be like, "What?" and not in a good way. We saw things others, hopefully, never would. We had different (maybe darker) senses of humor. Our separation of home and work wasn't always the cleanest. We carried things we probably should have dealt with when they came up but didn't always know how. And even if we did have healthy outlets, there wasn't always time between calls. I was trying to find a creative way to simultaneously explore themes like: the specificity of workplace vernacular, the dangers of PTSD, and all the times some mother has told some kid "if you keep making that face, it's going to stick". I've always used writing as a cheap form of therapy. I've always loved the late Larry Brown's straight-forward, unadorned prose. So, with all that in mind, I borrowed something I once heard Chuck Palahniuk say about following an idea to its most extreme conclusion, and "Deep Clowning" was born. Something short and disturbing but not without humor, and humanness.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Jason Arias lives in Oregon. His debut short story collection *Momentary Illumination of Objects In Motion* was published in 2018 by Black Bomb Books. Jason's stories and essays have appeared in *NAILED Magazine*, *The Nashville Review*, *Oregon Humanities Magazine*, *Clockhouse*, *Harpur Palate*, *Cascadia Magazine*, *Perceptions Magazine*, Lidia Yuknavitch's TED Book *The Misfit's Manifesto*, and elsewhere. For links to more of Jason's work visit him at jasonariasauthor.com*

AISLE 7

By Kevin Barbosa

WHY WE LIKE IT: *It's just business as usual in the corner convenience store when a wealthy man steps in and things change forever. We like the way the author segments incident and experience, reality and imagination while maintaining a credible model of real time. Prose is 'outsider' but impactful and the use of bold and light font visually rocks. There's a heart beating underneath this powerfully conceived social satire and at the end you hear it breaking. Good lines include: 'Silence is heard.' (Amazing!). 'Four eyes bulge out. Adam's apples rise and fall in dry gulps.' And 'Hearing footsteps coming, his blood-spattered face looks upside down to notice an aproned store employee running on the ceiling toward him as time slows. His vision blurs when his eyes water. Once the tears burst from bleeding out, Chien stares into the fluorescent lighting above.'* *A lightly published young author with lots of fuel in his tank and talent to burn.*

Aisle 7

The party is going great so far. Richard Chien thrives on celebratory events, but this one has missed a beat. A half-Asian half-Caucasian wealthy businessman so bored with life he doesn't know where to go, this is a man who has the desire to buy something missing, so he has to abscond his own celebration from the trancelike atmosphere and ass-kissing guests he grows tired of. He feels that without his personal favorite snacks the surprise party thrown for him is tedious. All he needs is some chips and dip for the occasion, and it'll be perfect.

Rich walks into the supermarket wearing his tailor-made suit: a coal gray sports coat, black dress shirt, loosened tie, dark ironed slacks, and mahogany Oxford shoes from Johnston & Murphy. Even though he just got promoted, he's already aiming for the next advantageous raise.

With tremendous swagger, he struts on towards the grocery aisles, whistling aloud his commercial happiness. A new attainable happiness that will lessen his stress at his American dream occupation. However, his wealth will not come without a price.

He turns the corner, and before he enters the potato chips section, that's when Rich sees him. His feet halt at the lane's entrance. At the other end is a man just standing there. Glaring at him. Completely still with intensity.

Rich is caught off-guard because he is bothered as to why a random person has startled him to stop in his tracks. The stranger doesn't look like someone Chien would know. He's wearing a faded gray sweater, the hoodie covering his pale face donning an ungroomed beard, along with relaxed-fit khaki joggers tucked into a pair of Doc Martens. For some odd reason, Rich undergoes a sense of discomfort.

What is now their arena are two outstretched rows of colored bags, a plastic rainbow on racks produced by corporations the businessman has become part of.

Rich chooses to break through the tension and begins walking through the aisle. The other man copies his gesture, and soon the sounds of Oxfords clacking and boots thumping eventually harmonize, the acoustics escaping out of the artificial passage. Chien becomes paranoid as more alarming assumptions are implanted, and his sense of discomfort turns into a sense of danger from the nearing man. His growing appearance makes Richard's eyes linger as if this is a normal scenario, only to roll back and lock onto the visible hazel eyes currently watching him.

Steps decrease as both men continue strolling, still matching the same pace. Their bodies approach each other and stop in the center surrounded by branded chips paired with common

dips. Synchronizing their body language as they inspect the different flavors, Richard can't focus on anything except the other guy who is simply shopping for chips since there's obviously something going on, leading him to wonder if he's somebody from his past. After feeling so uncomfortable for so long in this distressing situation, Chien finally decides he's had about enough.

His head cracks sideways, and in a disguised macho voice, he frantically confronts the male.

“Look man I don't know who you are or why you're following me but if you have something to tell me just say it so we can resolve this shit like men.”

Silence is heard. Four eyes bulge out. Adam's apples rise and fall in dry gulps.

Suddenly, a motion is made. The stranger slowly reaches out his hand. . .

Crunch!

The shopper grabs a sour cream and onion bag as he gives a weird puzzled look and awkwardly walks off passed the businessman.

Wait, hold on. What just happened?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing!

That's what Rich thinks. After the encounter, this wave of relief washes over him. He finds a casual condiment and clutches it. He pauses for a breath, smiles to himself, and chuckles out of embarrassment at how he probably looked like a damn fool. A rich fool who felt less rich for a moment. He feels fortunate again to move.

Sshhlucktzz!

A jar of salsa falls and shatters across the floor.

It happened so fast that Richard didn't see it coming.

A faint grunt expelled out through the slight opening of his mouth as his stomach sucked in from a piercing sensation the instant it struck. An unknown figure had charged at him, a firm hand at his lower back and Richard's head resting upon a broad shoulder for what seems like forever.

In shock, Richard feels lost along with his breath and vulnerable because he doesn't know what's taking place. Then his mind goes blank. No more thoughts. The absence of anxiety allows him to feel only the pain of a blade.

The heavy exasperating breathing against Richard's right ear keeps him from drifting away. His acromion gets pressed up by the figure's burly chest; beneath a scrunching leather jacket is the sweatiness dampening Rich's clothes as his blood soaks through his shirt, ruining his formal blazer. Chien begins losing all feeling that his being weightlessly drops, causing his legs to wobble yet still manages to cling onto the stabbing arm. The mysterious man puts his own chin on Richard's shoulder and gently lowers him to the floor with his left arm instead of letting him collapse to the ground.

As he lies him down, the outsider forcibly grabs Chien's gripping hand and covers his fresh wound with it. At last, he angrily whispers into Richard's humid ear.

“You deserve this, Dick.”

The anonymous murderer pulls out the knife swiftly before fleeing the empty aisle. . .

Blood is starting to flood his throat triggering Richard to uncontrollably spit thick cherry droplets while streams of red drip across his flushed cheeks. All of a sudden, he senses something between his thumb and pinky during his attempt to breathe. He picks up his skull with barely any strength left. His head tilts down and his hand lifts simultaneously.

A bloody photograph in his palm.

Eyes widen. Richard's cough intensifies, splattering blood up in the air after he plops his head to the tile. Whereas he's choking, he places the photo back onto his wound. He has the urge to drag himself but is too weak. The muscles in his shaken expression give out.

Hearing footsteps coming, his blood-spattered face looks upside down to notice an aproned store employee running on the ceiling toward him as time slows. His vision blurs when his eyes water. Once the tears burst from bleeding out, Chien stares into the fluorescent lighting above.

Although Richard doesn't want to die, he is gradually accepting his tragic fate.

The employee rushes over to kneel and sit *seiza*-style beside a pool of blood, propping Richard's head onto his lap and sort of cradles him. As Richard Chien's life topples over consoling legs, he realizes the glass shards nearby symbolize his shattered soul now leaving the scene.

The sympathetic employee cannot help but mouth the words "poor guy."

Afterward, he directs his attention to the spilt salsa at a distance and releases a sigh.

A monotonous female voice announces on the intercom: "*Clean up on aisle 7.*"

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *As a kid growing up in the Rio Grande Valley, my mom would often take me to the local H-E-B, so we always visited the chip & dip aisle for my*

favorite snack: potato chips with salsa. As an adult, I began viewing life as a series of random occurrences filled with darkness and humor, separate or mixed. Different ideas and genres just spawn from the imaginary spectrum inside my head. I wanted to highlight the gap between rich and poor along with the mystery behind such a random act. Paranoia, guilt, and tragedy all factor in without reason. One would eventually question if a person deserves such a death. How it can all be taken away by someone who probably has nothing to lose and how none of it matters in the end anyway because things like this happen every day, a story without a story. High class or low class, greedy or grateful, we're all still human beings. I've been reading a lot of Chuck Palahniuk's work, and I love Kurt Vonnegut's satirical style. I guess I was trying to create something similar as oppose to the bittersweet poetry I usually write.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Kevin Adam Flores Barbosa is an English graduate who has been writing poetry and short fiction since he existed. He has been published in The Rio Review, University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley's Gallery 2016-2018 magazines, The Chachalaca Review, and a couple of zines. He is a bittersweet poet who has an Instagram and Tumblr.*

Family

By Michael Haggerty

WHY WE LIKE IT: *No fireworks here, just a seamlessly written low key urban realist tonal study that touches sensitively on life inside and outside an average working class (why do we hate that word?) family. Much of the beauty resides in its unpretentious simplicity and the joy of 'commonness' that it tenderly celebrates. The bond between husband and wife is truly touching and understatement is deftly played throughout. The prose is remarkable for being unremarkable. If Richard Ford had a double Michael Haggerty would be it.*

Quote: In the dimly lit kitchen the cold November drizzle pelted against the window as the family ate in quiet contentment.

For this kind of writing, it doesn't get any better.

Family

Chester Wegrzynowski woke at 5:00 AM. It was dark. For a moment he listened to an icy November rain pelting against the bedroom window, and then he slid from his bed. The winds rattled and shook the house. Outside the big elms swayed heavily in heaping sweeps. He looked blankly toward the soft snoring of his wife Shirley stirring slightly under the covers. She would not get up until seven-thirty when she had to wake their daughter Denise and get her ready for school. Denise was in the eighth grade at PS 66. She was a shy, skinny girl with a boyish haircut and an embarrassing acne problem.

He put on his robe and slippers and shuffled slowly into the kitchen where he lit the burner and put a kettle of water on the stove. While waiting for the water to boil, he wandered into the

bathroom, switched on the light, and looked closely at his reflection in the mirror, his grey stubble and tired eyes. Chet pulled a tube of Colgate from the cabinet and began brushing his teeth. He spent a great deal of time brushing the inside and outside of each tooth. He had read somewhere that it is important to brush your tongue, so each day he choked his way through that routine. He flossed carefully and finished the whole ordeal with a large swishing of Listerine. By the time he was finished brushing, Chet felt livelier, more awake. He showered quickly, then moved back into the kitchen, pulled the steaming kettle from the stove, and made a cup of Maxwell House coffee with two heaping teaspoons of sugar and a generous portion of half and half.

As was his daily routine, Chet grabbed the newspaper wedged between the screen and the kitchen door, lit a Marlboro, and sat at the table under the soft glow of the kitchen light reading the *Courier Express*. He began with the sports page and read about the dismal season the Bills were having. He was glad Coach Saban was back, and he was happy they were giving the ball to O.J. more, but the team still couldn't rack up enough points to win very many games. They had just gotten pounded by Cleveland, and with only one more game at the old War Memorial Stadium, Chet figured maybe they'd have a better shot next year when they moved into their new stadium way out in Orchard Park. After he read the paper cover to cover, he made himself a sandwich of scrambled eggs with cheddar cheese on a toasted buttered bagel. He doused the eggs with Tabasco and threw a little iceberg lettuce on top. He ate quietly at the table while listening to the morning show on WEBR. When he finished, he washed his plate and cup in the sink and placed them in the rack to dry; then, he went back into the dark bedroom and dressed quietly for work, careful not to wake Shirley sleeping soundly in their bed.

Chet took his lunchbox from the refrigerator and headed out the door toward his job at the General Mills Factory. He counted on Shirley making his lunch the night before, usually a big bologna or ham sandwich, an apple or a pear or a banana, and something sweet like a chocolate chip cookie or a brownie. During his lunch break Chet bought a carton of milk or maybe a coffee in the employee cafeteria. He pulled the Ford from the garage and headed in the darkness toward work. He drove down Michigan Avenue, over the black steel lift bridge, onto Kelly Island, and through the gates at General Mills. Chet parked in the big lot and walked toward the employee door. He inhaled the sweet scent of grains and oats roasting, the clean smell of Cheerios wafting from the factory. Chet walked through the door and into the plant.

Inside, the plant was bright, noisy, and warm. Grain was brought by rail or ship and stored in the tall, massive grain elevators for later use. Chet's job was to manage the productivity of a crew of workers. Their job was to take an oat flour base and mix it into dough to be slowly cooked and pushed through an extruder. It was an important step in the production of cereal and flour. His crew worked methodically and diligently. The crew liked and respected Chet. They regarded him as fair and protective, a good liaison between the Union and Management.

Chet, like most of the generations of employees, enjoyed working at the factory. The monotonous humming and barking of machines, the constant predictable, methodical movement of men working, fork-lifts running, the sweet smell of soft grain wafting through the air soothed Chet. He could think of no other place he'd rather work.

Punch out for the first shift was at 4:00 PM. As was usual, much of the crew headed over to the Swannie House for a couple of after work beers. The shift change was a busy time at the Swannie House. By the time Chet and his crew arrived, the scoopers from the grain silos we

already at the bar clutching brown bottles of Genesee, Schmidt's or Schaefer beer, and knocking back tiny shots of whiskey. Bowls of peanuts and pretzels lined the bar. The bar was filled with men, smoke, loud talking, and barking laughter.

Chet squeezed into a spot at the end of the bar next to Ed *Little Egg's* Lannon, already attacking a couple of pickled eggs from the big glass jar sitting behind the bar accompanied by a handful of saltine crackers. Danny *Lump* Lukomski, Jimmy *Cigar* Sheehan, and *Rooster* Shanahan clutched their beers, filling the corner in deep conversation. Chet ordered a Genesee and overheard Lump Lukomski sharing his marriage woes with the boys.

"She don't do nothing but bitch and moan every goddamn day. I tell ya, if it were legal, I'd take a fryin' pan to her head."

"Jesus, Lump, you got that right," Jimmy Sheehan said, chomping on his cigar. "My ol' lady too. Do this, do that, what time ya comin' home? It ain't a moment's peace with her."

Chet turned from the bar and entered the circle. Rooster Shanahan lit a Winston and exhaled from the corner of his mouth. He was a big guy, half deaf, and had to bend into the circle to hear the conversation.

"My wife used to be a real peach," he said. "She's let herself go, done nothin' except gotten fatter and meaner. I tell ya, it ain't the same as it was when we first got married."

Chet took a long pull from his beer. He looked out the big window watching some of boys in his crew filing into the warm bar. He chuckled idly along with the boys wondering if they

were just talkin' to be talkin' or if they really couldn't stand the wives they married so long ago. Hell, Chet thought, these guys were no peaches either.

Little Eggs Lannon pointed a pickled egg toward the boys for emphasis, "All my wife does is complain about everything, or she gives me the silent treatment. She can go on for a long time with the silent treatment and most of the time I don't know what the hell she's pissed about. Last week she didn't talk to me for two days and then she finally told me she's getting tired of me keeping the toilet seat up!"

"I guess they're just about impossible," Lump Lukowski said.

"Women," Jimmy Sheehan sighed, "you can't live with 'em; you can't live with 'em!"

"Boy, you got that right," Rooster Shanahan agreed under a roar of laughter.

Chet ordered another beer and took a tiny shot of whiskey that Jimmy Sheehan bought for the boys in the corner. The place began thinning out. The boys were heading home to have supper with their wives and kids. He'd see them all again tomorrow and the next day and the next.

Chet walked slowly to the parking lot, got into the Ford, and drove over the bridge, past the Swannie House, and back towards his neighborhood. It was dark and that cold rain continued to pelt angrily on his windshield. The glare from street lights and a long blurry trail of red tail lights before him on the shiny streets caused him to squint as he drove. He made two stops along the way, a bakery where he purchased a half-dozen éclairs, and a flower shop.

He arrived home with his wife at the kitchen stove flipping pork chops in a cast-iron skillet. The table was set. Scalloped potatoes were in the oven and green beans simmered in a shallow pan. His daughter sat comfortably at the table waiting for dinner and thumbing through a copy of *Life* magazine. Chet handed her the bag filled with the éclairs and gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek. He moved toward his wife putting his arm around her waist. Her face flushed crimson-pink as he placed a small bouquet of six white roses into her hand. Flustered and surprised she took the roses, filled a vase with water, clipped the stems, and set them onto the center of the table.

In the dimly lit kitchen the cold November drizzle pelted against the window as the family ate in quiet contentment.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I like writing stories about my hometown, Buffalo, NY, and I like going to bars. I especially enjoy going to the many neighborhood taverns that make up this fine city. I suppose my influence for this story comes from being in this particular tavern that sits right on the waterfront next to the grain elevators and General Mills where Cheerios are made. The Swannie House is the oldest tavern in Buffalo, so I imagine that a lot of drinking and bullshitting from the workers at the factory has taken place there over the years. The story just grew from drinking in that bar.*

I'm pretty much influenced, one way or another, by every writer I've read over the years. Writers I've read in the past year or so include Lucia Berlin, Larry Brown, Donald Ray Pollack, Denis Johnson, Jim Harrison, Richard Ford, Daniel Woodrell, Annie Proulx, Grace Paley, Jim Thompson, & Richard Yates.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Michael Burns Haggerty is a novelist and short story writer who currently lives with his wife in downtown Buffalo, NY and in Wilson, NY located on the shores of Lake Ontario. Mr. Haggerty recently had Sweet Cheeks and More Stories from the Nickel City (2017). These comically dark and frighteningly real stories present the hard-hitting, determined, and flawed characters that live and die in Buffalo and Western New York. He is also the author of The Road is Open (2015). Set in 1978, it is the story of two longtime friends from Buffalo, NY who engage in a cross-country hitch-hiking adventure looking for a brother who mysteriously disappeared a few years

earlier. Along the way they encounter extraordinary landscapes and meet a series of remarkable characters who represent a truthful, gritty and heart-warming portrait of America.

YOU HEARD IT HERE FIRST

By M. Kolbet

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author PETER J. STAVROS writes: I was enthralled by the depth of imagination in the writing, where, like the jigsaw puzzle in this story, things were not always as they were pictured on the outside; for example, behind the doors of an empty hallway “warriors were hiding in caves, or concealed in a jungle, and ready to attack,” and an “undersized apartment seemed replete with hidden chambers, each closet room enough for armies.” New neighbors burdened with unpacking their vast store of belongings and unable to locate their cell phones “were blind as prophets, neither ready to tell fortunes.” And then there was the tension created by this insufferable “pre-loaded” parrot, tenuous retribution for a long unresolved sibling rivalry, which, while courteous enough not to soil the furniture, was an otherwise most impertinent guest, exasperatingly speaking generally “with jabbing words, or quot[ing] television shows” and knowing no other tricks, at least none the bird was willing to share. For me, the parrot had it coming, whatever were to come for him, as I anxiously read to the end to find out. Quote: ‘Erica came to know the different characters of silence, for it was not always monastic. Some silence existed only in a chaotic conversation with itself. Another stayed cool for a long time after it began, lifted perhaps from a stone jar. And while a third kind almost seemed to demand payment, a fourth ruffled itself off for nothing. Some had to be navigated. Others felt like an office memorandum, requiring filing.*

You Heard it Here First by M. Kolbet

“Get your trousers on.”

Erica Becker stirred, but didn't do what she was told. That wasn't her style. She'd been listening to her new parrot for over a month, periodically showing off the animal to curious friends, though just as often suffering a mental lethargy in having to share her space with another being. In what she would come to consider a moral feint on both parts, she'd inherited the bird when her Aunt Irma died. Ulysses' arrival felt like the fulfillment of some atavistic contract.

Though Erica's aunt was her only written correspondent, Erica had counted on nothing. Despite their letters, she thought of Irma as a shadow of someone she knew a long time ago.

Nor had anything suggested the companion Irma wrote about was a talking bird. Every time her aunt related conversations with Ulysses at breakfast, Erica assumed he was an old friend. And when the bird first came to her apartment, she thought perhaps he had been. In the final years of her life, Multiple sclerosis had confined Irma to her apartment, so Ulysses was at least a sounding board.

News of Irma's death arrived late, just two days before Ulysses came into Erica's life. A neighbor woman had written a short note to Erica, offering her condolences and commenting on what she called a mountain of correspondence. It cheered and saddened Erica to think her aunt had read and possibly re-read each letter; it also made her feel guilty. She kept Aunt Irma's letters a day at most and then threw them out. After the note from the neighbor, a lawyer telephoned to confirm the death and advise Erica a package would be arriving the next day. She'd been thinking what present she might buy herself that month, but such self-delivered gifts would never be a bird or anything that feeds. The lawyer couldn't tell Erica what the package was either; he simply asked if she would be home. She would be. She was. And so Ulysses came to be hers.

After a week together, Erica started to leave the radio on so the bird wouldn't be lonely while she was at work. It occurred to her how much easier their relationship would be if Ulysses would mimic what she offered him, if he were willing to discuss composers in some somnolent DJ's voice, for he seemed adept at accents. He might compare Haydn to Mozart, or the contrapuntalism of Bach. Even if he drawled out the words, like he was calling a ball game, it would be an improvement. It didn't take. The bird kept to his classless ways. As it was Ulysses

either talked about what was immediately in front of him, often with jabbing words, or quoted television shows. His repertoire left Erica with little hope for the life Irma had led in the end.

“Do you have any other tricks?” Ulysses teased her with silence. “No, bird. He talks, which is great, but still just a bird.” She sighed. “Who can live a tremendously long time. I don’t even know how old you are. And apparently I’m not reaching you. What kind of parrot comes pre-loaded?” She spoke as though the parrot were Poirot, ready to reveal the intricacies behind a mysterious death.

“*Glad we could get together,*” squawked Ulysses. His tone wasn’t anything Erica recognized. He followed his incantation with a mock curtsy. His left eye coiled round, like that of a fish. Sometimes it seemed to Erica that even if it wasn’t Irma’s intent, Ulysses wanted to humiliate her.

“Thanks,” Erica told Ulysses.

“*Let’s be careful out there.*”

Erica scoffed. Though it was early, she carried herself to bed after double-checking that both the radio and television were off. It was a warm night, and she left the window open.

Ulysses could collect the world as it flew up to him.

Saturday morning Erica spent an hour reading in bed, largely to avoid the bird. She revisited *The Odyssey*, something she hadn’t read since high school, and ventured from bed only to make coffee or use the bathroom. On both sojourns she ignored Ulysses’ noisy calls for attention—*Unless I’m wrong, which you know, I’m not*—and complaints about how careless she was.

When Erica finally dressed, it had started raining so heavily that her plan to take a walk was postponed. Captive, she made breakfast and fed Ulysses, who accepted a small pile of seeds in silence.

At the back of her closet Erica found an old jigsaw puzzle, something her mother had given her, noting it had kept them busy a full week. Erica was sure it would take her a month at least. Dedicating vast swaths of space in the small apartment to the endeavor, she cleared a table and began to pick through the pieces, shiny on one side and a moribund grey on the other. She'd managed to turn over and sort out a small patch of sea when someone knocked on the door.

Erica jumped, spilling cardboard water to the floor. Ulysses laughed. Erica swore. Usually her neighbors kept to themselves, offering little more than an obligatory greeting in the hallway. Knocking was reserved for noise violations, emergencies, or prologues to nothing. She opened the door, fearing the worst.

“Hi! Just wanted to introduce myself since you’ll be seeing me once in a while. Don’t want you to think there’s a thief or have to call the cops.” The newcomer spoke quickly, pausing only to point to an open door at the end of the corridor.

“Does that mean Mrs. Winston died?” Erica processed the information, thinking how much larger Mrs. Winston’s apartment was, one larger island in a sea of them floating over the avenues.

“No. That would be horrid. I don’t think I could live where someone had died. She moved in with her daughter or something.” Given the age of the building, Erica figured someone had probably died in every apartment. “I’m Herald. And that’s my boyfriend, Troy.” An arm extended from the door, supporting a waving hand. “Wow, is that a puzzle?” Herald pushed her

head past Erica, who was considering she might have to invent a death in order to end the conversation.

“It was raining.” She shrugged. “And Ulysses and I aren’t talking.”

“Who? Is he your boyfriend?”

“He’s my parrot.” Herald gawked, as though she’d heard prisoner instead of pet.

“*Just the facts, ma’am,*” said Ulysses. He slurred his words as though Erica had ruined him, let him become moth-eaten.

Impossibly, Herald’s mouth widened.

“That is so cool!” She turned, probably to call to Troy. Erica stopped her.

“I’ll take him out walking later so you can have a proper talk.” It didn’t fit the facts, as they never walked in the hall, but it was enough to satisfy Herald. Troy was calling her name with unmistakable complaint.

“Okay, bye!” Herald ran down the hall and vanished. Erica closed the door, sighing deeply.

“*A walk?*” asked Ulysses, before turning it into a ridiculous chant: “*A walk, a walk, a walk. Or a boat ride to home. A walk, a walk, a walk...*”

“Maybe. And you’ll have to sit on my arm.” No matter what he asked, Ulysses had a way of making Erica feel horribly complicit in some liturgical formalism.

An hour later, the rain outside still falling as though to rope the world shut, Erica had enough of the puzzle. The sea beneath her was slow to form. She’d managed only the bottom edge of what, according to the picture on the box, would be an intrepid boat.

Occasionally Erica let Ulysses out of his cage *inside* the apartment. He was courteous enough not to shit on her second-hand couch or the kitchen table, and could usually be charmed

back into his cage with a bit of corn. Besides his caged journey from Aunt Irma's, this would be the first time she took him outside. Even the corridor risked the wrath of the super, open doors and other apartments, or the stairwell and wide world beyond, from Ithaca, New York to Jakarta.

"Let's go entertain them," Erica muttered. Ulysses was contemplative.

"Going to see Irma?" he asked. Erica had coaxed the bird onto her arm and was stepping gingerly toward the door, afraid Ulysses would fly into his usual routine, exploring the various corners of the apartment. Hiding long enough to be found.

"No, I'm afraid not. She died, remember?" Death seemed to mean nothing to the parrot. Erica was loath to foist the crisis of life on him. "Irma sent you to live with me. You just be strong enough to forget." She didn't know how long a parrot's memory was anyway.

Ulysses said nothing. When Erica opened the door, he spoke Irma's name again, as though playing a game. When there was no reply, he buried his beak in his feathers. Erica couldn't be sure that he wasn't crying.

He was, she thought, as ephemeral as a child.

The hallway, a narrow stretch past six other doors before terminating in a stairwell, was blessedly empty. Erica could hear noises from behind the doors, as if warriors were hiding in caves, or concealed in a jungle, and ready to attack.

She paraded Ulysses the length of the corridor twice, hoping her footsteps would be invitation enough for the new neighbors. She didn't want to knock on their door. Even if he chanted and quoted and quibbled, Erica had begun to feel Ulysses was not a showpiece but an embarrassment. Besides, this was no ship with passengers desperate to leave their pestilential cabins for the open air of a deck. The corridor was dull, in need of a paint job. There were no other passing ships with flags that spoke of exotic destinations or danger. No sea monsters. No

dead bodies floating by, victims of war who'd been unable to succeed in their escape. In all, nothing to mythologize.

But Herald heard Erica as she turned a second time to head home.

"You brought him out!" Ulysses raised his head, looking for a revelation. Herald turned her head to shout for Troy. He came dutifully and marveled at seeing the bird up close, lifting a hand to touch Ulysses' dazzling feathers. He withdrew it, sensing touch would be a violation.

"Well, he's bright enough," said Troy. The flat light of the hallway, which gave the walls a prison tint, could not spoil the bird's vigor. Troy addressed Ulysses directly. "Tell me a story." Ulysses moved his head side to side impertinently, as though he were a repository of secrets he refused to share.

"Good night and good luck."

"Hell, I've got to get my phone." Troy bounded back into the apartment confidently. But the place was too new, undefined even, and he came back emptyhanded. He and Herald were blind as prophets, neither ready to tell fortunes. They had stacks of dishes and books, clothes still stuffed into suitcases, and unopened boxes that would surprise them later, as though they'd inherited unexpected treasure. They had it all, but couldn't say what it meant. When neither could find their phones, Erica waved goodbye and retreated to her apartment.

"Just one more thing," said Ulysses as Erica closed the door. She didn't care for the way he said it and sat down again to confront the puzzle. Ulysses launched into mindless chatter, songs in the first person that made him sound like a champion who needed only his own wind. He didn't heed her calls for quiet. She found she could only focus on the minute ridges of the puzzle when she capped her ears with wax earplugs.

Even in the relative calm, the journey was a labyrinth, its chronology confused. Erica had not grown up with jigsaw puzzles. This one was merely evidence of her mother's attitude toward everything, that what she cast off might be useful to someone else. In the past the practice meant re-gifting candles and unflattering clothes, towels that were too thin. If you had to occupy yourself with more than music, her mother considered crosswords the best option. She had tolerated and occasionally delighted in the word games Erica's father invented. But sitting for a jigsaw was too mundane, a timewaster she was happy to let the masses endure. This puzzle with its promised valiant sloop, may have been a gift from a new acquaintance, someone uninitiated in her mother's standards or aggressive jealousy.

As she fitted the pieces, Erica came to know the different characters of silence, for it was not always monastic. Some silence existed only in a chaotic conversation with itself. Another stayed cool for a long time after it began, lifted perhaps from a stone jar. And while a third kind almost seemed to demand payment, a fourth raffled itself off for nothing. Some had to be navigated. Others felt like an office memorandum, requiring filing. She understood that she could not know them all in one day, or for long if Ulysses chose to interrupt.

By late afternoon she had finished the puzzle only to discover that the picture did not match the image on the box. She supposed it might have the same number of pieces—if one were inclined to count—but instead of the noble ship she'd expected, she'd rendered an ancient scene. Deaf mariners ignored with their insistent captain, Odysseus, as he demanded they steer him to the Sirens. The hero was strapped to the mast like a piece of drying meat.

Erica scoffed. When she tried to direct the bird's attention to it, Ulysses said nothing. Even turning on the television during dinner did nothing to elicit more than "*Book 'em, Danno*", delivered in a sour squawk. She went to bed uneasy.

Sunday morning she slept until the new neighbors woke her with the sound of jazz roiling down the hallway. Probably this was a ritual, too, conjuring a false peace through routine. They would claim the music relaxed them, that it allowed breakfast to stretch. She could hear their simplistic refrains as clear as any of Ulysses' quotations: *Even God needs a day of rest.*

Crawling out of bed, Erica was startled when the telephone rang. No one ever called except her mother, who, in her old-fashioned way, insisted on talking instead of texting. Thankfully her mother didn't call often, disrupting whatever harmony Erica could grab between workweeks. They had no schedule for conversation, for her mother often noted that you shouldn't spend the time unless you had something important to say.

Erica wondered what it might be when she picked up her phone. She chose not to wait, launching instead into a description of Irma's death and Ulysses' unexpected arrival. How the bird was a novel joy less than half the time, and something ominous more often.

"Yes, I'd heard Irma died," her mother said. "When we were children, Irma feared me for a time. I always got more attention than her, At school or out in the city. Even from our parents, though they'd never cop to it. And when fear passed, it transformed into hatred, though Irma probably considered she'd be doing her young men a favor. Getting rid of me so they could be loved more completely by her." Her mother chuckled darkly. The sin of her youth was not stealing a beau, but casting him aside to soon after the theft. Erica's mother believed nothing was immoral if it prompted love, even the thin, drooling kind destined not to endure. The kind that burst forth on Friday and dried up by Sunday. "I suppose Irma figured you were rather like me. You know, apples and trees and all that."

Erica was loath to turn into her mother, so she changed the subject.

"What were you calling about, mom?"

“*Show you what you are,*” chimed Ulysses. Erica ignored him, sparing only a thought for her mother’s inability to ethically manage anything.

“Oh, that,” she said falsely, as if it were nothing. “I’m finally on the board at the country club. I thought you’d want to know.”

“But Mrs. Menelaus—”

“She’s out. Sometimes someone has to lose for you to win, dear. But it’s hardly a war, is it? I simply convinced the other voting members that I was the better option. Besides, old Penelope is more of the bridge set. Let her keep that.”

“I suppose,” said Erica. She wondered how her mother had convinced the committee. What kind of decoys she’d employed, what sop. The threat of exposure perhaps, keeping their illicit affairs quiet. The rest of the committee wouldn’t need money, though they’d still take it. Or names to be used later. And Erica wished she had kept Irma’s letters, that she might hold them like a fortune teller. A cold read that hints at an abstracted future, a troubled one.

“Something to write in your diary, perhaps,” her mother was saying. “On this bloodless Sunday, my mother ascended her first step in the Athens Country Club.”

Erica hung up. Her mother wouldn’t ring back. Might not even remember the slight the next time they spoke. She would only call Erica when she had good news to share, details of how another back was exposed and stabbed.

The world crystallized. Clarified. Erica had always presumed Aunt Irma looked to the heavens for guardians, when in truth she knew a nocturnal hunter when she saw one. And Irma could be as cruel as her sister. Ulysses was a phantom revenge, Irma’s revolt against the ritual duplicity—common as a pink-fingered sunrise—practiced by Erica’s mother. And the mountains of correspondence from Erica were not poured over wistfully, but were fuel for her revulsion.

Erica had a moment of fright when she looked up at Ulysses' empty cage. She called for the bird, assuming he'd flown to a dark corner of the apartment.

"Come on, Ulysses. Come on down."

The undersized apartment suddenly seemed replete with hidden chambers, each closet room enough for armies. Every cupboard concealing a single assassin. Erica moved through the kitchen with a watchful gaze. Paced out the living room. Headed to the bathroom in an attempt to seem casual. After all, this was her apartment. Her private kingdom. She paid for it, and even those months when she was a bit late with the rent, she managed to make the super see it her way. She could always ask her mother for help, promise to repay the debt without meaning it.

Her new watch, last month's little gift to self, caught the midday sun. She considered sending the damn bird out the window, washing her hands of the whole thing. Erica smirked. No one could call it murder, not when she was freeing him. No detective in the world would make a storied case against her.

"*Who loves ya, baby?*" The squawking words erupted from behind her.

Irma had taught the bird to be a simple repeating machine, a blunt weapon ready to sow chaos wherever he went. Presently Ulysses was done speaking. He seemed eager to explore the value of sight. His head bobbed. His beak thrust toward Erica, who struggled to defend herself. Her arms flapped uselessly at Ulysses. Yet even as blood broke from her skin, she couldn't help thinking about how bothersome the new neighbors were likely to be. How dull the city had become. How insipid her aunt had been, even in seeking retribution. Poor, pitiful Irma, Erica thought, her pride never satisfied. Such blind fanaticism. What had the old newsmen said? Words that rang true whether discussing false heroes, wasted journeys, or mistaken gifts. That was just the way the world was.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *While stuck at home I'm listening to Love in the Time of Cholera and was caught by a parrot and a death in an early portion of the novel. Thematically, The Odyssey features a problematic hero who often seems selfish and troubles my students, particularly in the story's forced sense of justice.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *M. Kolbet teaches and writes in Oregon. His work can most recently be seen in Fictional Café.*

EDITOR'S BIO: *Peter J. Stavros is a writer in Louisville, Kentucky. "Room 310," and "Ten Something in the Morning" from Volume 2 of Fleas on the Dog, are from his forthcoming chapbook, Three in the Morning and You Don't Smoke Anymore, which will be released this May by Etchings Press(<http://etchings.uindy.edu>). Peter is also a playwright who has had plays produced across the country. More can be found at www.peterjstavros.com and follow on Twitter @PeterJStavros. His story **Room 310** and his play **Three Sides** appear in this issue.*

The Muse

By Heather Whited

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A pervading sense of the mysterious and the nocturnal inundates this psychosensual somewhat gothic-toned Symbolist story of a sibylline young woman—like an ancient succubus-- who is a transient siren call to wordsmiths who feed her Delphic muse. In particular, the action dwells on Caleb, a young writer, who bonds with Opal, in a relationship that is less symbiotic than needfully sycophantic. Opal is the perfect name, as she ‘shimmers’ and ‘opalesces’, like a radiant spectrum of colour (Cdn. sp.), with her shifting moods and cryptic dialogue. The faceted prose is both ravishing and dreamlike.*

Quote: Everyone he encountered seemed too large, too large by far. They lacked all grace and they lumbered. He thought their faces looked like unrisen dough. Every laugh and cough made him flinch. Other people spoke too loudly and were almost, to a person, ugly to him. He put bread into his basket, and vegetables, and a cheerfully pink bottle of wine. The whole time he tried to avoid looking at other people, but the strain of being around them made his hairline sweat and his chest tight with anxiety.

He rode the elevator up to her apartment, stepped into the dim and musty windowless hallway.

The heavy gate clanged shut behind him and began to rumble away to its next stop. Caleb checked his watch. A minute to spare. He knew he could not be early. It was almost like she did not exist until the time of the meeting arrived. A held breath exhaled as the minute hand crept forward. Her building was old and especially on damp days like this became a musty.

Condensation had blossomed on the lone window at the end of the hallway.

Right at 5:00, he knocked on the door. Opal didn't answer immediately and his heart began to beat faster. She's fine, he told himself. Don't worry so much. A few more seconds passed. Caleb knocked again, more frantically now. Finally, he heard the lock slide from its place. His whole body sparked into life knowing she was close. The door opened. Opal looked up at him.

"Sorry," she said, after a long pause where a sliver of recognition appeared to break through her exhaustion. She pulled her robe tighter around her thin frame, blinking away confusion. She studied the wall behind Caleb, the door frame, and then his face, and with a yawn she accepted them all. "I was sleeping."

Caleb only smiled.

"No problem, really. Are you okay? I texted earlier and..."

Caleb stepped into the apartment and switched the lights on, making Opal flinch, her blinks the stunned and uncomfortable motions of a nocturnal animal suddenly exposed to light. She spent a moment peering around as if in inspection for something she recognized. She pulled back her long hair as she walked to the kitchen. He followed her with his eyes, rapt. In the kitchen, she reached for the cabinet where the mugs were kept, but became distracted staring out the window at the rain. Her arm drooped down before she picked one out.

"I'm just fine," she said, seemingly having just remembered what Caleb had said at the door several moments ago. "Just fine."

Caleb set down the library books he had picked up before arriving and rushed to the kitchen to make her tea before she could do it herself.

"Please," he said. "Let me."

She smiled at him and sat down at the table. Opal sank into the chair like waking and walking the length of her apartment had been exhausting. Caleb switched on the electric kettle.

“I hope to get a whole chapter done tonight,” said Opal.

“Great!”

“Are you up for it?”

“Whatever you need. I’m- I’m very clean. The connection should be easy.”

“You’re a lovely boy, Caleb.”

Caleb brought two mugs of hot tea to the table and left one to sit in front of an empty chair for himself. While Opal started on her drink, he began to rummage through the cabinets and refrigerator. He found a piece of fruit that looked still edible on the counter and brought it to the table.

“I know you haven’t eaten,” he said, finally taking the first sip of his tea, but she scrunched up her nose and looked away. She shrugged guiltily, a coy and untrue gesture, to confess and placed a small, cold hand on his. He almost felt their connection latch into place on him and his mouth dropped open in unexpected pleasure. She removed her hand with a demure, chiding wave and her eyes cast down.

“Not yet,” she said.

He drew his mouth shut and gave a mute nod. She began to eat large and ravenous bites of her food.

He didn’t know how she made it through the rest of the week without him. She seemed to hover over the earth without really being a part of it or touching it at all. He knew that there had been others before him, other young men and women who had come here over the years to be her muse. She did not speak of them, though once they had been the ones to nurture her and had been happy here like he was. She ate gratefully when he was around and was always there on

Fridays and that was all that really mattered right now. While Opal finished her food, Caleb inspected the bare kitchen shelves.

“I’m going to go to the store. No protests. I’ll be right back.”

Caleb ran back out into the rain and into the large supermarket across the street. The bright lights were offensive after the gentle dimness of Opal’s home. Everyone he encountered seemed too large, too large by far. They lacked all grace and they lumbered. He thought their faces looked like unrisen dough. Every laugh and cough made him flinch. Other people spoke too loudly and were almost, to a person, ugly to him. He put bread into his basket, and vegetables, and a cheerfully pink bottle of wine. The whole time he tried to avoid looking at other people, but the strain of being around them made his hairline sweat and his chest tight with anxiety.

The cashier was the only solace; solidly built, a pleasant, handsome face, the man, was not especially young but for that was distinguished. Tall and bearded, with wide shoulders, his strength seemed unquestionable. He exuded grace to Caleb, who calmed in his presence. Caleb wondered if Opal, who loved beautiful things, would like to hear about the man and was sorry, as he stumbled out into the clammy evening, that he had not looked to see if he was wearing a name tag.

Opal was asleep on the couch when he opened the door. Here, things were fine, the only place they were. Only a few lamps gave light. The only sounds were secondary, from other places in the building; footsteps from the floor above. He decided not to wake her and went to the kitchen, where he began to make a proper meal. He started a can of soup simmering and then cleaned. There were things to throw out, things that had rotted or gone bad during the week. A brown banana that fell apart as he put it in the plastic trash bag. The fuzzy end of a loaf of bread. Tiny flies, darting specks in the air, hovered over the spoiled food. Small deaths collected around Opal

during the week. He sprayed surfaces and wiped them until they gleamed. Once that was done, he made a sandwich to complete the meal.

The smell of cooking woke Opal and she soon wandered back to the kitchen. There was a hint of the movements of a feral animal in the way she sniffed the air and peered around Caleb at the food with her long hair in front of her face, but she remained elegant even in her wildness. He set the table and she sat down in front of the food.

“After this, we get started,” Opal said as she picked up the large sandwich, glistening with bacon grease, that he had made her.

Caleb agreed. She didn't ask if he was ready because now, after a year, she knew he was. As soon as the meal was over, it would be time.

He told her about his roommates while she ate with a powerful appetite. They were noisy, he said. They were stupid, he said. One of them had scared him by dropping a coffee cup in the other room and the fright had made him jump and stumble and cut his foot on the wooden frame of his bed. Opal listened and responded with calm. That she wasn't annoyed by the roommates made them seem not as bad as they had earlier in the day and he was embarrassed that he had made such a fuss. Quickly, Caleb decided to switch topics.

“There was a man at the store,” he announced with as much false confidence as he could muster that she might be interested in this, wiping his damp palms on his trousers. Looking up, he saw that she was licking grease from her fingers, absorbed in that task.

“Hmmm?” Opal lifted her eyes toward him and Caleb felt himself blushing.

“There was something...he was like an oasis. You should have seen his hands.”

Opal stood, smiling serenely at him as she did, and patted his head before walking from the room.

He washed dishes while she changed from her sleeping clothes. When Opal came back out, she was in a skirt and sweater and it was time to work.

He got out the pad of paper from the drawer in the desk in the living room. She sat on the couch and he sat with her.

Caleb flipped open to where they had left off last week. Opal transcended the earth during these times and needed not only his energy, but for him to write what she dictated. He took off his shirt to expose his clean skin. He was cold, but that would not last long.

He nodded to show her he was ready and the familiar humming filled his chest as she closed her eyes and breathed deeply. He felt the invisible fibers reach out to him, sink in, and begin their churning. Opal sighed in bliss as the connection was established and his energy flowed into her.

Briefly, he let his eyes close and the world there was golden. But it was time to work and he opened his eyes to Opal smiling at him.

“Take a moment,” she said.

Caleb felt a joyful surge and sank back for a moment. He heard Opal breathing deeply in contentment. Finally, she spoke again.

“It’s time.”

He sat up and reached for his pen and pad of paper.

She began narrating the novel again without pause and Caleb wrote. Between them, heat flowed, heat that Opal turned into words and gave back to him to write. Heat turned into words that he filtered and put on the page. They were extensions of each other. Caleb was never sure if she spoke when she gave him her story or if she cycled the words back to him through their connection.

During these times, he felt everything fiercely. Each small movement against the couch, each of Opal's words was like a burning stroke on his skin. The connection between them sometimes twitched, filling him with a tingling. She transmitted until after midnight, when the channel of energy became thin and whiny and Opal started to shiver.

"You're tired," said Caleb. He heard the words, he thought, but even now couldn't remember if he'd really used his voice or if they were something he had thought and she had felt. "We should stop. It was eighteen pages tonight."

Opal sighed. She let the connection drop fully and Caleb lurched where he sat as he was released. Instantly, he was freezing and he grabbed his shirt. He shivered so hard that his teeth knocked and he buttoned his buttons, the ones he could manage, crookedly. There were dark circles under Opal's eyes and she slouched, hardly able to sit up.

"A whole chapter. Just like I had hoped." She pulled herself up a little on the couch. "I was waiting for days for you to come so I could tell you all about it, so we could work. Thank you. I'm going to go lie down while you get things ready."

Caleb staggered to his feet and helped Opal stand. Leaning against him, he walked her to the bedroom and she lowered herself to the bed.

In the bathroom, he filled up the tub with hot water and her favorite bath salts. He went to her room where she lay on her bed, eyes closed and her slender arm draped over them.

"It's ready, Opal."

He helped her stand again, let her again lean on him as she stumbled to the bathroom, and she went in, closing the door behind her. He waited until she called for him and then went to fill her request, which was a hot cup of tea. Within minutes, he had brought it to her, making his way through a heavy cloud of steam to leave it on the edge of the bathtub. He picked up the clothes

off of the floor and when he left the bathroom, he folded them and went into her room and set them on her bed.

He felt their presence here in the bedroom, the others who had come before him and done this thing for her. He felt them in this room, felt them move his hands to fold the clothes, felt their breath on his neck. They were his icy shadow and they thought his thoughts. He thought theirs in return. But he wasn't scared. Love for Opal coursed through their presence. The other muses were very old, some of them with musty, decaying voices, much older than he liked to acknowledge. There seemed to be layers of them, reaching back years, stacked on top of each other.

He sat for a while next to the clothes he had put on her bed. He caught his breath and listened to the noise of the ghosts of the other muses and let them come to him. Opal's room was bare and clean. She had few clothes, all of them similar and colorless, hanging in a neat row in her closet. A few books on her shelf. A small, porcelain lion sat on a table by her bed. Caleb wondered if he would haunt this place later, when Opal was done with him. He tried to imagine the person who would come after him, but he couldn't. It seemed impossible that this would not last forever. He left her room.

For a moment, he watched steam leak from under the bathroom door and then he went and laid down on the couch.

She refilled the bathwater twice and Caleb watched television in the living room, drinking from a large bottle of wine and occasionally getting up to bring her more tea until she was done. He was woozy from giving so much of himself to her, woozy from the wine. Exhausted/[Exhaustion](#) threatened to overcome him, and pain too, like his skin, every inch, was bruised, but it was a pleasant feeling, one that left Caleb disconnected from the world. He wondered sometimes, in

the dreamlike moments listening to the splash of bathwater, if he imagined these evenings here. He looked down at his foot and saw that it was scratched from earlier in the day when he had hit it against his bed after his roommate accidentally scared him. He supposed he was real and here, after all.

Opal emerged from the bathroom swallowed by her robe. Fragrant steam billowed into the living room behind her.

“Goodnight, Caleb,” she said. She absently touched the wet ends of her hair. “I’ll see you next week.”

He knew where the blankets and pillows were and he got them for himself when he heard the door close. From the couch, he watched until her lights went out. It was almost morning.

Fridays were his favorite day.

He woke only a few hours later, as he always did after a night of work.

For a moment, he had the impression of a lanky young man standing at the foot of the couch. He was transposed over the morning like a thin film. In that second, the room was icy and different. The curtains were a heavy, velvety material. There was a record player in the corner. Not a record player. A gramophone, a great, hulking thing that was not out of place here. The young man didn’t see him, but called Opal’s name. Only, it wasn’t Opal that he said, but another name for who she had been then. Caleb realized the vision and tried to catch the name and bring it back with him, but he wasn’t able.

The scene dissolved instantly as he woke. This had happened a few times before but he was never as aware of the feeling as he was now. He gasped as a blink showed him one last time what had been. He let his head sink to his knees and breathed deeply.

The ritual was for him to let himself out when he was ready. Caleb knew he would not see her this morning. He showered and put his clothes back on and had coffee while reading over the chapter from the night before. Seeing the words again made the ghost of his connection with Opal ache. It would be another week before he was back and squirmed thinking of how long it would be until he could again slip into oneness with her and quell the itchy craving gnawing at him.

He washed his cup and went out briefly onto the fire escape next to her kitchen window and into the misty morning. When that was done, he made a call to see that more groceries were delivered for her later in the week. He stood at her bedroom door for a moment, listening for any noises inside. There was never anything and it made him want to cry and beg for a little more time, but he knew that would be undignified, and so he didn't..

Caleb gathered his things and left.

He hated this, the long stretch until next week. Saturday mornings hurt. At the bus stop, he crossed his arms and watched the neighborhood slowing coming to life, despondency turning into surliness. There was none of the magic of Opal anywhere here. Caleb rode the bus home glaring at the view out the window.

At home, his roommates were still asleep. Caleb went back to bed, where he stared at the ceiling thinking of the night before until he too was able to rest.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *can honestly say I'm a bit surprised that this weird little story found a home, and on its first time out too! I've fiddled with this piece a few times since writing the first draft a few years ago, but recent time off has given me a chance to pick it back up. My first, very basic, idea for this was to invert the idea of a young, pretty woman being the muse of an artistic man, so I started with that general framework, making the (seemingly) young, pretty female protagonist the creator or artist (I wasn't exactly sure where the story was going), and giving her a male muse completely in her thrall. It eventually started to transform into something a bit more supernatural, with Opal being an ancient, otherworldly creature of some sort who instead of being merely inspired by her muse, literally uses Caleb's energy to create her work. I wanted to add in some ghosts too, so I just went ahead and did that. I love strange stories, and especially ones with strange women characters. Shirley Jackson is one of my favorite writers, and I am inspired her ability to send a shiver down a reader's spine, shock them, or leave them vaguely disturbed, all while creating unforgettable characters.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Heather Whited is originally from just outside Nashville, Tennessee, and after many changes of her major, somehow graduated from Western Kentucky University on time in 2006 with a degree in creative writing and theater. After a few years working and traveling that saw her hanging out on no few than three continents and gave her the chance to try vegetarian haggis, Heather returned to Nashville to obtain a Master's degree in education. She now lives in Portland, Oregon, where she teaches in the public schools and at Portland State University. When not writing, she plays on a killer Harry Potter trivia team and a general knowledge one too, spends time with her dog, does not go camping, ever, and tries not to think too much about the vegetarian haggis.*

The Procrastinator

By Sean Treppedi

WHY WE LIKE IT: *You wouldn't think watching the clock and waiting for inspiration (and how many writers can relate to that?) is promising grounds for good fiction but we think this wondrously adept story will turn you around. The entire narrative is descriptive, third person POV, there is no dialogue—not even interior monologue. To keep something like this fresh and alive--instead of putting the reader to sleep--is a daunting task only the most self-assured and technically astute writer can hope to challenge. Pedagogues insist that you have to 'show, not tell', but sometimes telling is the only way to tell it and in that regard 'The Procrastinator' stands as one of the best examples of its kind we've read in a while. The prose is limpid, nuanced and radiant and the glory of language painting word pictures is everywhere.*

He remembered the neighborhood trampoline that served as a rendezvous for every child on the block—jumping worry-free until the sun set behind the houses.

And this breathtaking passage:

His mind continued to drift to other things he'd rather be doing, like feeling the creamy *whoosh* off the face of his golf club as it fired into orbit across the acres of pristine green terrain, or tasting the tantalizing refreshment of the first sip from his favorite IPA on an early Friday evening after a long week. He would then feel the padding of his thumb graze across the jagged edge of his index finger's nail and there he would discover the next oral fixation to satisfy.

Five stars.

The Procrastinator

By Sean Treppedi

Its looming figure lurked in the corner as he deflected its penetrating judgement in his peripheral. Its back catty-corned next to the window—scanning the room with its towering frame and glass face while ticking away each waning moment of all the life that passed it. It was his mortal enemy. He never could forge a stable relationship with it—even when he approached it with optimism, he fell victim to its ruse. Each of its *ticks* weighed heavier on his brain as the text cursor blinked in unison while he gazed into the empty white abyss. The glowing screen bounced off his utterly frozen face. His teeth lodged themselves deeper into the yellow coating of the Ticonderoga No. 2—tasting soggier each bite. But, his oral fixation was the only thing keeping his mind occupied while he lounged back on the beige upholstery amongst the colonial decor of the living room. He sat up to adjust his position from the progressively exaggerated slouch he was sinking into and crossed his left leg onto his right knee. His rested foot wiggled along to the rhythm of the song repeatedly playing over in his head. Each time he had an inkling of an idea, the song would wash back over his brain like waves crashing ashore over words written in the sand. It was only the chorus too—the same repetitious words hypnotizing himself into a stunned state of incapacitation all while his enemy in the corner gained ground with each additional *tick*. The task hovered over him like a rain cloud; it was something he knew he had to face eventually, but with the plentitude of *ticks* he thought he once had, he figured he had a more than sufficient span to execute it comfortably. But, now ‘comfort’ had evolved into stress like the stages of a flower’s life from spring to winter—beginning with so much effervescence before dwindling to

brown. He awaited windows of inspiration to appear, but nothing arose for him to jump into. It was like rubbing wet sticks together for a campfire—an agonizing frustration. A frustration that had beat him to his knees often enough in the past, but the scars never proved as lessons—a conundrum where hindsight could not shed light on foresight.

Even when he knew it was right to address his task with week's worth of *ticks* ahead of him, there was always a deep-seated restriction to perform with the knowledge of these *ticks* at hand, rendering him unable. Each one that would pass with weeks to spare before the final *tick* would reassure him of plentiful opportunity like a seductive whisper in his ear manipulating him to delay—all until that final *tick* was within plain sight. Every time he questions himself in this decision to dance with his enemy and every time he fails to provide himself with an answer—it is the ultimate ruse he couldn't not help but fall victim for. His counterpart trimmed with intricate workmanship and a rich polyurethane finish nestled in the corner would boom in hysteria each hour that passed, mocking him in song that rang throughout the house, rattling him with the same face-slapping effect each outburst. It had felt as if he was entangled in some kind of sticky spiderweb he couldn't escape no matter how hard he attempted to rip free. His mind continued to drift to other things he'd rather be doing, like feeling the creamy *whoosh* off the face of his golf club as it fired into orbit across the acres of pristine green terrain, or tasting the tantalizing refreshment of the first sip from his favorite IPA on an early Friday evening after a long week. He would then feel the padding of his thumb graze across the jagged edge of his index finger's nail and there he would discover the next oral fixation to satisfy. These fantasies and distractions were all part of the great ruse; merely obstacles to stall him from crossing the tape at the finish line. He pushed his fingers beneath his wire-rimmed glasses and kneaded his face up and down to ease his tensivity before readjusting his frames to take notice of the portraits

above the mantle place. The expressions of these faces were ones that had become a staple in the room's ornamentation over the years; ones that had been imprinted into his memory throughout the long period in which they stood perched there. But, those very same expressions looked at him with different thoughts in their eyes than ever before—almost as if they were all in on the great ruse of his antique counterpart standing adjacent from them in the corner. And in between their adjacency? The silhouette of his figure projecting off the wall from the night light, joining the cast of the portraits and the pendulum-swinging corner dweller in glaring at him in shame.

He set aside his untapped keys and stepped outside onto the front stoop in search for a lifeline to cast itself at him in his drowning efforts. Upon pinching the precisely-rolled paper packed with cannabis between his lips, he held the flame to the end of it. The smoke ejected from his nostrils and wafted about in the atmosphere. One thing that he held a great appreciation for was the soothing environment of the night in his comfortable suburbia. The crickets chirped in harmony while bugs alike would chime in spontaneously amongst the lush tangles of green grass, bushes, and trees that formed tunnels over the street. The warm air felt so inviting to him in the night while he gazed across the street to admire the meticulously-groomed front lawns and enchanting light fixtures of his neighbors. His mouth, wrapped around the burning calumet, formed a sudden smirk while he puffed another exhale into the air thinking about all of the cherished memories he had in this neighborhood. He recalled racing down the declining street feeling the gravel vibrate beneath him on his skateboard, launching baseballs over the house to his brother, and him and the neighbor kids' water gun platoon. He remembered the neighborhood trampoline that served as a rendezvous for every child on the block—jumping worry-free until the sun set behind the houses. He remembered chasing after lightning bugs with jars every first night of June, covering every square-inch of driveway in chalk murals, sinking two feet upon the

first step outside on a snow day, and hearing the sugar-craving jingle ricochet from the ice cream man's truck throughout the neighborhood as him and his companions deployed into a predatory chase. The memories began to cave in like a building built upon nothing but nostalgia had its foundation beams kicked in as a tear splashed onto his bottom lip and he licked away the salty moisture. The childhood whimsy led to the naive thrills of being a teenager—sneaking out of the house for parties, the rush of driving for the first time, and the excitement of returning home after the first kiss. This view from the stoop outlined the spark notes of his coming of age. As he blew the last puff left, it was that moment that it dawned on him—the window had opened. Alas, he felt a pull on the fishing rod that was his desperate search for an idea and he frantically trotted inside to capitalize.

The keys *clicked* and *clacked* to the rhythm of documenting this epiphany. He was in a rat race with the hands of his lurking corner foe. Afraid to know how many *ticks* he had left to be afforded at this stage, he didn't bother to pay it any more attention; he just bared down as his fingers tried to keep pace with his rapidly developing thoughts. His heart palpitated like the beat of an African drum; the contours of the vein atop his forehead grew more defined; adrenaline that felt like hot gas stirred in his throat and spewed through his nostrils. It was any moment his foe would seize his stimulus away with a final outburst of its chiming anthem of mockery, marking the last *tick*. His fingers muttered feverishly in this rush of composition that he yearned to access at will. Riding the invigorating focus with enthusiasm, he vomited his most colorful thoughts onto the page just as he-

END

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The Procrastinator* was written as a tribute to the deception of time and the price of taking it for granted. Aside from time, its themes are based around personification, denial, and the commonalities of the human condition. I was influenced to write this story upon reflecting on various personal experiences and perceptions of my own. It explores issues of anxiety and the subconscious, while featuring an unreliable narrator who sympathizes with a flawed protagonist. The duration takes place within an hour, but is depicted to be an eternity. Stylistically, I wanted to create a simple narrative that paces itself with a lot of visual imagery and builds ominously.

AUTHOR'S BIO: As a copywriter with a B.A. in Print Journalism, the art of storytelling and its many platforms is a craft that Sean has always valued most. Sean is a native of Northern New Jersey and in 2015, he was a winner of the Edward R. Murrow Journalism Award. His freelance work spans between published flash fiction, sports editorials, and radio spots.

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

By Aditi Chandrasekar

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author BRAD GARBER writes:* Aditi Chandrasekar's short story, "Survival of the Fittest," has more twists and turns than a James Bond motorcycle chase scene. From outer space to college to garbage bin and the White House, from love and hate and sacrifice and loneliness and murder, the reader never quite knows where the physical or emotional journey ends. And, perhaps, that is good because it need not end.

I am, primarily, a poet and I find much poetry in this literary odyssey. There is a conflagration that "gobbles" up people and trees "like fresh pieces of meat being consumed by a hyena." There is the lover with "tinges of gold in his jet black hair," and the object of his attentions who wears "cheap make-up and excessively tight clothes to the grocery store." The imagery is tasty and delightful.

Ultimately, the reader is on a nice little trip that may be prescient in these days of uncertainty and worry. Like protagonist Sandra, we are all a bit confused, but we are all loved in ways we may not imagine. This is a story of hope in the face of loss, a story of bravery, a story of new beginnings. It is a fun read that will leave you wanting to read the next installment.

Survival of the fittest

Aditi Chandrasekar

Sandra gazed through the porthole at the wavering stars. They blurred and blended mysteriously. She thought she might be dreaming, until she felt an unmistakable sting in her eyes. Rubbing her face against a piece of foam inside her helmet, Sandra watched a little ball of liquid float past her. For all the leaps space technology had made, there still didn't exist a helmet that allowed astronauts to cry painlessly in space. Her helmet crackled to life. "Hello", she croaked, and was astonished by the hoarseness of her voice. "Hello", a robotic voice greeted her. "Welcome. You are aboard one of our capsule ships to the ISS. There are five other individuals travelling in

capsules of their own, so you're not alone! Please take a mental note of all that you're expected to do, to ensure your safe travel over the next two days" *You're not alone*, the words rang in her ears. How strangely toyish the green and blue of the instruments in the cockpit looked, against the devilish orange that enveloped her home planet. "Focus", Sandra whispered to herself, bringing her wandering attention to the woman who was now calmly reciting something about a water tank. She nodded her head as the lady robot droned on-she discovered at a young age that this helped her retain information. "That will be all. Have a safe journey", there was a beep before the audio ceased and she was alone again. Sandra surveyed her temporary home, a spotless white cage, and her eye caught an engraving near the porthole. Curious, she bobbed towards it and felt a shock of recognition as the letters swam into view. GRISHAM, it read in sleek, black letters.

Keith Grisham was sitting cross-legged on the couch in Sandra's house, his eyebrows knitted in focus on a Chuck Palahnuik novel. Sandra mentally reminded herself, for the hundredth time that day, to tear her eyes from him. Both shy, quiet, and unassuming-Keith and Sandra instantly hit it off when they met each other at a class in college. She couldn't remember since when but, his pleasant mannerisms filled her with warmth, his smile made her stomach do the tiniest of flips and the tinges of gold in his jet black hair suddenly stood out to her. She tried her best to push these thoughts to a miniscule corner in her head. It was hopeless - there was no way Keith Grisham, the handsome and beloved son of largely successful entrepreneur Kevin Grisham, would be interested in her. In what she viewed as desperate attempts, she flirted back with the man in the deli who hit on her relentlessly, and wore cheap make-up and excessively tight clothes to the grocery store. She would rather spend her life avoiding the intense emotions she

felt when Keith was around, than ever tell him. Now alone in her spaceship cage, Sandra wished, more than anything, that she had confessed to Keith the moment she developed feelings for him.

Tens of thousands. Tens of thousands of humans running and screaming at once. Sandra could swear she heard distant cries of women, men and children and the rumbles of the earth everyday. Fires had engulfed almost every single country on the planet. The world had been heating up for decades, so this was inevitable. Even as environmentalist groups and governments spent billions of dollars trying to reverse peoples' careless actions, it was of no use. The fires began in Australia five years ago, lasting several weeks and then several months. Until every last square foot of the island was scorched, it didn't stop. It came to Asia next, gobbling up houses, people and trees, like fresh pieces of meat being consumed by a hyena. It was only a matter of time before America was overtaken by this monstrous force of nature. The government threw themselves into action like never before. As the global death toll rose by thousands every second, they toiled day and night, drafting and testing. There was no doubt that they would have to deploy spaceships for their citizens-getting the people out of the planet before it collapses into itself was the only foreseeable future, if any. Of course, there was no way 500 million people were hitching a ride to space. The citizens waited with bated breath, with each day passing by painfully slow, to hear the president's plan on how the lucky ones were going to be chosen. It was a time that everyone saw coming, but somehow had felt like a distant nightmare until then.

GRISHAM. Why? How? Sandra's mind reeled with questions. She spelled out the name in her head, counted the letters in the word, looked up and down the wall it was printed on, before

realizing that none of this helped her arrive at any answers. No, she would have to tackle this one question at a time.

“When did this begin?” Keith asked, slightly awed and slightly confused. He was referring to the muddle of newspaper clippings, worn photographs of Valentina Tereshkova and Kalpana Chawla, clay models of aliens, and moth-eaten glow in the dark stickers that were plastered to the back wall. They were standing shoulder to shoulder in Sandra’s closet that was just wide enough to hold the two of them. Keith hoped she didn't feel the heat radiating from his cheeks. “I started collecting things when I was 8, but my mom says I wanted to be an astronaut pretty much since I discovered that it was a thing”, Sandra said, a ghost of a smile dancing on her lips. It was the first time Sandra and Keith were hanging out somewhere other than their common classes. She had invited him over to her house to study for a calculus test they had the next day, an invitation that she practiced many times before her mirror. "There's just so much out there in space that's left to explore and-" Sandra’s excited babble was cut short, as her eyes fell on a fairly recent newspaper clipping of an ad for admissions into the United States Naval Academy. The dreamy glaze in her eyes disappeared. “But these are just stupid dreams right?” she let out a forced laugh. Keith wanted to hold her hand, but resisted the urge to. “My parents wanted me to take on a stable job so I can support them financially as soon as possible...hence the nursing major.”, her voice waned and she fidgeted with the ceramic buttons on her sweater. They stood in silence, Sandra with her head towards the ground and Keith staring at the toddler’s handwriting in chalk, reading “My dream” .

Sandra emerged from her flashback suddenly, bumping into a yellow package whose contents she was disinterested in. She sighed-how distant the memory seemed, how unfamiliar the warmth they shared in her closet felt. GRISHAM-Staring at the embossed letters, Sandra felt an odd sense of foreboding consume her. Suddenly, Sandra became desperate for human company and recalled the communication code that the robot lady mentioned-three sixty one cat four wool six-if Sandra wanted to contact the other capsule ships. No one had tried to contact her yet, and she weighed the risks of contacting them. If robot lady was to be believed, they would all land in the ISS so they had to meet at some point. "Three sixty.." she said out loud, in a clear voice. She felt a gurgle in her stomach, as panic rose but she resisted the urge to shut off her mic. A few seconds of silence followed, and then a crackle like the one she heard earlier appeared. Her stomach flipped, "Hello?" Sandra said in a small voice. "Mr. Grisham?", the crisp voice of a human woman met her. She sounded confused, echoing the perplexity that Sandra felt. The voice sounded vaguely familiar too, like something she heard on TV or over the radio. Sandra placed her hand on the engraved letters. "This is Sandra", she managed to get the words out of her mouth. "Sandra Collins. I don't remember how I got here but I think that's because panic makes me forget things.", she gulped. Sandra felt more confident with every word she spoke, and continued lucidly. "Could you please tell me why we're the ones who were chosen to be on these ships?", she cuts to the chase. A silence dragged on for what seemed like eternity. Sandra wondered if the woman on the other end had possibly fainted or died. Many moments later, she heard a sigh signalling the presence of life. "I'm Claudia. Make yourself comfortable."

Keith, shivering and muttering curses at the harsh wind, wrapped the wool coat draped around him tighter before quickly loosening his grip. His chest still felt sore, still felt the impressions of

his dad's closed fists. He pictured his dad tearing the house down in an attempt to get a hold of him, Keith knew he only had a few precious minutes of solace left before his dad called the cops. He was cowering in a nook not far from his house--a convenient spot next to an overflowing dumpster. As always, he wondered if this place was only his little secret; if no one else occasionally came around here to find comfort next to a pile of garbage. Keith leaned back, closed his eyes and imagined what Sandra would have to say about his hideout. She would disapprove of the smell, but the clear view of the stars in the black sky would make up for it. He smiled. Stuffing his hands into the pockets of his coat, he marched silently back to his house. He imagined this is what soldiers heading into a war they knew they were going to lose, felt like.

A bomb. A green bomb. A grenade. Just as the President of the United States registered the words in his head, a deafening explosion followed. Balls of flame engulfed paraphernalia in his room---a vase filled with plastic flowers, a dining chair, his wife's wrapped birthday present. A crowd of uniformed men broke open the door, and rushed in with a grace that only years of relentless training warranted. Their rifles were trained towards the president's bloody corpse, a look of permanent horror pasted on his face.

Kevin Grisham paced around the dining hall, his phone gripped in his sweaty palm. He closed his eyes and-What was it that his therapist told him to do? Count to 15?-started muttering under his breath "1 mississippi 2 mississippi 3 missi...". Devoting himself to this exercise, he continued circling the teak wood table. His phone vibrated, and he looked at the screen. The face of the godfather of his children looked back at him. With a shaking finger, he moved the little telephone icon to the right on the screen. "Hello?" Kevin said breathlessly. "I'm going to publish

the plan tomorrow. You stay put, alright?”, said a familiar voice. Kevin had never relished in someone’s words so much. Flooded with relief and pleasure all at once, he wanted to squeal. Instead, he sank to the floor out of exhaustion. “Thank you John” he whispered and was met with a beep that signaled the end of the conversation. He glanced at the wall-mounted TV at the end of the hall, where a national news channel was showing an image from NASA-men with tired eyes and hammers huddled behind a tiny spaceship---unaware of the sudden death of the country’s ruler. Most certainly, it was those vindictive political enemies of his! the media would claim, hungry for the brutal assassination before the world was doomed to nature’s whims. Kevin felt an unmatched sense of elation. Erratically scribbling the date and time in a notepad that had the letters GRISHAM printed on every page, Kevin decided that he would remember this moment forever. He tore out the page and kissed it gently, barely tasting the sweetness of victory.

“The president has passed.” A woman, in the corner of the TV screen, didn’t make any effort to hide her childlike sobs. “This is a time of great distress for us. We ask you to respect our privacy.” John Gardner, the beloved vice president, said haltingly. Sandra turned to look at Keith, who was sitting next to her on the dilapidated couch in her living room. “Hey” she said softly, as she noticed the bright red colour of his face. Keith exerted a forceful sigh, looking down at his closed fists. He returned her concerned stare. “I’ve got to go,” he said abruptly, and walked out the door before Sandra could muster any form of speech. She got up to follow him, pausing at her open door. “Hey, are you okay?” she shouted, fidgeting with the strings on her hoodie. He looked at her, but she struggled to decipher his expression as his bike helmet cast a shadow on his face. “I’m fine.” he said. Whipping his bike around, he pushed the pedal down

with one foot and sped away. Sandra was worried, but mostly confused. Why was Keith reminded of his dad? That's the only time his fists clenched.

“John and he had been best friends ever since they met at Harvard.” Claudia said. “They agreed on everything all the time, good or bad. Evil or Noble.” Sandra’s stomach was sinking, it seemed, into a bottomless abyss. “So it’s no surprise that they agreed on a....horrid plan like that” Claudia said quietly. Claudia Polinsky, the famed CEO of the world's biggest car manufacturer-a distracted voice registered, in Sandra's head. “None of us knew anything about any of this.” she hurriedly explained, lest the young girl do something irrational and brash. Sandra felt smaller and weaker by the second, the white of the spaceship softening in her vision. Images began to form in her head, one by one, as though being viewed in a slide projector. Keith’s mortified expression, a gun held tightly in his right hand. Mr. Grisham’s lifeless body. Keith pushing her into the ship, the barrel of his gun pressed into the small of her back distracting her from the words that came out of his mouth-”I love you”. Scattered pieces of information in her brain were beginning to stitch themselves together. Sandra belched, she wanted to vomit. Keith hated his father. Keith discovered what his father pushed John Gardner to do. Keith Keith. Keith. He was all she could think of now. In a tiny voice that she could barely hear herself, Sandra asked, “What was the president going to do?” Claudia replied after many minutes with an equally small voice. ”He was going to send those who had done the most to prevent this-the environmentalists, the climate change activists, the social workers..” she trailed off. Sandra closed her eyes, sensing a familiar sting.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Author’s note for ‘Survival of the fittest’A couple of years ago, I stumbled upon a wonderful podcast hosted by Mrs. Clare Press named ‘Wardrobe Crisis’, where she interviews a bunch of influential people involved in sustainability and*

activism. Listening to them talk about plastic accumulation in the oceans, melting glaciers and animal cruelty among other things, I started questioning what it would take for us to pause this fast pace of urban living and question our practices. Out of this rumination, 'Survival of the fittest' was born-a story based in the near future when planet earth is almost entirely destroyed by raging fires, and a moral question finally comes to the forefront. I've always wanted to explore the themes of romance and corruption in my writing, and never thought that I would stash both in a single story but it just seemed apt to include both here. My main stylistic influence has always been Jhumpa Lahiri-her lucid language and emotional observations are things that I draw inspiration from, everytime I sit down to write. Other influences that have amalgamated (or at least, I hope) my writing style are Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie. It was a wonderful journey writing this story, and it will always remain close to my heart.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Aditi Chandrasekar is a 20 year old pursuing a bachelor's degree in Electronics and Communication Engineering. She lives in India, and her interests are vast and varied-including robotics, poetry, sustainable fashion and running among other things. She has written for companies like Analytics Insight and The Optimist Citizen, and hopes to publish her own fiction novel one day.*

GUEST EDITOR'S BIO: *Brad has degrees in biology, chemistry and law. He writes, paints, draws, photographs, hunts for mushrooms and snakes, and runs around naked in the Great Northwest. Since 1991, he has published poetry, essays and weird stuff in such publications as Edge Literary Journal, Pure Slush, Front Range Review, Tulip Tree Publishing, Sugar Mule, Third Wednesday, Barrow Street, Black Fox Literary Magazine, Barzakh Magazine, Ginosko Journal, Junto Magazine, Slab, Panoplyzine, Split Rock Review, Smoky Blue Literary Magazine, The Offbeat and other quality publications. 2011, 2013 & 2018 Pushcart Prize nominee*

ALL LIFE ADVANCES ALL LIFE IN THAT DATA IS PROCESSED THROUGH THE ACT OF OBSERVATION

BY JOE MARCHIA

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We were instantly taken with this intellectual construct that, to quote from the author, is 'essentially about metacognition'. It's something that could easily cross the floor to CNF but what keeps it fiction specific is the omnipresent and rampant power of imagination. We like the way thought links thought, the subliminal consorts with the conscious and ideas, tumbling like mind clouds, pupate into something new and different from their former selves. Urbane prose and a dry, ironic voice only heighten our infatuation. Quote: I still have never seen a tornado with the exception of movies about tornadoes. If you have seen a movie about a tornado you can pretend to have seen a tornado (party rules, etc).*

All Life Advances All Life in that Data is Processed Through The Act of Observation

I saw my dentist at a party on 51st street. It is impossible to get used to seeing people in contexts you do not expect them because the human brain is designed to organize. His wife was between ten and twenty years older than him. Statistically this is rare as compared to other age distances relative to gender. I do not know how rare because you cannot ask someone's age once you are past thirty, even to discern standard deviations from data. This is because time is a secret and at a party there are only two remarks you can make about time: "It is early!" and "It's getting late." You do not say it *is* late unless you are causing conflict. I.e: your dentist brings up a controversial study about fluoride. You respond: "boy, its late."

At the party there were crackers and meats. At the party a friend of a friend asked if I had seen a new movie, but I had not. At parties it is a gamble to talk to people because there are differences in how

interesting people are- such that sometimes people are trapped in conversation with people who are less interesting than them. Alternatively, sometimes you are less interesting than who you are talking to. This is when you must trap them and savor the interaction. These are the rules of parties, I didn't make them up.

The party was in 2011. In 2011 a tornado killed 161 people in Joplin, Missouri. This is what I remember because I had never seen a tornado and never heard of Joplin, Missouri, so it was a topic of conversation in which I pretended: *Oh no, Joplin. Or, oh no, tornado.* I still have never seen a tornado with the exception of movies about tornadoes. If you have seen a movie about a tornado you can pretend to have seen a tornado (party rules, etc).

When it was getting late, I left the party, and in subsequent years the memory has become flattened and squashed, such that it can mix with other memories, which is how memory works. We then labor under particular delusions; like maybe I didn't see my dentist, or it was 52nd street. I sometimes remember a tornado but it is just from a movie, I think.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *“All Life Advances All Life in that Data is Processed Through The Act of Observation” is essentially about metacognition. I find people's process of interpreting information and discerning appropriate responses that reveal subconscious influences to be interesting. It's also about parties, which enhance this awareness for people who are socially awkward. It's influenced by Lorrie Moore's humor and Henry James' ability to over explain, which I find amusing.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Joe Marchia is the author of two poetry collections, i will sit on the sidewalk i am not joking, and Like Movies.*

WHEN LEAVES DROP

By Annin Brothers

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author OMAR HUSSAIN writes: Memories and roaming thoughts crackle and hum through the spiraling stream of consciousness our narrator gifts us in this piece. With every ellipsis, with every rhyme and passage, the melancholy of what was once here is juxtaposed against what can never be—an apparition haunting us all. There is great nuance within the poetics of “When Leaves Drop,” allowing the reader to gently work through the story’s tension, often found in the endlessly hypnotic and repeating refrains, harkening back to autumn—everyone’s favorite season of gloom, the season where pretty things soon turn dark and die. If you’re in the mood for something Allen Ginsberg might have penned, don’t miss this piece. Quote: I’m feeling naked confronted by this gentle mouth rent by a smile, and I’m sort of clinging, clinging to this cleft gentleness. And into this space – of my eyes, her mouth – this sky blue is pouring forth... and suffusing my nakedness with beatitude and breeding an incomprehensible new beatitude in me.*

When Leaves Drop

by Annin Brothers

What do you think of when leaves drop..?

Rasp an' rustle... much like my soul... that's lost track of day. A day lost to eternity, to a silky petrification – the flesh's forgotten shadow.

Rasp an' rustle... much like my soul... that's lost track of day... ripped out of the times by a swirl of memory. A memory gone berserk, that's turned back the time. Memory: go crazy or fall...

Rasp an' rustle... much like my soul on a lost day... craving a fall into oblivion, into mindlessness, into nothingness – to forget her eyes, lips, voice, heartiness. Craving a fall... losing a foothold and dropping... clutching (nothing to clutch at) at the air – and falling, at the raindrops – and falling, at the whisper that is dropping along with me, along with my soul... I can hear: it's always there in me. I'm reviving the stillborn sounds: "I invite you to..." No, time was short... too short... Rather this than cuddling her in a crazy patchwork of loose dropping rags...

In times gone by, before you'd got yourself entrenched in this life bodily or mentally, it looked like a space frozen in time, like so many paints on canvas that had gotten sick with lifelessness and infected the picture – a landscape, a still life or series of portraits?. The picture seemed to be saying: "You've no business here. This isn't yours. This is far away." You looked away and backed off... and got nearer, none the wiser... Now you're a paint drop in the picture, coolly gazing down from the canvas, a paint drop from the Artist's brush, all the way from a world of play and paint coitus into the world of cooling highlights... It's just the wistful nostalgia for dropping leaves that makes it into this world on occasion...

A noise is getting louder. A whisper... scant of breath... is building up. No, no whisper – it's the wind, a gust, not scant of breath. The wind is gusting, forcing its way into the picture... crack! – the dry hymen is gaping wide – crunch! – the particolored shell is splintered. The noise is getting louder. A rasp is roughing up the air all around: rasp an' rustle rough and ready all around the ruts. The wind is battering the trunks – violent... shaking the boughs – violent... tearing at the tops, shedding leaves, alive as yet, veiny, blood still in the veins – heartless...

tipping up the heads, the dead heads of the dead flowers, frightening the mortals and frightening death – feisty and gloating... The noise is building up. Rustle – air confused. Gusty rustle... air compressed, wave after wave. Shrapnel! Raindrops clear, by the cloud, lashed and entwined so loud. Shrapnel lashes the space, rendering it opaque. Gusty rustle – wave after wave – is deafening. No leaves, those. The leaves are dropping overwhelmed... recoil and drop... clutching (nothing to clutch at) at the air, while the dripping air rags drop all the way past memory, only to float in memory and never drop – and drop unaware, and plop into oblivion, and plop on your face, splattering, spreading snot and blood and memory all over the cheeks, the lips, the eyes...

The noise is receding. The rustle is subsiding... along with the dead leaves. The leaves are dropping... Rustle... rustle reverberating. That's no rustle – it's a whisper, not an echo – it's scant of breath, a tremulous sign. The leaves are dropping... and whispering... and whispering: "She's coming..." Whispering as if she were there to keep a tryst...

What do you think of when leaves drop..?

What... what makes my head spin so? I'm still small, very small... what makes my head spin so? Entwining me are the flowery bands of a merry-go-round; in this space, in this translucent coil enclosing feeling and flesh right across the way is her... her gaping mouth, seemingly quite near... but I'm very small... It's smiley, and I'm feeling naked confronted by this gentle mouth rent by a smile, and I'm sort of clinging, clinging to this cleft gentleness. And into this space – of my eyes, her mouth – this sky blue is pouring forth... and suffusing my nakedness with beatitude and breeding an incomprehensible new beatitude in me...

"Hannah!" Her aunt's voice cuts the merry-go-round short... turns the rainbow phantom into blurry autumnal stained glass... unclutches Hannah's fingers and drops the lost us (much like the autumn does the lost leaves) onto the cool leaves, the glass leaves.

"Hannah!"

We've come to and are rising on shaky legs and stagger – to each other, as chance would have it – on shaky legs. Something has brushed me – but I'm still too small – something has brushed me, something intangible but exciting my flesh... I know the smell of grasses and of the pond and the smell of apples on the porch and the smell of the dump, abuzz, in the ravine. They get my nerves tingling and let me go and are forgotten only to come back on occasion. Something has brushed me and rung a bell – but then I was still too small – and reverberated in me as an unbearable echo...

"See you," she says, she smiles... she goes. What brushed me goes, too. But what brushed me stays put inside me. It's what – but I'm still too small – it's what she... she smells like...

What do you think of when leaves drop..?

It's always there in me: "I invite you to..."

I can see myself in a rag of space suffused with autumn. Inside me is... a premonition. It's unexpected and momentary. It could have been my fancy. I'm feeling but unable to explain a thing to myself, but I am feeling, I'll always be in that rag of space, for all eternity. This isn't my autumn. Mine is the sort of autumn that cross-hatches the air with charcoal rain that spatters faces and words and leaves me to myself.

There's a different autumn in that rag of space, one that you can't help gifting...

I'm amid that autumn. I want to cheat the premonition. I'll be calling her next and let in her voice as part of the space, and it'll bring in and scatter fragmented and momentary sketches, as fragmented as the moments themselves. And she will enter my space, with the premonition as good as gone... How silly of me: it won't be gone – it'll just lurk... in the patterns of these airy

sketches, grimacing and laughing at me in secret... only to reappear as suddenly as it vanished, to reappear and triumph: "I'm no longer a premonition, I'm there in actual fact." What a silly idea!

I'll be ringing her next and saying... and hearing her voice. I'll say right away:

"I invite you to a show."

"Aleck! A show?!" The air would blot the watercolor splotch in response, a crimson watercolor splotch... with a smile in it. In the same response the air would be full of glowworms, turquoise glowworms with a smile in them.

"Look out the window," I'd say softly.

The air would be aflutter in response, as if brushed by something. In it there'd be silhouettes of her hands, palms up. Falling on them... seemingly falling on them are leaves. The leaves are brushing her fingers, the fingers are touching the leaves. And feelings are heard to be shuddering between them... in her space. And the air is aflutter... in mine...

"Yes, a show," she'd say softly.

I can see us in this rag of space suffused with autumn that can't help being gifted, for it is the show and is making a gift of itself... There's so much space all around, but the rag that's captivated us is getting ever smaller and smaller... I can see us in the tiny rag of autumn. It's fluttering and whirling, much like hundreds of multicolored rags of autumn, spurred to this gyration by Chopin's passion... "They're close by," whisper the leaves about our lips. So close... the leaves have grown silent... the lips are aflutter, aflutter... What a silly idea. As clear-sighted as foresight. I can see a rag. This is no autumn, not our autumn – it's a fragment of spring. In it are lips... ever so close... "Go!" No, I won't say that – that'd be spurning (it's passion stirring) lips away from lips... hers away from his... nay, hers away from mine... in our rag of autumn. It's a

long way from lips to lips... but just a moment apart. What you do is recover the moment. Recovering is a stirring of passion and lips. Hugging is a stirring of passion and lips. I'll be pulled to her – recover – spurn... and: "Crazy!" in her eyes, and the tears and a curved mouth...

I can see a rag of autumn. Hannah is flat on her back among the leaves... cooling like her, with the fingers spread like hers, rid of their pain like her. I'm on my knees nearby. Why do my fingers keep shaking..? Why..? I only know they were aflame with the passion to recover... they were hugging, entwining – it's a passion thing – entwining her neck in order not to let loose the clots of words, the fragments of a cry that might get this rag of autumn full of holes, our minute rag of autumn, with, a moment ago, *The Autumn Waltz*, the closeness of the lips, the bounty of the eyes... Eyes... her eyes are looking as if they weren't looking. Asleep – shan't wake her: let her relax. I'll bundle her up in leaves: the leaves are hallmarked oblivion. Well, tomorrow... I'll call her tomorrow... as if nothing's happened...

I can see myself in this rag of space suffused with autumn. I've a premonition: I'll always be in that rag of space, for all eternity... I want to cheat the premonition. I'll call her now, and she'll be there in my space... with the premonition gone... While the lips and lips... hers and his... ever so close... in a fragment of spring..? Nope! I shan't cheat the premonition, I shan't call her, I shan't let my passion entwine her neck... I'd rather stay in my rag of autumn for all eternity, and it'll travel from day to day... until one of them gets lost...

A phone call... hers... not mine... it's a sign.

"Hi..! Aleck? What makes you silent..? Pray speak..."

"We are no longer an item. And pray... no more words."

The air has stilled in response, as if all the leaves have dropped and not a single one left. And there'll be no more words... save for those unspoken: "I invite you to a show."

What do you think of when leaves drop..?

Rasp an' rustle...

The leaves are falling... and whispering... whispering: "She's coming..." Whispering as if she'll be there to keep the tryst with them...

"Hi, Aleck. Here're some lilies for you. I'll stay with you."

Hannah will put the flowers next to you. She'll produce a handkerchief from her purse to wipe away the slithering snakes off your granite face and the yellow leaf you thought up. Then she'll gaze for a long time into what's long past...

"Don't cry, honey." You'll say: "It's okay. You've got a family and two kids. They're your happiness. What about us..? You come to me every autumn, and we're together again. Don't cry. It's rather better than me bundling you up in a crazy patchwork of eternally falling rags..."

The rasp an' rustle of my soul full of chuff that's lost track of the day...

Do you remember that day..? It seems to have got lost. You're out on the balcony. Leaves and raindrops are falling. And then all of a sudden you see far away a rag of autumn... that autumn... and her and yourself in it... The leaves are falling, clutching at raindrops...

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Author's note demands thinking. We don't like to think. When we eat ice cream, we don't think, we just experience emotions, anyone can guess what kind of emotions we experience. When we read Joseph Brodsky ("A man comes to the ruins again and again, yesterday he was here, and the day before, and appears tomorrow, the ruins allure him..."), it gives us gooseflesh. When we read "The Old Man and the Sea" by Ernest Hemingway, our feelings cry: "How!?" When we write a story, we just follow our emotions, nothing more. We see images, we listen to the sounds of words, and write. What have our thoughts to do with it all?*

Some of our friends told us that they didn't understand what we were saying as we spoke both at the same time. When we write a new story, we usually pace

around the room with our emotions... and with our tongues moving like two hands of a pianist. Time and again we stop to write down what we've just heard, and our tongues keep on moving like two hands of a pianist. And rest assured we understand what they—our tongues—say.

As to "When Leaves Drop," once we were standing on the balcony. Leaves were falling, clutching at raindrops. And a wild jealousy from a distant autumn engulfed us and made us crave a fall...

AUTHORS' BIO: *Twins by birth, Gemini by jest of the stars, always and everywhere together. They studied psychology, literature, and languages. After graduation, they worked with teenagers coping with physical and mental disabilities.*

Their stories have appeared in Down in the Dirt magazine. Apart from reading and writing, they collect American Xmas and seasonal music. Their favorites are "Blue Christmas" (Doye O'Dell), "Christmas Candy" (Margaret Whiting, Jimmy Wakely), "A Christmas Festival" (Leroy Anderson), "I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm" (The Mills Brothers), "An Old Fashioned Tree" (Gene Autry), "Silver Bells" (Doris Day), "Too Fat for the Chimney" (Teresa Brewer), "Up on the Housetop" (Bill Boyd).

EDITOR'S BIO: *Omar Hussain is a writer from the San Francisco Bay Area, transplanted to Ann Arbor, Michigan. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Ellipsis Zine, Spelk, Dream Noir, the Drabble, the Potato Soup Journal and (mac)ro(mic), among others. Omar's beta-test novel, *The Outlandish and the Ego*, debuted in late 2017. It received some praise, remarkably. His story **iDentity** appears in this issue (Fiction).*

POETRY

Would you like a friend?

By Christopher E. Ellington (aka in the trenches CEE)

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:

*If trees can be blasted so can voices and here is one clawed from the deepest reaches, so wrenching raw and corvidal it scrapes skin off our sensibilities with its dirty mind and dirty claws and smiles that leaks blood and honey: delinquent, unholy, full of gristle and excelsior. Read Ellington's mind-warping works where the prospect of a friend rivals the ephemeral nature of seeding "sea monkeys." "Miserable human beings / Don't generally live in misery" And here we have redemptive lines: "For all the hearts I never broke / All the misery I never caused / All tears never brought by my sins" **Her name, was "Shock"** reads a malenky bit like a narrative from 'Clockwork Orange' Why scramble for mind? I just found the truth here. Dig in...HS (Spacing is poet's own.)*

CEE
11

lines

Would you like a friend?

Maybe
Depends
What does it do,
And if it doesn't
Can I kill it?
Because I've heard about this
"Friends" stuff,

When I was little, a comic book
 Fooled me into buying
 “sea monkeys”
 Sounds a lot the same

CEE
 20

lines

Every Guy Over 45

Sixth graders
 When I was a high school senior
 Let alone any guy I then knew
 Look now like
 The guy from *Breaking Bad*, or
 The other guy from *Breaking Bad*
 I think there was a lesser, third guy
 Or a few stock henchmen, same look
 Every guy surrounded
 By a gang of Outlaws, then
 Beaten senior with sawed off
 Ugly cues
 Looks like one of those actors,
 That show won 16 tons of awards
 But I never got anything out of it
 Outside of
 “I could write like that by sixth grade”
 And
 “I don't want to know anyone to talk to
 For the rest of my life”

CEE

25

lines

Fuck It List

There's one item

hello

Miserable human beings
Don't generally live in misery
So, 40-year-old convo
With friend about enemy
Makes no sense, until its end,
I delineate logic of
Removing from the planet
An individual sad (wrong)
Despised (by us, maybe)
With nothing to look ahead to
A life bereft, and void
(only if that accurately describes
the whole Human Condition)
Paying out with,
"It would be mercy killing!
You know, it's like shooting a horse!"

Friend: *"Somehow, I don't think
A judge is gonna buy that!"*

The justice and legal systems
Combined with
Dying not being clockwork
Make for grandmaster chess
Save me, Bobby Fischer

CEE
26

lines

Damn It All to Hell

If I state in my terms
Characterize, categorize
Say why I did not take up so many
Interested parties
When young
A reasonably impressive tot
Of offerings of free service
Forbidden fruit dancing before me
Wearing a sandwich board
"Open For Business"
Backing away, instead
Seeking daylight, escape,
If I speak truth, it's way worse than
Inconvenient,
Distilled to its nicest, it was only
"GO AWAY!!"

But, if one instead takes that as
 Gold Star A+ Attaboy
 For all the hearts I never broke
 All the misery I never caused
 All tears never brought by my sins
 I did something rather right,
 Now, point, in a perfect world
 Of perfect applicants
 I'm dripping evil, an incubus, a criminal
 But we know there's no such world

CEE
 25

lines

Her name, was "Shock"

Rorschach of WATCHMEN
 In his 1.0, was outfitted with
 An entire super suit of blot-morphs
 Pretty clear why it wasn't used,
 But, here's another story idea:
 Runaway outsider girl accepts
 Being Rorschach blot inked
 From crown to sole
 It's done of course in stages
 Masterwork, perfect symmetry
 And she wanders, naked blot creature
 Grounds of a rich man's rural estate

And, then...he dies...and life goes on
 As does title and occupancy
 And the creature, hopelessly insane
 Haunts the property and, feral,
 Nearby lands and farms,
 Flaw? No possible genuine ending but
 Canned 50's police climax, 80's-style
 This ain't Jodie Foster Meets Compassion
 (chickabee, chickaboo)
 It just makes a point how many rely
 On one, continued breath and its
 One, caring heart
 Or Social Security check

CEE
 23

lines

Singing, "God Favors the Tenements"

I was going to bring Halloween candy
 Just get out of the cab
 Go hang it on the door
 Hop back in, go home
 In that neighborhood, who knew
 If you'd ever see it, or your kid,
 If a BE, I know that drill
 I once lost a friend, last straw
 When I had Halloween candy

Delivered to his kids
 And he justified eating of it first,
 But selfishness isn't the why not
 Not even my own, which is a beast
 Which cannot be given,
 No, as I said, it's the crime
 Two shootings on your block
 Just in good weather this year,
 I know why you live there
 If I dug all the way to China
 PEZ-face of Robin or Vampire Teddy
 Is just chemical taste, machine art
 Where you live is how you feel
 About yourself

CEE
 26

lines

I Love the Alphabet, But Not That Way

It's impossible to know
 Who is online
 Who, sometimes a very definite
 'Who'
 Who knows You
 One whom you don't like at all
 Who'd better not assume even

Ectoplasmic shape
 Or one perhaps who has been
 Forbidden with a capital
 DOMESTIC ABUSE
 To ever communicate with you
 Therefore, or
 The chatty Cathys and Chuckies
 Who don't know any other way
 Than to share as overseas
 American Telephone and Telegraph buds
 And dream a little dream of
 Using your textprint as fodder
 For wishing and then getting on with it
 Kind of a G-rated sexting,
 But it's much the same wawh-wawh
 Sad sax of what's the point
 As in The Day bus stop conversation
 Which you thought might be a movie
 And instead was static

CEE
 20

lines

Antisocial Fashion Warrior

I said (of Faceass costume party photo),
 “*What's the deal,*
Them going as a Martian woman
”

And a clown who's not really trying?"

She said (of Halloweening couple),
"They're dressed as The Simpsons!"

And I stared

And recalled Mom and Dad

Then Mom and Next Husband

As convict and sheriff

And Mom and buddies

As hillbillies

And I got truly ill, inside

Because other than what I've lived

THAT was my alternative

You can't "be anything you want", nons

You can be The House of Usher-dweller

Or a Body Snatcher pod in a sea

Their way, you all dress Team Crappy

My way, you can even stay nude

THE POET SPEAKS:

How start?

It began with considering Typing to be a blow off class, counting on 1980 being the peak of Civilization. I'm lazy beyond the pale, and poetry, which I turned to in 2007, had few rules, depending on your chosen market. I learned on the fly. Almost never read any market to which I submitted. I experimented using the theory of an anarchist-friend: "The real test of a {poet}, is if you are prolific." It's the "shit up against the walls" method. At that point, it becomes intensity/sincerity and grammar. Also, for the first 5 years, I could keep 'em short by default. You have to BE READ, so until you've done Johnny and gotten your sitcom, don't try to let your pants out a size. You Will Pay Dues, no matter the level of laziness permitted (Less So, Now!) or how cute your verbiage comes off.

What write?

My overall themes are 1 = Man is a Monster; 2 = It's All Unfixable; 3 = The State Always Wins; and underlying everything 4 = All Reality, Exists in the Personal.

Recently, I've begun toward the pettiness most begin with. I've pretty much lost my internal argument, re: "if you do This Bad Thing, you're dead meat". Mrs. CEE (who is very ill) remains as force field. I make no further promises.

FYI, series of seeming forms (usually in titles) are only platforms I enjoy using. Early on, I dabbled in organic speech, but have mostly abandoned it. When I still had a stamp collection, I used it to write 246 poems in one week, just going on impressions...prior to this, I used the standardized Rorschach blots. I have sold most of these. Suggestion: Don't try to repair everything. Mindseye presents what it does, but some stuff just stinks.

How feel?

The world is a riceball of Evil and Drool. Some are plastic, or able to adopt the guise. Others can blink, blank, and walk away unmarred, as they have laundry in the dryer. Still others are able to make peace with the existential, do the "Russian bread and the earth/spooge and dirty feet" slog. Me, I have no forgiveness. No compassion. No empathy. Not anymore. I'm standing in the midst of cacophony, firing verbs, swinging adjectives. We own a custom, program-your-colors laser sign, which we use as a night lite, and it reads, "I Was Made of Custer / So Custer I Must Be." I realize I can't win. None of you will, either.

What poetry?

As I'm on record, "not media, but message"...because the cacophony exists, and each Self wants to be heard and we can't be, because no matter websites or talking heads, "media" has decided what it in Itself, is. So, thee and me are left with messages in bottles. Yelling "YOP!" (or "yawp", if you like), trying to speak our quintessential "I". My work ultimately says the "I" alone, is what's operable. It's all which remains. Because no one's ever gonna love you or deal decently or be fair. Even not bite. I had a phrase I used as far back as callow youth: "the lies people chant to themselves, in order to last another day". This is Narcissist Planet, and you and you and you. Which is why I anger so many. No one wants to hear they're not a good person. But of the 26 volumes I did wrong as a kid, lying was what really made my Sgt. Rock pop, go ballistic. I understand, now. I too am at war.

Why poetry?

Why fortune cookies? Why Twitter? If you won't shut up, neither will I. Planetary ADD promotes the short form. Mrs CEE and I are sleep farmers. Or you'd be reading my novels. They're pretty violent. I spent the 80's in movie theaters.

CEE

AUTHOR'S BIO:

I am Christopher E Ellington, known in the indie press by the too-general pseudonym of "CEE" (I have used my initials since the 10th grade, but never counted on Mr. Green).

I am the author of 28 (theme) chapbooks, beginning in 2010 with 12 times 12 equals Gross, and ending in December of 2018, with Suture Feature. For listings with heavy splash, try me on Amazon ("CEE poetry" under BOOKS), and look for The Lost Religion of Men, Ironclad Beta for the Coming PPV, and Onderdonkey (search that last, by title only). In pursuit of chapbook publishing, I paid requisite dues, seeing print in Tales of the Talisman (David Lee Summers, NM), Not One of Us (John Benson, MA) and numerous issues of Dreams and Nightmares (David Merkel, AL). Over 1400 poems of mine have found a place in some venue, since I began, in 2007. I've also appeared in the international mailers of Marymark Press (Mark Sonnenfeld, NJ), incl. a broadside which went out with a chap by Beat poet, Kirby Congdon. I am a Pushcart Prize nominee, and published a "rant" column out of Austin, TX, for 2 years (2016-18). I am semi-retired due to health, but poems of mine will still appear through concerns, into 2021, so hoped to augment.

Official bio (I have a few joke-bios, if you require brevity):

CEE is a failed short story writer, failed novelist, and failed playwright. In the early 2000's, he developed Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, forcing him, by 2007, to fall back to the shorthand of poetry. Over 1400 of his poems have since seen some form of media. He has been printed in such divers publications as "bear creek haiku," "Jerry Jazz Musician," "Children, Churches and Daddies," "The Storyteller," "Barbaric Yawp," "The Iconoclast," and "Poises". His poem, "It's An Old Story," received a Pushcart Prize nomination in 2009. CEE is the author of 28 chapbooks, including "The Cannon-Fixers' Picnic", "I Am Not Sydney Carton", "VOX ARCANA", "Erasable Bond", and "The Tribes Joshua Drove Out of the Land". His last release, "Suture Feature", was listed at target.com, before their buyer discovered CEE was indie press.

P.S. Just to be completely grovel-ly and target this with accuracy (I hope), my early work was complimented by Indigo Hotchkiss of Haight Asbury Journal, although I failed to score publication, there.--CEE

BUT I CAN'T and other poems...

By Martin Pedersen

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: It is unlikely I could tell the difference between a Spoken Word Artist, on paper, and an Oral Poet. I'm not sure which Pedersen is, but he is transfixing. His use of language is exquisite. "Even my silence / calculated to seduce / payback for poison" "I may miss a couple times but then I will squish you / against the glass and wipe your pulp with a paper towel" I would swoon to be a fly on his wall. "like a steamship of sweaty Sicilian immigrants / to a Sam Spade San Francisco" And spying a bride distractedly hanging out her own un-bloodied bed clothing? "she's so far away I'm forced to invent her madonna face" "Today I will tell my wife that I am leaving." Pedersen is an inversion incarnate of the old adage, 'Every story tells a picture.'

But I can't

It's stronger than
myself
I can't

I must pick at my cuticles
I must pop another brewsky
I must play one more round

Even my silence
calculated to seduce
payback for poison

First the bitter but honest lull
then thick strong honey
made years ago by
dead bees

I am sick
tens of thousands
of sparkling word bubbles
gas, I am hungover

I'd explode
 in fireworks
 but frankly
 I can't.

Charity

from the rocking chair in the sunroom
 I wave at you as
 you go through the evasive maneuvers
 I don't look at you, busy making notes
 the room is big and you'll fly off
 if you push too far, though, I'll get the swatter
 look at you chase you and get you up against
 a window as you run stupidly to the light
 I may miss a couple times but then I will squish you
 against the glass and wipe your pulp with a paper towel
 if you bother me too much

I might not do any of this
 I may just let you
 my brother or sister
 land on my arm
 walk there as long as
 you please
 since I forgot why
 I must kill a fly
 I am a man
 and I have free will

Farewell

Waiting for the red bus in the light rain for
 she to leave on a long journey back
 a cranky businessman's orange butt
 on the shiny black lava cobble
 just before sunrise
 the blue swirl pointing west, anxious
 like a steamship of sweaty Sicilian immigrants
 to a Sam Spade San Francisco

cigarette silverly smoking.

Inspecting My Nails at the Crossroads

Essay correcting is boring me and I look out of the window across housetops
 she's younger than I, medium build, long dark hair, a bride
 she's hanging out the bedclothes, first the heavy tan blanket, she shakes it out
 with distracted care she tosses it over the line and smoothes out the wrinkles
 it's a nice sunny day in March
 she shakes the thinner blanket and the two humid sheets, how delicately she moves
 a pink pullover that would look fine under a simple pearl necklace
 with hubby's soft gray cardigan thrown on top
 she's so far away I'm forced to invent her madonna face
 she's so cozy, I should get back to my papers
 if I could ask her she would tell me something I already know
 that today
 that it's today,
 Today I will tell my wife that I am leaving.

light darken

thank you for the contrast
 for taking my head in your hands
 music biting and glad
 like mountain water tastes
 I tilt my head back and sway
 the ticking doesn't bother me
 one cuts and one bleeds
 until the lanterns fade

when they come up again
 on a child's merry-go-round
 with other adults found
 grasping into the unknown
 at a flashing signal
 I am home and will stay there
 let go, won't you hearken
 I need to see light darken

THE POET SPEAKS:

The Poet Speaks, that is, Pretends to Know What He's Doing:

If I must comment my own poetry I look and see that, as in my prose, I begin at the finish line then find a road leading there. I make the way clear but not too clear, so that the reader can participate.

Also, I often have a narrative hidden behind the poem. Some of these poems are quite old--like 20 years, I let them age slowly--so I don't remember what inspired them, but they've all been recently revised. It is interesting that, after living in Sicily for forty years, there is very little Sicily in my poetry. I suppose that in my poetry mind I am elsewhere or referring to a time in my life when I lived elsewhere, or I am out of place, out of mind, lost in the clouds.

I'm equally unaware of my influences. I read lots of poets, many anthologies and collections, starting at the beginning, and then let them seep into my subconscious. So, I don't have a lot of answers or insightful analyses, I try to be spontaneous while not ignorant. And, whatever happens, I plow ahead telling my little made-up stories.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *E. Martin Pedersen, originally from San Francisco, has lived for over 35 years in eastern Sicily where he teaches English at the local university. His poetry has appeared most recently in Ginosko Literary Journal, Abstract Magazine, Neologism Poetry Journal, Poesis, Thirteen Myna Birds. Martin is an alum of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers. His collection of haiku, Bitter Pills, has just come out. He blogs at: <https://emartinpedersenwriter.blogspot.com>*

the naked midwife

by f. d. Hudson

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:

*This entry is brilliant. I can't believe the author is just 18 years old! (Do any of you lie about your ages to make me more jealous and inadequate?) In comparison, I am a barren man. Do read the **The Naked Midwife**, if you please—it is sure to. It speaks to us all. “and i am the naked midwife / with hands covered in blood clots.” Hudson is certainly a poet. I always wished I could write for a living. This one may. These words engender emotions and images I wish I could affect. “i am the stone catching her sparks” “she grabs my seaweed hair, / i catch the oyster’s pearl in my tongue / while tears touch red lips, tucked under teeth.” Bellissimo!*

“the naked midwife”

and i am the naked midwife
with hands covered in blood clots.
i can still feel her sharp nerves
tingling against my stomach. she is

like a jellyfish floating in my arms,
and i am the stone catching her sparks.
i keep my fingers free, in order not to smear
the color of roses on her skin.

i ease my breath and feel her
again, covered in sea-foam like a spirit.
i curl the fingers of my free hand into her balled fist
and call her mermaid queen,

poet of pearls, mute until i begin chewing
saltwater taffy. she grabs my seaweed hair,
i catch the oyster’s pearl in my tongue
while tears touch red lips, tucked under teeth.

i lie on my back, both my hands frozen
at a safe distance. she lays love
on my chest and swims across me.
my stomach feels tight as leather,

while my fingers claw into the sand.
 the waves crash between
 my legs, and i breathe
 like a whale breaking the ocean.

she spits into the sink,
 and i am screaming
 with laughter.

“the keys to the theater”

i kept the keys hanging from my shaking hand.
 told myself no doors need to be opened
 today. this twirling ballet needs
 its tragic second act.

the lights come on, and a violent moon protrudes
 from the ceiling, hanging by a thread. somnolent
 slippers come twirling stage right.
 the heart plateaus. the light can be seen across the pond.

only the fantasy of a star; a stage light covered
 by cloth lulls the audience into believing
 there's hope. there is none.
 these dancers must fall into the water.

and the curtains are drawn. end of act one.
 whoever came is shuffling in their seats,
 wondering if they can leave. “it was only a pond,”
 “yay-long. why couldn't they just swim across?”

pens scrape over notepads as act two
 comes barreling through, making no apologies
 for structure. now we are at war, splashing
 in the shallow shore. the heart grows

concave, forging new caverns. the stars multiply,
 crash and spew flames. sheets of white, orange and red
 are thrown asunder. the moon grows
 a face and fangs.

the anticipation is dearly felt, and in response
 a knife is plunged.
 tragedy befalls center stage, and just as the first tears
 fall, the scene ends. another intermission.

silence befalls the velvet room. “what a terrible
way to hurt me, just for watching your rotten
play,” mutters the air. the exit signs
disappear, as if in response.

act three is quiet, with echoes of a silver lake.
the heart is overwrought with blood; this ballet’s
windpipe closes. the songs are mute, the dancers
bound and gagged.

the night has ended with a whimper. in conclusion,
life loses its way, and is drowned
by the earth. the moon obscures the sun,
and the audience takes its leave.

but here i am, with the keys to the theater
in my naked palm. and i say the ballet
need not open today. nobody has to see
this nonsense, so they may call it a travesty

and continue on about their days.

“tatterdemalion soldier”

send me to bleed, tatterdemalion
soldier. you and i share a poisoned heart.

have no fear, son of clovers and rose crests,
there is no known cure. you will be relieved

of duty in due time. come, let us foxtrot
with our rifles slung round our shoulders.

in the between time, after all the bullets
have been fired, but before our wounds can be treated,

let us fire rounds into the black night,
let us drink and fight so that we can taste our bleeding gums.

rejoice in the shelter that was torn away from you,
celebrate the searing pain of this blade of freedom thrust

into your back. always remember the beauty
of your lover, for the photographs thrown into the fire.

always dream of the battlefield. it will embarrass you
to know how tethered you are to this torn-up place,

but nobody knows the echoing canals of your mind,
so feel safe at least in this; i am your one true lover.

your tongue will bleed and i will be there with the bucket.
when you come screaming back from a dream, it's me smothering

you with the pillow. you and i are failures together,
left behind without a morsel of a true word,

and when we die on the front line, there won't be a soul
to eulogize us in the papers. a flimsy legacy

regardless. so send me to battle first, ragged, ailing
brother of mine. our time is limited.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I am trying more and more to write about myself. For the longest time, I refused to be autobiographical; so much so that I tried to write poems as far removed from my life as possible. As such, I have written about famous actors, birds named gloria, and senile war veterans. Perhaps this is why I have so many poems about war and religion, despite not having particularly strong feelings about either. That is probably also why these poems involve midwives, ballet dancers, and (unsurprisingly) soldiers: three things with which I have no experience. I do have experiences with intimacy, admitting things, and breakups, which are all things I meant to write about when I sat down when to write these poems. Sometimes I think writing poetry is like subjecting yourself to the most confusing psychological exam conceivable.*

Whenever the question of inspiration is brought up, I usually say T.S. Eliot because it's easy, and because every time I read "The Waste Land" I feel like submitting to my true fate as a grocery store clerk. Recently I reopened Birthday Letters by Ted Hughes and surprised at how much I took from him, which troubled me until I couldn't be bothered to care anymore. Other names include: Mark Strand, Guillaume Apollinaire, John Ashbery, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Marianne Moore. I have been compared to E.E. Cummings often, and understandably, but the influence is less present than it seems. Some of my friends have told me that I will grow up to be a famous writer. More predict that I'm going to be an alcoholic. I don't know what to make these conjectures, but I hope at least that it means some of the stars are aligned in my favor

AUTHOR'S BIO: *My name is Foster Hudson. I am 18 years old, and I live in Jersey City. I am a senior at Elizabeth Irwin High School, and I am published in Black Horse Review and Sheepshead Review. Thanks for taking the time to read my work!*

STINGING RED and other poems...

By Sam Smiley

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: These are worth a look, some interesting lines and thoughts. Stinging Red is a lovely little allegory hyperbolizing the incidental; Toxic Penetration, a somber reflection. Treachery, 'Are your tear ducts obstructed or is it just your heart?' . . . 'I am from empty job promises / and dwindling savings accounts.' From the mundane to the mysterious comingled—if only I had a modicum of emotional intelligence. There are times when my undiagnosed psychopathy conflicts with my critiques.(Spacing is poet's own.)

Stinging Red

When I was little,
I never wore goggles to swimming lessons.
After a few times,
I got used to the way chlorine burned my eyes,
leaving the pool with red where white should've been.

The world was the same when I grew up.
It made me hurt and shake with anxiety
until I forgot
what it was like to sleep regularly
and not have burning eyes.
I got used to the pain.

Three weeks ago, my doctor wrote me a script
for some little blue pills.
She told me she was giving me goggles
and that life would be easier now.

I don't know how to tell her
that these are my fourth pair of goggles.
They all leak
and my eyes are still red.

Toxic Penetration

He walked on water
but unlike God,
he didn't float.
As a mortal,
he sunk down
into the depths,
wrists slit
to poison the blue.

It's polluted down there.
We cannot escape to Mars
and he cannot enter the depths
to escape the toxicity of the air.
It's sad that he couldn't see
that red seeping into blue
doesn't always make purple.
Sometimes it makes brown.

Treachery

We're on an island.
We are the island,
a bubble of hope and mist
surrounded by nothing but water,
away from the perils of civilization
until I hop on a plane
and the fog clears.
Only then I realize
our island was a peninsula all along.

Would you be okay if we were landlocked together?

I dream of a sea,
together we sit side by side
rocking with the water
until I wake and realize
I'm covered in your sweat.
The calm ocean I saw
was a tsunami for you.

Does it scare you to have me so close?

Your room fills with water
that drops from my eyes.
How are you so calm
while the room fills and I drown?
Your gills protect you.

Why didn't you tell me you were a fish?

I want you to pull me under the sea,
drown me in your tears.
Show me that you love me
enough to cry,
enough to kill me
with the sadness of us being apart.

Are your tear ducts obstructed or is it just your heart?

Through impassioned kisses,
water flows until
we create the ocean blue.
Skin on skin, we are the crashing waves
Until your mouth opens up and
You swallow me.
Please let me go.

Will I ever be able to find my way to shore?

I am again on an island,
desolate and bare.
Staring at the water,
I watch you row the boat away.
Our boat.
Your boat now.

Are you leaving me shipwrecked?

THE POET SPEAKS...

I wish I could say that I had intentionally chosen to write water-themed poems, but after months of poems flowing out of me, I noticed that water kept coming up over and over. I started to realize that we are initially grown in water, full of nutrients, living in amniotic fluid. We live our lives made of 60% water and can only survive three to four days without it. This connection that we all have to water, along with growing up a block from Lake Michigan, made me see water everywhere, in everything. I embraced this theme and started to explore how water shaped the person I am and how I see the world.

For me, poetry is understanding and connection. I write because I feel a compulsion to explore the world and to share that with others, to connect in mutual understanding or misunderstanding. I find that connection in misunderstanding is almost always the most intriguing.

I read and write because I have to. I cannot imagine the world another way.

BIO: *Sam Smiley is a writer from Racine, Wisconsin. They currently live in Chicago and study physics at DePaul University. Sam writes poetry and short fiction inspired by their experiences in the midwest. They are non binary, use they/them pronouns, and can be found on Instagram @wordsflowlikewater.*

BRUSH STROKES

By Joey Scarfone

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: *Here is an anthology you just might want to print and bind. You're bound to love each and every one, find your own favorite. It is always nice to be touched by someone's work, but every now and again I get steamrolled. 'Brush Strokes' does just this. I hope these words have been set to music, Scarfone's meter cries for melodic notes. They are ballads, oftentimes of the sadcore subgenre. (If Taupin got writers block, John could go back on tour with these.) NEWSSTAND, is just such a lyric. (Or break it up with a couple of choruses and make it a Springsteen hit for encore calls.) Both Scarfone and Squitieri have poems about crows. Far be it from me to play favorites, but they are two heavyweights in this issue. "you won't see them gliding up to some silly bird feeder / like those social climbing sparrows" Maybe the bird should be "immortalized on a coin or a stamp" Next! THE MATING GAME: "give me a day without the news / i'll stand in line to pay" Who writes his stuff?! [interrobang]. Isn't it nice when someone's words are just how you're feeling and all the while knowing you could never have said them yourself? Joe does this, unite in his writing...I could go on, but as a tagalong editor, my column gets cut—dare I speak further? Suffice to say, I might just start wearing a sandwich-board, 'READ AT JOE'S' It would improve my apparel and elevate my status. Unworthy of insistence, I can't do it just us, it is a must read...HS (Spacing is poet's own.)*

Senior Editor Charles writes: *If you have ever wondered what Whitman meant by his iconic words 'barbaric yawp'—to be sounded over the rooftops of the world—these poems will make it perfectly clear. As a poet, Joey, is the voice of barefoot reality. It's poetry wrenched from the trenches of experience, blood-washed, wired with nerve endings that fire powerful sonic volts and charged with the compassion blast of pain and joy. The poet's heart beats in every word and in those words life is all a-tremble, extraordinarily ordinary and alive with Monday to Friday grace. Joey prefers the measures of soul to pyrotechnics but in his hands no key is untouched, no melody forsaken. We limit submissions to ten poems but in this case we took all 23. And how could we not? A luminous talent that burns steadily in its own fiery constellation. Five stars.*

BRUSH STROKES

poetry by

Joey Scarfone

2020

NEWSSTAND

when your feelings are too far from anywhere
and the city becomes a stage
when your belly dances with hunger
and you're working for minimum wage
walk within your desire
and you know you're not alone
your passion is your fire
your dreams are precious stones

history sells at the newsstand
tourists flock to Greece
Pavorati starts a blues band
you by pizza by the piece
what it takes to be famous
is what it takes to survive
no one can really blame us
if we're late when we arrive

sometimes it all gets too crazy
and you can't get what you need
and it's not like you're being lazy
or overcome with greed
you're simply not connecting
or maybe it's not your time
your program needs correcting
your meter need another dime

THE CROWS

they sit on hydro wires like punk rockers in the cheap seats at a concert

fashion statement isn't their thing
no pretty coloured feathers or sweet songs

they wear black leather and black leather only
their song is a raunchy blues
with a smoker's cough

that's why i like the crows.....they have no pretenses

you won't see them gliding up to some silly bird feeder
like those social climbing sparrows
they'll eat left over pizza from last night's hockey game

no wonder they don't have the energy to migrate

instead, they brave the winter in their skinny jackets
huddling together like street smart ethnic gangs
body heat is all they need

i admire the crows.....they're tough
they can survive in the city or the jungle
same difference, it's just survival

we'll never see a crow immortalized on a coin or a stamp
there won't be a portion of wetland set aside for their preservation
because they don't need the advertising
they're already famous

refusing to become extinct they dictate their terms to evolution
“pick on the spotted owl, stick it to the bald eagle
but don't mess with us crows
we are here forever”

THE MATING GAME

fresh as blood from a broken heart
it will take some time to get over this one
you had balcony seats for the first three acts
front row centre for the crucifixion

life goes on if you want it to
but it stops when the heart overloads
good thing we have a soul to get us through
these major and minor modes

rock stars comets rhythm and blues
dripping from the milky way
give me a day without the news
i'll stand in line to pay

changes are good for a little while
cities are all the same
on every corner and every smile
you see the mating game

THE RAIN

cold winter day
crows are pair bonding in the naked birch tree
nature repeats herself again and again
while i'm lying with my lover
and listening to the rain

time moves slow
like the cactus plant
clouds colliding
they don't know what else to do
emotions stand silent
waiting to be named
while i'm lying with my lover
and listening to the rain

it will end soon
when winter seduces spring
when young crows are born
when leaves reappear
when history repeats itself again and again
i'll be lying with my lover
and listening to the rain

JESUS AND MARY MAGDALENE

Jesus wore leather that night and Mary wore a mini skirt.....very very tight
they had come a long way from Nazareth to the bright lights of Rome
a long way from Babylon
a long way from home

David Bowie flew in from Japan
or so the papers said
he just couldn't miss a party like this
so he decided to come back from the dead

never shy of the spotlight, they really lit up the town
David, Jesus and Mary Magdalene really knew how to get around

they drew a crowd wherever they went and record sales were great
from the sistene chapel to the big apple
the media just couldn't wait

one miracle followed the other but the politicians weren't impressed
Jesus in his leathers and Mary in her cute little dress

Jesus was definitely out of control
he was getting too much power from his rock and roll
his fans adored him while the clergy deplored him
what would they do with this soul

now Jesus and Mary Magdalene had to cover their tracks
their following grew and so did their crew
they needed security to cover their backs

David had left for Amsterdam
he could see the end was near
Jesus and Mary were close to his heart
but they wouldn't last a year

everyone wept for Jesus when they saw what was done to him
turning water into wine was just too big a sin

they should have stayed in Nazareth and just settled down
but Jesus and Mary Magdalene wore a very thorny crown

THREE SHORT POEMS

THE CROSSING

may the stars of Orion guide you on your journey
may the wind and tides be in your favour
may the light of the moon guide you through this uncharted darkness
and when you have made your crossing
may you land on the shore
insight of the fire i will have burning

BLESSING

may the love you radiate
come back to you
as a hundred suns

LULLABY

close your eyes little child
rest yourself from a world so wild
may all the dreams you dream tonight
be filled with love and hope and light

NOMADS

cement sidewalks dry as the desert floor
cross the street and stand on the edge of the world
the thin line between beauty and danger winds like a snake
among the disasters and success stories

perfect moments slip through greedy hands
how much is enough? how much is too little?
it's a question of survival in the lowlands

the budhists say "stay empty, a full cup can not receive"
tough concept for an empty belly
even tougher for one that's full

unions demand a living wage
while beggars beg for spare change
and at the top of the food chain
it's all free

sometimes the nomads move in caravans
secure in their numbers
united in their hunger
but then the rebels desert their tribe
and set up camp on the edge of the world

TWO POEMS

THE DANCE

i think i get it now
life is a dance in slow motion
and if we can move like the flowers in the wind
we can grow with every season
then the trials of every day would not be so hard to edit
they become a source of energy, making us stronger
giving us legs to dance every dance
sing every song

i think i get it now
life is asking something of me
my response is my destiny
my chance to give
growing a garden from my experiences
however small the plot of ground i have to work with

i think i get it now
life is about dancing in a dream
like the pappus grass on the shore
like the hummingbirds of summer
like waves breaking the sound barrier

SOUL CANDY

breath connects the spirit to the body
music connects the body to the soul
a smile connects beauty to the heart
a song connects one heart to another
heart inspires vision
vision reinvents joy
joy attracts love
love connects everything

DOWN AND DIRTY

it's been a long time
but it doesn't matter now
funny how loneliness fades whenever you're around
still, i'm wanting more when the clock says 10:30
still i'm wanting more
after we're down and dirty

trust this awkward process
if in fact there is one at all
you look so pretty in that dress
let's take one more fall
i wouldn't want to lie
my emotions aren't sturdy
i'm afraid that you will cry
after we're down and dirty

so crawl with me on this jungle floor
let the quick sand suck us in
it's fun being where we've never been before
it's fun committing this sin
let's be kids again

let's pretend we're thirty
let's go on the skids again
let's get down and dirty

TWO HEARTS

promises get broken and fade away
but when a heart breaks it becomes two hearts
twin seeds planted side by side
waiting to grow.....welcoming the elements

rain and tears soften the soil
reaching for the warmth of the sun as they break familiar ground
only to be greeted by the cold of the night
the mystery of the moon

the wind blows
two hearts touch like flames in a fire dance
climbing, falling, flashes and sparks

now it's morning
the dew is asleep on the flowers
patiently waiting to quench the thirst of the sun

the cycle starts again
love is renewed in the forest, in the city
and in the space between two hearts

TOUCH ME

put your hands between my scars
play the strings of this fragile harp
until the music breathes the words of the shaman's prayer
over and over
healing every wound

i sit beside your soul
watching the sun rise in my heart
it floods my earth
fallow from the long days of despair
anxious to grow and give

lay with me like paper and kindling

our spark will melt the poisons we have endured

touch me
touch the corners of my body that are yours
touch every colour within your passion
touch the light of stars that no longer exist
touch your dreams until they are real
touch me.....touch me

FALLING STAR

the sky was so clear
success was so near
then a cloud blocked the moon
and i had to do something.....real soon

it would be nice to just stare at the stars
such a hypnotic sky
but destiny doesn't stand still
it dances with when and with why

move now on another road
hope i can handle this unwanted load
no time to wonder just get in the car
no time to wonder
it's just another falling star

I FEEL IT TOO

who would have thought this would happen to me
who would have thought this would happen to you
here we are in each other's arms
'cause it feels like the right thing to do
ya baby.....i feel it too

i don't really care how long it lasts
i don't really care about your past
we're just two happy lovers
embracing something new
ya baby.....i feel it too

it doesn't really matter who works the controls
it's more about body than it is about soul
i promise i'll like
whatever you do
ya baby.....i feel it too

RUNWAY MODEL

runway model.....hottest thing in town

see through dresses.....is that a sequin gown
you kill it every day without even tryin'
and your manager loves you 'cause the customers are buyin'
they're buyin' what you wear and your sexy stare
and the money's so good that you don't have to care

fashion leader....you're in demand
got a thousand photographers
in the palm of your hand
you look good in silk
you look good in jeans
they might even put you on a can beans

THREE WHITE ROSES

petals fall from the roses that sit in a vase
that bathed in the sun
that laughed in the rain and stared at the moon
they fill the room with beauty.....it's all they know how to do
silent sweet innocence plucked from the vine
look at us, we are beautiful, we are pure

feel the softness of our skin but hurry
we will soon be slipping into the mystery of the spirit
we are only roses
our life is short

petals lie on the mantle beneath the stems with no flowers
each one a chapter in a life spent without fear, without malice
each one a brush stroke in an impressionist's painting

NOT FOR PROFIT

hello.....i'm soliciting donations for my tropical vacation
it's really overdue and i can prove it too
you see.....i've been working very hard
every day and every night
to make enough money
for my southern flight

i was on the wagon but fell off it
so i started a non-profit
and before my very eyes
money fell from the skies
so i'm taking a vacation
thanks to your tax deductible donation

Psychedelic Highway

psychedelic highway
a road that never ends
imaginary conversations
with imaginary friends

i feel it comin' on now
it's startin' to kick in
spirits start to call now
it's flyin' time again
i know my feet are on the ground
i know i don't have wings
tryin' to measure every sound
it's such a crazy thing

on the psychedelic highway

polka dot street lights
squinting through the fog
subterranean jazz sounds
cutting through the smog
i'm walking and i'm listening
but i can't see very far
the streets are all deserted
and it's beautifully bizare

on the psychedelic highway

day three
of a three day run
i gotta' admit
i got high quite a bit
but i sure had a lotta' fun
mountains appear on the horrizon
getting larger every mile
it won't be long 'til i get home

and see my baby's smile

paychedelic highway
a road that never ends
imaginary conversations
with imaginary friends

Desperate Dogs

grey sky blocking the sun
streets are deserted but there's no where to run
the first day of spring
feels like the last day of fall
and the desperate dogs are watching it all.....

they watch from the markets that have emptied their shelves
they watch from the shops that are closed
they watch from their balconies, afraid for themselves
they watch from their kids who need clothes

it happened so fast.....like wind through the trees
no one knew what was going on
the whole human race was brought to its knees
something was really wrong

so the dogs stayed at home 'cause being alone
was the only thing they could do
they needed a plan, or maybe superman
would help them make it through.....

through the war they never fought before
through the losses they would endure
through the jobs that aren't there anymore
through the hope they'll find a cure

and then the dogs did what they do best.....

they went for a walk and started to talk
and eventually got a grip
the desperate dogs howled at the moon

and got on board with the trip

THE POET SPEAKS:

As for my inspirations I will begin with....everything that surrounds me. The current crisis has me dealing with a lot of anxiety, hence "Desperate Dogs". I feel like a desperate dog when I see my neighbors lose their jobs and worry about how they will feed their kid and pay rent. I feel a guilty compassion when I see how large our homeless "tent city" is growing. I feel grateful for my comfortable apartment and food in my fridge. I am also inspired by my own experiences.....good and bad. A lot of my poems have become lyrics to songs. The music and lyrics don't always happen simultaneously so that process can take years. I just wait for the chips to fall into place. Sometimes things happen quickly. Desperate dogs was written in one hour. I started it....we went shopping for groceries....and when I came back I finished it.

I did publish a book called "Vintage Cars of Victoria". I did all the photography and paid a graphic designer to do the layout. I wouldn't say took a bath on it.....it was more like a cold shower. It did lead to producing TV shows for Shaw TV which was a very valuable experience. They can be seen on youtube (vintage cars of victoria). It was like going to school for two years only I didn't have to pay. That has led to my current hobby of video. I took some computer courses and learned how to do facebook. I have a few projects on the drawing board but right now everything but my imagination is on hold. My page is simply under my name (joey scarfone). Lots of my videos are there including newsstand. Truth be knownst I'm just a frustrated musician.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Joey Scarfone lives in Victoria, BC where he owned Lazy Joe's Vinyl Emporium—a store devoted to classic vinyl. He devotes some of his time and all of his interest to poetry and music.*

9 POEMS

By Carolyn Adams

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Here is some fine poetry from Carolyn Adams. My favorite title might be **Late Leaving**; so I won't quote a single line since I highlighted most of them. But here's a taste for the rest: "The moon is a splinter, / inferring its wholeness." "in heavy garments. / The sun has been absent" "prophets in statuary gold, / saints in beatified stone," "the past is a collection of mirrors," I left some out, maybe there are too many...HS (Spacing is poet's own.)*

Something Moving

Feel your pulse
become a memory.
The ticking clock
steers toward
a full quiet.
You're weightless.

Something moving
in the kitchen.

You steady the
vertiginous chair,
the carousel floor.

Something tugging,
pulling you
to the window,
to the lamp,
to the rug.

The room doubles,
then toggles,
slowly swings into the vertical.

Something moving
in the attic.
Something moving
in your bed.

The Glacier Dream

I'm cold. I realize
I'm trolling Southern California,
ice-bound.

At first I'm alone. Then,
passersby adhere to the glacier.
We pick up valets, socialites,
janitors, a mayor or two.
Their cars. Parts of their houses.

We pile on designer bags,
reality stars, costume jewelry.
We test them for fit,
tossing aside what we don't want.
We don't throw them off
the glacier, though. We can't
bring ourselves to do that.

We're plundering Disneyland,
dismantling concessions,
destroying the integrity
of the Ferris wheel.
We add carnival trash
to our existent burdens.

The sun sets.
Our vehicle pushes on,
through streets and celluloid,
revising as it goes.

The Aviator's Valentine

Plush lines of farms and meadows
 divide the earth below.
 Cemetery towns, their chess games
 of little pawns and squires and kings
 marked for death,
 blue waters snaking
 cities of stacked boxes,
 shimmering streams of light,
 burning refineries--
 all pass under my wing.

Here in veils of blue silk,
 hawks and I argue
 the perils of current and updraft.
 We name the shades of grey
 in cumulus, nimbus.
 We skim the horizon's blush.
 Summer storms sweep us
 through banks of warm rain.
 We are buoyed on the glimmer of stars
 and a quartered moon.

Looking up,
 you may see this vista
 as vast and chartless,
 made of water and the dreams
 of a thousand lost fools.
 But over land and sea, over all,
 I am cruising.
 I am lighter than air.

A Modern Death

In slow motion, freeze-frame,
 I watch you struggle
 in the cocoon of error, time lapse,
 convulsion of need and refusal.
 Injury is inevitable,
 but there should be no fear in this:
 the past is a collection of mirrors,
 the present, water broken by a stone.
 I leave this room
 where a clock echoes

in the hollow afternoon,
and the scent of rain is the only fresh thing.

Voices in my head recite
our nameless lives,
slashed with this blade I wield, this pen.
You sleep alone in the darkness,
our story scrawled in couplets
on the living room wall.

In this age of modern death,
motivation is not questioned,
closure is achieved in 60 seconds or less.
Faith is quickly forgotten,
ambition, only bright flashes
on the horizon.
You will not see me,
you cannot forgive me.
But I am told that's the way of love:
one is always leaving,
the other is left
to an unraveling aftermath.
And we are pursued by a hounding rhythm:
the tale is no greater with the telling.

Slope

Her clothes, ragged hair,
whip the wind like tattered flags.
The horizon stretches lean and hungry,
a thin cold line.
She reaches for the husky beside her.
She smiles and strokes his thick white fur
as he hunches, nose to ground.
This is a hunt well-rehearsed.

She tethers the dog
to the shopping cart,
tilts up a brown bottle,
throws it down empty.
She steps from the slope
of the overpass,
to face the wind
and the herds of cars.
Steps to the curb
with her crayon-scrawled sign.

Veladora

Carry a candle
 in my name
 to your place of prayer,
 cluster it with others
 in supplication.
 In that delicate air
 luminous with incense
 and absolution,
 prophets in statuary gold,
 saints in beatified stone,
 receive your requests for me.
 In your hope, piety's wing
 will buoy
 the pain I carry,
 and I'll emerge,
 take to flight,
 borne on your benevolence.
 Uplifted, almost holy.

Late Leaving

Finally,
 I am leaving you.
 I've left before,
 but you weren't here to notice.
 Absence is your trademark.

I stand at your door,
 scrubbing it clean of every trace
 my knock has left.
 I walk backward
 down your stairs,
 lifting my footprints as I go.

It's long ago
 been time to leave.
 I'm the late one, I guess:
 waiting for the coffee to cool,
 waiting for nightfall,
 waiting for you to beckon my return.

Rust

The rust bells of winter
toll the days in long numbers

as rain, a dark word
on stones
mantles the air

in heavy garments.
The sun has been absent
for many paragraphs.
My solitude
expands hours

to interminable manuscripts.
I wonder if persistence
can summon heat

from its
abstract origins.
I wonder if
evidentiary storms
can change slight words

to a cogent
argument.
I wonder if
damage truly
alters

what it falls upon.

Envisat 1 Observes Us

Tonight I'm thinking
of Elton's blue canoe,
that harbinger,
as I study
the face of God.

The moon is a splinter,
inferring its wholeness.
Planets wear colors
in complex memory.

I'm only a pin dot of light
in your eye-sky.
I measure distances each day,
gather pointless bulletins.

I see you.
I see you giving up your good intentions,
taking me with you.

You migrate a small Earth,
crawl a finite geometry.

Warfighters move in, move borders,
explode and run.
Then, one minute after the hour,
all guns fall silent.

Breezes move aspen and oak arbitrarily.
A soft tapping rain
disturbs you.

Salmon swim upstream
against the hungry teeth of wilderness,
through sediment and toxins,
into the mouth of a volcano.

My obsolete architecture,
my irrelevance,
don't distract me.

You give me so much to see

THE POET SPEAKS: *I write because I want to understand the complexities of this life -- the relationships between people, objects, and environments. If I can lay out thoughts in poetry, those complexities begin to unravel. Poetry is like raw data that has to undergo the discipline of critical review and revision, so I'm always working on my craft. I've experimented with forms, but I usually return to free verse.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Carolyn Adams' poetry and art have appeared in Steam Ticket, Aji Magazine, Topology, Change Seven Magazine, and Beatnik Cowboy, among others. She has been nominated for a Pushcart prize, as well as for Best of the Net, and was a finalist for 2013 Poet Laureate of the city of Houston, Texas. She is currently a staff editor for Mojave River Review, and a poetry editor for VoiceCatcher. Having relocated from Houston, she lives in Beaverton, Oregon.*

Each Wednesday is Different

By Tom Squitieri

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Wow, a celebrated journalist who waxes poetic? Will wonders ever cease? Squitieri's sequences are cerebral and certainly well-seasoned. Well shouldn't they be? In the first piece, **Warmth at 9 degrees**, he is inviting us into his 'world at large' "Today we control / The Ouija board / We mock the maelstrom's / Fury ..." "the music we create / is what makes / Earth smile" This is the first of ten poem, sally forth, "Shorn of fear." If the evening news read like this I might just tune in. The language is engaged; the man's a raging sage, persuasion fills each page, the fifth estate at center stage. His voice and verse are both earthly and worldly. "I wanted more / it gave me more" My personal favorite is **Dyad Senses**, but I am a poor judge. These poems are sophisticated with an inkling of licentiousness. 'But Lust precedes what's yet revealed.' (Spacing is poet's own.)*

Warmth at 9 degrees

walk with me
in what I have learned
as we face a moment of
true challenge

Today we control
The Ouija board
We mock the maelstrom's
Fury and know how
To stare it down

the music we create
is what makes
Earth smile

We ignite within us
Then spread its
Power

i love your body
and eyes and
mind grabbing me
It gives me the truth
I was timid to share

Each beat in
Our music
becomes a chord
No one has
Heard before

Yes, go more
Because those next steps
Will be like
No others

The brambles do part
If we look carefully
Shorn of fear
Radiate in belief

And one moment,
You will look around
Smile and say to me
“You were right...”

Laughing Hair

Tell me the things you enjoy
I will take it from there

There is more
that I see
those eyes and smile,
head tilt.
I am pretending
we laugh the same way.

Lovely again

and then again

I will not
 Push too hard
 Just always try to
 Go a little longer
 At a nice pace
 As I will give you
 Presents every day

No matter what
 You say
 Or do not do
 I'm going to embrace
 This lovely sharing

To add luster
 To what you create
 not a sunrise
 Not a sun set
 It is
 a sun stop

You see
 I delve into mysteries and
 fan flames of those
 ready to soar and sing

Two Crows on a Telephone Line

We knew at once
 How easy it could be
 Coming from different directions
 To rest on the telephone line

Two with knowledge
 Being used well
 The wind supports the line
 Even as it causes it to sway
 We swing like kids in a park
 And laugh

How the world hates our caws

As if their yipping is not the true annoyance
Calm crows concern them, it seems
Our sharp eyes seeing through all
Transparency that quakes the majority

True Plinth

That stunning, sacred
Moment of stillness visited
This morning
Oh my
The world truly stopped
Opened its words without speaking
Pumped me with life
Made me more

I wanted more
it gave me more
Twice, thrice
A blink of eternity
That restless night
Distant and defeated
For the moment

Magic still comes
There is just so many
More demands of it

My mouth smiles
A laughing lick
A sigh and a ponder
As again you sweep my heart
And awaken my wishes

Slowly, the dark coffee
got deeper
richer
I no longer could resist her

Dyad Senses

Let's just open for each other
As we know it will be heaven
To smooth our skins
Tangle our tongues
Warm the world
Stir the thoughts

We sleep as one
In our own desires
Perhaps our dreams
Cross
As our fingers touch
In slumber

We are far away
And strangers
Yet no one can prove
What I know to be true
That you and I
At some point
Deserve to look
Deep and smile
As one

We get transported to
Magical places
Only to discover it is
Within us
That the magic
Sings the loudest

Shared Creativity

I will give you one word
If you give me a paint stroke
A photo of the true you

A smile that sees it all

A word on paper
For paint on canvas
A finger touch of talent
Of two connected

A fair trade
indeed

The stroll
the thought,
the rumpus of the mind
and runaway of the heart
Are pure, true
Art

I want my
Words to go
right through you
Then boomerang
And hold you tight

Your fingers
Take the brush
And create me again
In the vivid color
That my words
Cause to erupt
In you

A very fair trade
Indeed
Can you match
My words
And their daring
With paint and clay
A smile, a touch

Or perhaps pencil
Yes
A pencil to draw
And a pencil to write words
You see
We already have

harmony

Penultimate

Each word is
like a star in
the sky

A few seconds, demure.
Stops the moment,
breath held,
wondering, keeping.

What word next

Arms on knees,
head in deep ponder
how do I
get into your thoughts

body gets
ready
soul sings

Feel your hidden
Secrets
Pull my words
closer

We walk and search
Suddenly
That beauty
We fear
Will never be found
Appears

Even as you remain
silent

The Chew

She was really eating grapes
Nothing was wrong with that
Her mouthed moved
To fulfill total
Taste and then
To tempt

Because what are lips
For
But to taste
And tempt

As we
Watch
Thoughts construct
Lips dry in
Ponder

Unresolved Chord

Hollow never leaves
Despite spring's
Promise of beauty

Hollow stays
scorches beyond
Repainting
As to taunt life

Hollow will remain
Even as new life blossoms
This spring
Which we tried to reach
and could not

Sun will again

Shine on the deck
Yet the warmth
Will elude
The basking
We once enjoyed

Many many many
Times
I am glad I said
I love you
Snuggling on
The pillow
Walking
The extra blocks
Stopping to look around
Sharing as one

Now alien words
Crowd me
Distraught. Forlorn
Opening the door
To
Hollow

Don't worry
Sweet girl
Even though hollow
Is now here
I will tell the
School children who love
you,
that you are still
laughing with them
How they, and I,
Danced with
your happy smile
Soft ears
Best wagging tail

And I promise to
Always sniff the air
For both of us

\$50.59 Or \$59.50

Life laughed and told
 Me wake up
 Told me in ways
 That soothe attention

Two consecutive purchases
 \$50.59 and \$59.50
 Vast odds to happen
 Life laughed again
 It sometimes does
 Pay attention, it said
 As the sky said, hey

Those pleasures of the body
 And mind
 That the many say are
 wrong to feel
 Are to be felt
 so gloriously right

The winds coming
 In to the shore
 Gale force in spirit
 Deep in embrace
 Reminding
 This is the beginning
 of anything you want

Go down the slide with mirth
 Be a silly and a badass
 Get stoked and soaked
 Meld childhood wonder
 With adult wisdom
 Soon the paths
 All join
 The same soul

THE POET SPEAKS: *Poetry is the opera we all can sing, it is the Prosecco in the vineyard of words. When you write someone a poem, you can find the words that before could not come out of your mouth. And if the author is reading that poem, those hearing that poem will react more*

real, more intensely, usually more lovingly, because writing a poem is indeed your act of love and affection to that person.

I've loved writing for decades and now poetry reflects what I have learned, who I have saved, how I have fallen and the wings that make me and others fly. I love poetry for many reasons, from listening to Dr. Gargano in freshman English reading "To His Coy Mistress" to Jackie Gleason reciting "Casey at the Bat." I think it started with "T'Was The Night Before Christmas" and continued to "Dream A Little Dream of Me" and "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow."

It is usually in the morning, as the coffee's aroma is in a duet with the waking up songs of the birds, that I write. The more I write poems, the more places I find inspiration. Sometimes something I see, sometimes a line I hear or read, often a combination of seemingly disparate moments or thoughts or events or prods that weave themselves on my typing fingers.

For example, my dear Hezekiah, in the poem that I finished today — perhaps in anticipation of your kind note — drew its inspiration in large part from the conversation we shared several days ago.

As for the two poems before that, written as inspiration in the COVID warp that now snares us, one came from a line of conversation with a friend ("I Will Be There") and the other from a comment made to me in a grocery store ("Smiling Beneath the Mask")

One poem which you graciously accepted reflects the last months with my dying friend. Another talks of surreptitiously watching a colleague unknowingly sensuously chewing. Two vastly different inspiration points.

One female friend told me, to my surprise, that "you write what women want to hear." Another said "Your poems are sexy and sexual. Makes you want more or to actually see that person." A third wrote of the woman in my poems, "How lovely to be in the place and space for her so that she can easily and energetically find her way to you. :)"

To hear such lovely responses is a true honor.

Poetry liberates me from the false rules many impose upon us; that is the potion to happiness, sensual invigoration, the bounty of a robust sex life, and embracing fun for couples. Poetry to start the day means you are alive. It is what truly sweetens that morning kiss.

It first struck me on a December morning as the war in Sarajevo was winding down I was walking down the hill and my chum Roger Cohen of the NY Times was walking

up the hill; he observed my glances, my pausing and my jotting words. He smiled and said aloud, "Ah Squitieri, writing poetry again."

He was correct and I had not realized it. My dispatches from the war zones were often written with poetic song as the binding for the story.

I used the horrors of war, where love dared only to be shown in quiet, far away places, to fuel the song shared by those who would not give up in the face of horror. Soon I realized that poetry is the window to not just capturing love but liberating love. The love most prevalent during the war was of those giving up everything to save someone they love. Nothing seemed more powerful. That is manifest now in writing the pleasure of love -- not when love is a joy crushed under the boots of bully boys and rapists.

From bullets to ballads, angst to aubades, elimination to etudes. That I do reflect constantly that love in its purest forms always needs embraced, cultivated, supported and sung.

Tom, April 15, 2012

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Tom Squitieri is a three-time winner each of the Overseas Press Club and White House Correspondents' Association awards for his work as a war correspondent, with reporting from all seven continents. His poetry has appeared in Ariel Chart, The Raven's Perch, Scarlet Leaf Review, Twisted Vine, The Literary Yard, Eskimo Pie, The Stardust Review, Wanderlust Journal, Shanghai Writer's Workshop, No Strings Attached, Style Sonata and The Griffin's Inkspot, as well as in the book "Put Into Words My Love," and was selected for Color: Story 2020. He writes most of his poetry while parallel parking or walking his dogs, Topsy and Batman.*

lonely boy and other poems...

by abi odun david ogunrinde

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: *So I'm told, there are over 500 native languages spoken in Nigeria. Ogunrinde expresses himself beautifully in this one, though I wonder if he draws from others enhancing ours: "maybe, i should try and smile, maybe i should worry less," "my hands wrapped all over me, coiled, twinning and climbing like vines." "when you open my mouth, you will find a garden". HS (Formatting and titling are poet's own.)*

i close my eyes, and disappear into myself, my hands wrapped all over me, coiled, twinning and climbing like vines. i want to create a home inside me, and stay there.

-lonely boy

i allow myself to feel fear, i worry and pace. i do not know how long it stays, or when it goes. maybe, i should try and smile, maybe i should worry less, but i am hollow, a pure vessel of emotion and she is a part of me.

-time is passing

i am a late bloomer, slow to grow, slow to know, slow to speak, and slow to bloom. i did not realise i could have so much words. when you open my mouth, you will find a garden of words. i am still slow to speak, still blooming. i am a festival of words.

-late bloomer

THE POET SPEAKS:

my poems were inspired by fear, anger, and loneliness, but most especially fear.

-the fear of never saying the things that ran through my head and told me that they made sense, one of non-conformity, and doubts of finding reasoning with anyone, or even becoming a book.

-an anger with myself, people and a culture in my environment that had, has, and was still cultivating silence.

-a loneliness, that drove me to my limits and asked me to speak, to write anyway.

style for me became clearer, after reading the poems of rupi kaur, nayyirah waheed, and rumi. the softness and freedom they brought with their poems made poetry seem all the more at ease for me. it made me explore that plainness in concepts, a sense of honesty and vulnerability, without trying to concoct any form of mystery with my poems, one i didn't want or had at the moment.

poetry is important for me to familiarize myself with a world of individuals who see the human emotions, in words and colours, stories and depth. i want to read them, to think, to feel and to become detached from a reality that can be too conclusive sometimes.

it has become a tool of expression for me, but beyond that, a process of documenting my life. i want to age, being able to also allow my words bloom, mature, be free, and tell stories of a life the way that i saw it. i want to be dark, cryptic, sweet, layered, honest and many many shades of things and i want to use words to do this.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

my name abi, full; abi odun david ogunrinde. i write from lagos, nigeria. i started to write as a way to express my fears, my thoughts, my pains and ask the questions that i've always plagued me openly. this has given me the chance to explore myself more, while responding to whatever i feel. i like calm, beautiful spaces, a lot pastries and ice cream

5 Poems

By Paul Bergstraesser

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: *Bergstraesser turns some piercing phrases. If his mind were a maze, I doubt few, other than he, could find their way out. I cannot think of many, who wouldn't do well to aspire not to write unlike this: "every egg sitting in the pure / white of its judgment." "Each spring blossom is cringingly / individual and we lump them together at our own peril." "We removed our suits? We're still wrinkled and can't mask the chlorine?" If you want to wonder you way around his work, read 'Whatever Keeps You Alive' first; it has a mind-bending, spellbinding motif. HS (Spacing is poet's own.)*

A Common Enemy

Pretending that other people are the problem
kills us when we should be looking closer:

every leaf a critic, every lawn a critic, every jetstream,
every single ounce of water, every egg sitting in the pure

white of its judgment. People are predictable: the ones
who eat money, the ones who wear leather flying caps as a

condition of their Amelia Earhart scholarships, the ones
who shower with one guy before prom and attend

the dance with another. Each spring blossom is cringingly
individual and we lump them together at our own peril.

This is no acid trip turned dicey, the clouds suddenly pink and
suffocating like some late afternoon cotton candy crime scene.

This is serious as a corporate memo redoubling our efforts to
cut down all the trees because M. Nature needs a clean shave

every now and then and one day will thank us for it.

Bipeds

You thought I was taking you to a cocktail party for swingers,
But instead I'm pulling over and we're going for a walk.

I know what you're going to say: We are the least undressed people I know!
Need I remind you of that one evening we stood shivering in the

Community pool watching the director's cut of *Forrest Gump*?
We removed our suits? We're still wrinkled and can't mask the chlorine?

I've read all the literature on walking which suggests its healing power,
How the ego is stripped away till all that's left is a horse with a rabbit

On its back. And I'm perfectly willing to assume the role of the rabbit,
As per our last counseling session. But here's what I'm afraid of: You,

As George Washington, will refuse to bind with rags my blackened,
Frostbitten toes during our walk, our Valley Forge. Or worse, that you'll

Crawl from the ocean, figure out what it means to breathe, and
Immediately turn right back around for another million years, disgusted

By my lack of gills. I beg of you: Please see the mystery that surrounds us,
Even if we embarrass it. I just want to be your 9/11 hero, lead you down the

Staircase and make love against a tree as it collapses beneath our feet.

Whatever Keeps You Alive

I am hated in hospitals.
I wish that meant I'm a

metaphor for disease, infection,
a gob of bacteria, but what it boils

down to is just that I'm hated
in hospitals. You see, I switch patient

charts when no one's looking.
I loosen screws on gurneys.

I listen in on private conversations
and share their grief room to room,

whispering the news into ears that
are unblocked for the first time.

Oh, you say. You must be Death.
Sorry, no. What about Cancer, then?

No, no. If I were a riddle, you could
tie me to a bedrail like a gift shop

balloon and smile at me and feel
pleasant after your visitors have

left, but don't look to me for
comfort in the long night.

If, in the half-light of the nurses'
station, you see me slowly working

my way down from the IV bag
into your wrist, remember that

this is going to hurt me more
than it hurts you.

My 100-Year Plan

I hand it to you to read
while I wait by the window
thinking about my
courage, my bravery
against the backdrop
of the birds this morning,
whose lack of foresight
is evident in their song
and suggests a certain
spinelessness that even
the greats have never
written about.

When you're done you
say there's no dying in
here, no disease, and I say
yes, but there are 15 to
20 brand new TVs, just
think of it, which impresses
but, ultimately, it needs
some editing, you say.

So, I dig up 5 worms and
line them up on the
document and between
the sun and the worms
I hold a magnifying
glass, thinking this is
the kind of editing you
mean.

More, you say, bigger,
really have at it, and as
I read through the plan
again I cry like an old
man who's lost nothing,
realizing that you're
right, there's no pain
in here and that all

pain is one pain and
 better to schedule it
 sooner than later, so
 I step into the day,
 into traffic, and wait
 for a bus to hit me
 like a freight train.

Flight

I hang out with a group of people
 Who've never wanted to fly.
 And here at the meal we don't
 Discuss this. We talk about our children's

Schooling and trips we've taken
 With our families in airplanes—that kind
 Of flying is mere routine, another
 Subheading in the outline of our large lives.

The kind of flying I mean is the boiling
 Together of wax and feathers and affixing
 A pair of wings to our backs and preening
 In a mirror, readying ourselves to dive into

The ocean of wind that surges over the earth.
 It's never been a topic of conversation, not once,
 But tonight, like every night, I rise from the
 Foam in my drink and circle the table like

A mobile hung over the tedious crib of our tongues.

THE POET SPEAKS:

Apropos of my work and our times, I quote Franz Kafka: "There is no need for you to leave the house. Stay at your table and listen. Don't even listen, just wait. Don't even wait, be completely quiet and alone. The world will offer itself to you to be unmasked; it can't do otherwise; in raptures it will writhe before you."

AUTHOR BIO:

I was awarded an NEA Literature Fellowship in 2012. I have poems forthcoming in The American Journal of Poetry and Hole in the Head Review. In addition, I have had my fiction and nonfiction published in Another Chicago Magazine, The Barcelona Review and The Portland Review, among others.

At present, I teach creative writing and literature at University of Wyoming.

through the crack

by aldo quagliotti

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:

If ever a poet's writing ignited the reasons for Fleas being... this is ONE! Now we won it, and own it—for awhile... The only thing stopping it from having been read throughout the ages would be that it's recently written. You run a risk by being lesser for not having a look. We have all taken and taught Poetry Survey courses, with syllabuses recommending the masters. Here is one yet to be perused, that we can auspiciously and timely include. "as light filtered through the crack / our faces densely packed." Also "[un]tangles our majestic spires" And what makes me feel best about myself—is to know he is out there somewhere on my top shelf...HS (Spacing is poet's own.)

Senior Editor Charles writes:

Un poeta di qualità che siamo onorati di presentare. Scrive in inglese ma pensa in italiano - un linguaggio lirico nel cuore stesso della poesia.

as light filtered through the crack
 our faces densely packed
 with ragged-looking petals
 were similar to a burgundy variety
 of sunset
 we were tangling our majestic spires
 hands floating like flies
 falling like spiders along our arms
 a new day was starting, we were recovering
 from the night
 debating what season would come next
 right inside our room
 a sweaty summer of enveloped bodies

or a myriad of autumny impervious clouds
 I decided your lips
 would suit spring better
 so I covered you with kisses
 to replenish our rebirth

THE POET SPEAKS:

My poem was inspired by a plastered night, made of endless techno beats and cascades of hips-shaking moments, wrapped into a black hole of feelings running towards the ending of the club bang and the beginning of a brand new day. A circling cycle that left me with a throbbing headache and a vigorous image in my mind: my boyfriend and I, sweating after the dance floor bliss, were welcoming the sun beams by having a guess about what the weather would be like. I smiled at my partner whispering to him we could even decide ourselves what season would come next. And that outburst of energy and love triggered my poem, that was vomited incessantly.

My reading has always been proudly feline, quite bashful to tendencies and bestsellers. When it comes about Poetry, there's a full army of writers I adore since I was a young, rebellious teenager, starting with my countrymen Eugenio Montale, Antonia Pozzi, Alda Merini to William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath. Having a contemporary look to authors I've crossed recently I can't help nominating and showing my wild gratitude to minds like Ana Guadalupe, Susy Freitas, Konstandinos Mahoney, Pedro Rocha, Davide Garritano.

Poetry is my third eye, the only possible way to evirate my constant fuming anger and to turn it into a spiritual guideline, driving me through the adverse currents of life. It's my shadow puppet theatre where I can be the master of processing my own feelings. It's a freeing, unmissable meeting with myself, where I always arrive late. It's always been my filter to keep my hope in this world and to instill some faith in these dark times. The genre I consume the most, the pleasure I never give up on.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

My name is Aldo Quagliotti, and I'm an Italian poet based in London.

In 2019 I published my first collection of poems, Japanese Tosa, published by London Poetry Books. The anthology debuted on October 2019 at the Tea House Theatre in Vauxhall and has then been promoted throughout the London open mic nights such as Flo vortex, Paper Tiger, Poetical Word.

My poems have also been published in Italian anthologies, such as Il suono del silenzio 2008 and 2008, English collections (such as Poetical word 2009 and Reach Poetry 253) and Brazilian magazine (Revista Torquato).

More recently, my work has been included in the Cannon Poet Quarterly , in the American anthology Poetry in the time of Coronavirus.and will also be published in The Voices Project by Denise Powell.

With a diploma at the London College of Media and Publishing, I also reviews music and writes live reports on Peek-a-boo magazine and Gigsoup. I also offer reviews and genuine feedback to emerging poets/musicians on <https://quaquaversalweb.wordpress.com/>.

7 Poems by Nanci Woody

Poetry Editor Hezekiah's note follows the poems. Spacing is poet's own.

Lady Liberty's Lament

O say can you see
your tired, your poor
can you see
by the dawn's early light
your huddled masses
yearning to breathe free

O say can you see
what so proudly we hailed
as the golden door for all
can you see
the wretched
the refugees
on your teeming shore

O, can you see
blood
on the faces of children
dragged along by mothers
fathers dead
from the perilous fight
the rockets' red glare
bombs bursting in air

O, say
does that star-spangled banner
yet wave
for the tempest-tossed
homeless
in the land of the free
in the home of the brave

Ho Hum

Ho hum to what our country has become.
Scant scant is our notice when headlines roar
mass shooting mass shooting
it's just one more.

Ho hum to the aggrieved and angry man –
a need to get even, a lust for gore –
mass shooting mass shooting
it's just one more.

Ho hum to our Amendment Two. Ho hum.
Arm the teachers, rabbis, preachers. What for?
We can't stop mass shootings –
there will be more.

Ho hum, slogans catchy, as *guns don't kill
people kill people*. But
O my God! This time
it's our children
bleeding
on the floor.
Mass shooting mass shooting
it's just one more.

Silent We Stay

Go! Raise your torches in the night
cry death to Jews, minorities.
We watch as you march by
masculine voices deep
chanting your chants.

Jews will not replace us!
Keep our country Christian!
Keep our country white!

We wring our hands
we shed a tear
we read again Amendment One
and doubts be damned
conclude
your best friend
is the Bill of Rights
written by men
all of them Christian
all of them white.

MY LAST AMEN

Kneeling, I make the sign of the cross
 lift my eyes to the statue
 of the Virgin.
 I begin.
 Hail Mary, full of grace

The prayer rote, my mind wanders.

*Hail, Mary.
 Are you there?
 Did you know
 all these years
 about the children?
 You're the mother
 most respected most loved
 you would be watchful of
 the children
 full of grace.*

I shift positions, begin anew.
 Hail Mary. Full of Grace.
 The Lord is with thee

*With thee?
 And not with the thousands of . . .
 No, Mary, Wait. Hundreds of thousands
 children, defenseless
 abused sexually abused
 by trusted holy men
 holy evil men
 sins concealed
 by other holy evil men.
 Where were you, Mary?*

The Lord is with thee.

Dear God. I'm trying to get
through this prayer.

Hail Mary, full of grace
The Lord is with thee
Blessed art thou amongst women

*Amongst women? In the church?
There are no women there, Mary,
not in the hierarchy,
so which women are you blessed among?
The ones with children abused?
Hail Mary, full of grace
the Lord is with thee
Blessed art thou amongst women
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb,
Jesus.
Jesus, your own son,
the one
who blessed the children
even as his disciples rebuked him.
Remember, Mary, when he said unto them -
Suffer the little children to come unto me,
and forbid them not
for of such is the kingdom of God.*

*Mary, Mary
please please implore your Son to come
again destroy the temple
of the abusers
and their confessors
and their protectors.*

My head drops
tears spill forth
as I continue the prayer

Holy Mary, Mother of God
pray for us sinners

Now, yes, now

*pray for the sinners
in your own house.*

*I'm so sorry, Mary.
I can not continue.*

I stand, say aloud
my last
Amen.

Paradise Is Lost

The idyllic town in the foothills watched
a Hell fire roar through its thirsty woods,
tear through canyons, leap streams, rivers,
the fiendish fire fueled by angry dry winds
opening the gates of Hell in Paradise.

Fiery embers rained down onto the town
brittle black trees dropped their ashy branches
on smoldering smoking rooftops, spreading
fire inside, merciless were the flames.
Panic! Panic! People rescue treasures,

Pile into pickup trucks. Burning burning
burning lungs burning eyes burning houses
old narrow roads jammed with abandoned cars.
Run! Run from Hell's own fire. Escape! Escape
a dungeon horrible, on all sides round.

Fast-moving frightful flames that might engulf
them as they ran, dragging along children
dragging along the sick, the elderly.
Terror-stricken falling wailing hot hot
running running *as one great Furnace flam 'd.*

Many thousands escaped old Satan's clutch.
For many more, bones and ashes smoldered.
Brave brave firefighters searched, dogs in tow
the rubble hot, while the still-living faced
another Hellish disaster – despair.

Sick from the black, polluted air, blue skies
a memory, afternoon sun burns red.

These poor people paid the terrible price
for the sins of us all against the earth
their prayed-for rain coming coming too late.

Too late it is to curse the drought, too late
to curse your God. Hold back your tears, your thoughts
and prayers. Resolve to better stewards be.
On earth, what we have sown we now have wrought.
California was on fire. Paradise is Lost.

Italics are quotes from John Milton's "Paradise Lost"

If I Could Be Your Instrument

If I could be your instrument
enraptured you would cling to me
such sweet sweet music we would make
always in perfect harmony.

If I could nestle in your arms
your mind and heart I'd surely win
as back and forth you slide the bow
on your most cherished violin.

Or I could be your clarinet
the sounds we'd make - oh so sublime
poets would swoon and grab their pens
and put our gorgeous notes to rhyme.

Your fingers fondly on my keys
we'd be as one, together grow.
Our passion would be plain to see.
Play me! Play me! Your piano.

Or, I could be your bass trombone
hands polishing my lovely bell
sensuous lips on me each night
you'd ever be under my spell.

Yet, maybe fame we two could share
our names in lights - famous rock stars!

As you would nightly pluck my strings
I'd delight crowds as your guitar.

Percussion, brass, woodwind or strings
it matters not at all to me.
Your devotion is what I crave.
Your heart I want my own to be.

A Sweeter Gift

What gift have I
to mark this day
one of countless days
we have shared -
days turned to years
years falling
tumbling rapidly
into decades.

What gift have I
to mark this day
one of many such days -
heartbreaking, some –
yet most filled with joy.
We have shared
them all.

This day, by your bedside,
your hand in mine
I'll read to you
those favorite poems
we've shared
in happier times.

Housman's emotional lines
early though the laurel grows
it withers quicker than the rose,
and dear Emily's
hope is the thing with feathers.

Perhaps this day
 I'll end our time together
 with Milton, who tried to
justify the ways of God to men
 though justify I can not
 this suffering wrought upon you.

What gift have I?
 Only the gift of time
 though nothing new
 is a sweeter gift
 when days are few.

POETRY EDITOR HEZEKIAH writes: Radical, riotous, rebellious: I think that the greatest quality a creative person can hope to have is irreverence—it insists upon a lack of satisfaction and inspires the unreasonable upon which, of course, “all progress depends.” Woody may have something beyond this, parading what is held most dear in, **Lady Liberty’s Lament**. United we stand, divided we fall—‘**Silent we Stay**’ at the peril of all; poignant verse for those who most hate Hate... **MY LAST AMEN**, if it nourishes the spirit, why does the ‘mind wander’—another bean for the pot and one less coin for the plate. “Sing [earthly] muse.” Read on to explore things most touching, tormented and tortured.

THE POET SPEAKS: *When I write, I want to elicit feeling. It could be disgust, fear, love, or nostalgia, but something that lingers on the mind of the reader. I do not seek out poems – they come to me, sometimes in the middle of night. I oftentimes think in iambic pentameter and like the traditional poetic forms – sonnet, villanelle, rondeau. I am influenced by the daily news reports, and also by the lives of those close to me. If I had to choose my most important “stylistic influencer,” it would be John Milton. I am in awe of his creativity and willingness to speak out against power. I am especially impressed with Paradise Lost, 10,000 lines of blank verse written when he was blind (and before computers or even typewriters!)*

POET’S BIO: *Nanci Lee Woody’s novel, Tears and Trombones, won an Independent Publishers medal for Best Fiction in the Western Pacific Region; a 5-Star Review and medals from Readers’ Favorites for Literary Fiction and YA, Coming-of-Age; a Book Excellence Award, category, Music; and a Top Shelf Magazine award, category, Regional Fiction.*

Nanci’s short stories and poems appear both in print anthologies and online. She wrote the book and lyrics for a musical, “Hello to Life!” and produced it in collaboration with her husband, a musician.

Some places where her poetry and short stories appear are: CWC Literary Review; Sand Hill Review, Fault Zone – Transform and Strike Slip; Tule Review; Poetry Now; Your Daily Poem; Fear of Monkeys; and Carry the Light.

words

by Mike Zone

Poetry Editor Hezekian writes: *If someone was to ever write a poem like this for me, I would hire a monk to scribe it in India ink, frame it with gold leaf and hang it somewhere I could see it all ways and forever: I give you 'words'...*

words

words fail...

to be entwined with you

to share a life with you...

words fail

being in love with you

with no better sensation

than you heartbeat

next to mine

The Poet Speaks: *Sometimes words fail when in the presence of love and all that matters is a pair of synchronized heart beats, in the bliss of holding one another. It's not just an intermingling of Beat Poetry and Sufi writing colliding with Zen breathing techniques but it's that void, a loss of words trying to articulate scavenging the mind through cinema or a series of musical notes to seek out that particular rhythm to be read aloud for the poem, a bit of angsty existentialism helps as well. This is why we read and write poetry; to further thought, erode misconceptions and channel a form for the human mysteries pervading our lives.*

Poet's Bio: *Mike Zone is the author of A Farewell to Big Ideas, Void Beneath the Skin, Better than the Movie: 4 Screenplays and Fellow Passengers: Public Transit Poetry, Meditations and Musings. A contributing poet to Mad Swirl and contributing writer to the graphic novel series American Anti-hero by Alien Buddha Press. His poetry and stories have appeared in: Horror Sleaze Trash, The Daily Dope Fiend, Outlaw Poetry, Piker Press, The Rye Whiskey Review and Synchronized Chaos*

HIERARCHY and other poems...

By Vern Fein

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Here are some poems from the past, both historical and, perhaps, personal. A tale of someone eating their dog in a race to reach our lowest point; fortunately, I have never been that hungry or as competitive. I do believe that the second is the first verse I have ever read on the subject of bowling. And Naismith leaving the bottoms in his peach baskets—no doubt there was a refundable deposit and he already had a ladder—we are a cheap people—after all the game was just meant for a little winter exercise up in Canada, at the time. The last entry deals with a theme I have never encountered: Love unrequited.

HIERARCHY

At the top of the food chain,
men strive.
Amundsen raced Scott
to the South Pole.
Amundsen ate some of his dogs
to survive.
He won.
Scott said using dogs
was undignified.
He lost.
Eating dogs is undignified
even at the bottom of the world.

COMEUPPANCE

He had been with too many women,
a jaded young man.
Then she walked into where he worked.
Sunset in his heart, blaring bleeding colors.
Flaming, forest fire hair.
Olive skin, snake smooth.
Green eyes, flashing like a temple idol,
a fox with sharp teeth.

Got her phone number
was at her house the next night.
The next night a date ending in bed,
Wild, raucous.
Asked her to marry him—She laughed.
Asked her to marry him again—She laughed.
Clothes strewn, helter-skelter.

She did not answer the phone for several days,
fuck and run as he had done,
dusk in his heart,
hunting through darkness, cut hands spread the jungle reeds.

Finally they talked.
"I too have been not wanted.

A COUPLE OF STUPID THINGS

I.

JAMES BLACKSTONE:

Circa: 1905.

Bowled an almost perfect game,
except one last wooden pin
split in half and wobbled but stood.
The stupid judges refused
to allow a perfect game.
gave him a score of 299.5,
which is the only reason we
know about Mr. Blackstone
and his lucky or unlucky break
depending if you want him to go
down in history.

II.

Dr. JAMES NAISMITH:

Circa: 1891.

Went down in history
and now we pay millions
to watch his minions
speed up and down courts
to shoot a ball into a basket
to cheering crowds.

Oh yes, the stupid thing.

When you have a basket

with a net which we do today
and the ball goes in,
the ball falls through the net
and Newton is proved right again
and again and again.

But in Canada when the Dr.
invented this game to help
young men stay fit,
he used a peach basket
and after every made shot,
someone stupidly
(don't know if they had refs then)
had to climb a ladder perched
beside the basket and retrieve
the ball stuck in the bottom.

We would say now:
It disrupted the flow of the game.
It took five years, legend has it,
to figure out if they cut out
the bottom of the peach basket,
the ball would fall through.

It's all right to be stupid.

We all are at some time.

You can surely add your own

as we figure out why the world is the mess it is
or just to feel better about ourselves.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I am 78 and did not ever write a poem until a bit over three years ago when a friend of mine saw a few poems I had written in my retirement and suggested i submit them. One of them--a two line poem--was accepted and I was bitten by the poetry bug. With my friend's help and a solid, local poetry group, I believe I have been able to improve my craft. I do have a Master's in American Literature and always loved and appreciated poetry, but never aspired to write any. It has now become a wonderful avocation in these last years. (Spacing is poet's own.)*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *A retired special education teacher, Vern Fein has published over one hundred poems on over forty sites, a few being: *82 Review, The Literary Nest, Gyroscope Review, Courtship of Winds, 500 Miles, The Write Launch, Broadkill Review, Soft Cartel, and River and South.*

SUNFLOWERS

By Marianne Brems

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes... *Here are some worthy words: Sunflowers, who could look upon a sunflower and not have their mood improve. The very idea of sunflowers causes one (or me at least) to reminisce in a single moment however insignificant but made memorable by their presence. 'They flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude;' verses, 'Like a magnet, the sun draws / the young faces of sunflowers.'* *Daffodils versus Sunflowers, sounds like a ladies rugby match. I wonder...lonely as a cloud...HS*

Sunflowers

Like a magnet, the sun draws
the young faces of sunflowers
east in the morning,
west in the evening,
back again at night,
expectant of the dawn.
A biomass hungry for sunshine
to offer a warm landing
for bees.

In gratitude
nodding golden heads migrate.
Yellow follows yellow,
paying tribute
to a benevolent source
of nurture
fluttering down
from the protective canopy
of a parental sky.

THE POET SPEAKS... *The inspiration for "Sunflowers" came when I learned that young sunflowers follow the movement of the sun as if they had muscles of their own activated by the sun, a fascinating connection between the two. Poetry*

allows me to express such connections between things that may seem dissimilar or random. For me this creates order and understanding which I can then pass on to my readers. Poets that have influenced my writing style include James Dickey, Mary Oliver, and Kay Ryan.

BIO: *Marianne Brems is a writer of textbooks and poetry. Finishing Line Press will release her chapbook *Sliver of Change* in 2020. Her poems have appeared in literary journals including *The Pangolin Review*, *La Scrittrice*, *The Sunlight Press*, and *The Tiny Seed Literary Journal*. She lives in Northern California. Website: www.mariannebrems.com.*

3 POEMS

By Stephen Okawa

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Here are some words from Okawa I couldn't resist: "the pain like when megan romano kicked me / in my little twelve year old balls" "play pretend tea time with parents" "most / of your children / have worked through / the complexes you gave them." Bad news cannot be uttered in honeyed voices... "my fists've been doing all the screaming for me / lately" I'm starting to prefer poets without punctuation, it appeals to my lack of syntax...HS (Spacing is poet's own.)

i did two tours of childhood, 195th infantry

flashes of barely developed photos of me as a boy
 invade my mind's eye like a trojan hobby horse
 the pain like when megan romano kicked me
 in my little twelve year old balls
 the agony marching through me
 as if my torso were rice fields
 her boots attached to 'Merican GIs
 napalm carpet bombing my GI-tract
 all along mekong miasma of nerve endings
 storming a cortex horizon going dim
 a perfect place to stash these photos
 banish megan's rejection
 play pretend tea time with parents

who scold me for putting my elbows
on the good grey matter
which they boast is a family heirloom

bad news

this is the day the world forgets you.
the last day you'll be thought of.
from this day forth
only the source will know your name.
the source has known you
from the very beginning
and you'll hit it off like
old friends.
i know you're curious:
is there anything you can do
right now
to stop this?

i'm sorry.

you can't influence that side

any more.

mostly

you're just brought up around

your birthday time

or holidays. most

of your children

have worked through

the complexes you gave them.

you have zero affect

on them

their lives

the world at all.

oh dear.

you're getting sad.

this always happens.

what's that? can i

sing you a song?

ok. but my voice isn't so good.

i mostly use it

for delivering

bad news.

anymore

my fists've been doing all the screaming for me

lately

as my mouth has been walled-up,

the soldiers afraid to go over lip-trenches

anymore.

and speaking of anymore

how come you don't see dead things

anymore?

i remember seeing dead birds around my house

smelling something awful,

roadkill in the streets for weeks,

family funerals a few times a year.

but where are all the dead ducks?

i counted 20 live ducks

at the pond once

and have never seen a dead one.

i've seen ducks with one eye

or half a beak,

ducks with no legs

ducks half-eaten

and ducks with jobs

but never dead ducks.

i'm growing suspicious of these things

as i get older.

i'm feeling less and less human

and more like a dead duck,

all unseen and closer

to "anymore".

THE POET SPEAKS: *A lot of my inspiration comes from actually missing old pains from a disturbed childhood --- like being roundhoused in my groin --- in that these kinds of pains are preferable to being lonely or undone by indifference. Native American poet, Adrian C. Louis --- who was able to speak starkly about a hard life and a harder non-life --- and beat poet Richard Brautigan --- who could toe the line between autobiographical and pure whimsicality --- are*

responsible for any stylistic or thematic similarities. Mostly, poetry is group therapy for me. When I read, it's like seeking out others who see the world as I do, taking some solace in knowing I'm not alone in feeling a certain way. When I write, I become the one sending out the distress signals.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Stephen Okawa is a garbage man from Chest Nut Hill, MA. One day, he's going to throw it all out. His work has appeared in The Main Street Rag, WordEater, Breadcrumb Scabs, Boston Poetry Magazine, Madswirl and others.*

SAD FUN...poetry

By Snhhaitembu Snh

Poetry Editor Hezekiah's note follows poems. Spacing is poet's own.

Predictable

I have seen it before
 The same night in 'The Cove'
 Eighth time to the count
 He wouldn't make it up the stair
 Fourth step is the trick.
 His weight will drag backwards it seems
 His feet a slay of snow
 Of stone that stripped
 His legs to stumble and cackle
 A struggle to shuffle
 He would wheeze and squeeze
 To deal with that hustle
 And huff and puff
 To balance a mountain
 A top a tip of a corner he hovers
 Like gravity plays the game he lost
 A flail of arms and flabby flesh
 One second later He will fail again
 at the edge of that ledge
 A fall backwards he gets
 In a fountain of shock straight he lands
 A series of misplaced bones he thinks

Of why, oh why, he does that all the time
If the elevator of life and peace is just,
before the stairs of dread it lasts
But the ninth time is a charm they said
After they cast his arm on again
He will be back to turn my night to bliss
Predictable one man show that is.

No words

Don't fuss over me, when I don't speak
About it all, when I don't leak
Without it full, when I don't break
From a pain so old, when I don't trip
Over something clod, when I don't sing
To appease the weak, when I don't blink
At how fortunate I am, when I don't gasp
At how shocking it looks, when I just sit there.
Absorbing it all in just one breath, suffice to say
I am okay, I just don't know what to say.

Divorce

Father left first
Slowly but surely he tugged free
He did what he did best, to seem better
Little did he know, he's stuck that way
On a selfish tram, unhooked from the truth
A bundle of emotions that led to pain
Unlike himself and his ego, his wife is fine
She sings, and dances her pain askew
Leaves dinner for him at the table top
Wakes up to it then throws it out
In denial, a fruitful sound like jail
Trapped in a turmoil of worry and plans
Seems she doesn't understand he pulled away first
He decided to portion himself with someone else
She understood it better but couldn't believe
Her fear of the future without his body
The kids, her love for him, all drowned with betrayal
He did what he does best to seem better
As better as a touch of his final choice
A life without the people he thought he earned
The kids and their pain don't count a thing
Divorce was better for him and the wife
Then she left last.

The way you cry

When you cry in public, you're an attention seeker
 When you cry in private, you hate sharing
 When you don't cry at all, your suicidal
 When you pretend to not care, your mentally unstable
 When your tears leak by accident, you are losing yourself
 What's the use of the definition of the way you cry?
 Its still healing the soul, isn't it?

POETRY EDITOR HEZKIAH writes: Here is a swath of poems by Snh, entitled, Sad Fun... 'She enjoys things that don't make sense...' (Am I allowed to steal quotes from the poet's biography as well?) Here are some of the lines I like: "Like gravity plays the game he lost" "Don't fuss over me, when I don't speak" "On a selfish tram, unhooked from the truth" "He decided to portion himself with someone else" It is up to you to read were they go...By the way I love all of, **The way you cry.**

The Poet Speaks: *I lack any inspiration that's the dead truth. Creativity or inspiration floats in and out of my world like its being chased. Being African doesn't offer much help either. So, a vivid imagination boiling in a skull, triggered by a full blown sun that seems to follow me around, enjoying a bite or two from those chick mosquitoes, seeing half of the fields drown away with the flood, my fear of sleep and its dreams, I'm pleased to know I have coined two words together that made a sentence that appeared before you today. To me Poetry could have been life, if life was words that made no sense but explained better than meaningful and sensual words could.*

Poet's Bio: *Selma Haitembu is a high school teacher. She enjoys things that don't make sense and is hella suspicious towards those that do. She is hoping to do her bachelors in Medical laboratory soon. But poetry is a game she still doesn't*

understand to date, it's the confusion that made it a separate world for her. She is hoping to have a lot of work seen by at least more than two people. Good luck to you, you cant un-see it.

CONSECRATION OF 5 POEMS

By R. T. Castleberry

***Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:** Why do we get so much fine poetry from Texas? Castleberry's work has everything but that friendly drawl. I admit the South can turn the most engaging phrases, and I hung on to every word of Shelby Foote in Burn's series. Here is a taste: "I deny memories useless to me— / week-long binges, wives I've cheated with." "I look away, watch the ceiling fan / swirl shadow circles on the blinds." "the signet ring is a stranger's fit. / I use Crown Royal to share my voice," "Yours rattles with sketch pad and pencils, / Bowie knife and Beretta." HS (Spacing is poet's own.)*

CLEARING OUT

Simplifying a house of secrets
 I'm stranded on the firing line,
 dreams argued and denied.
 I'll not be a lawyer, a teacher,
 but son of the lazy wasted,
 brother to the fearful,
 the indebted and delinquent.
 Locked like winter into ordinary retribution--
 slammed phones after sweatshop accusations,
 I stand heroic, the droning tone
 like a bombing plane at my ear.

IMPRESSIONS OF THE SICK HOUSE

I watch in the world,
 amused by massacre and gin,
 homeland walls, holiday wars.
 Viewed from the barred gate
 darkened surveillance cars prowl,
 aimless under winter afternoon skies.

Cold weather tramps straggle past
 construction generators, pavement gaps,
 work order water leaks.
 I take into consideration
 the symbolic and the sin.
 I deny memories useless to me—
 week-long binges, wives I've cheated with.
 Unsettled by panic attack, I leave
 a dark bedroom for couch and cable tv.
 Lessons located in news video,
 detention gangs scour migrant dives,
 mercados, work warehouse.
 I look away, watch the ceiling fan
 swirl shadow circles on the blinds.
 In jeans, a Steely Dan tour tee shirt,
 almost ready for silence,
 I allow days clear of music.

CALLED BY NAME

I used another name last night,
 took initials and a ringleader's bandanna
 into calibrations of changing moonlight.
 I carry knives in every pocket,
 a coin lucky for the week.
 Loose on my hand,
 the signet ring is a stranger's fit.
 I use Crown Royal to share my voice,
 a shoplifter's Mont Blanc to sign
 broadsides written for the war.
 Fortunate in a year of injury, circuit failure,
 I select a difficult souvenir,
 take a motorcycle track
 and a letter to Sam Houston.
 Like war movies I've seen,
 the ethics of death aren't his concern.
 I stand at bayou's edge, watch
 campfire consorts spill Beaujolais.
 Let Barabbas explain the next message.
 I wrap black silk around a racer's derby,
 lean my bike towards the nearest coastline.
 I'm gone from here.

DEATH IS IN THE CONVERSATION

Three of us stand in street corner rain,
 kicking at a glass crucifix, savaged in the grass.
 You and I pile colored pieces for collage.
 Molly bears the stigma of coincidental cuts.
 A shirt tail preacher binds his wounds,
 clutching a Circe pennant, bullhorn
 and Living Bible at his feet.
 Soldiers on cell phones
 laugh in the park, crossing against the light.
 "Something always breaks," you say.
 I bow to the sentiment, "It's the gift I own."
 A pride of black cats settles
 on a storefront stoop.

As we enter the basement bar,
 a war song punches through the chatter,
 emblem white and blue of the Resistance.
 They sing Death like a football cheer.
 "I'll buy one round but I won't buy more.
 The Capricorn heart will stop if I do."
 My messenger bag is weighted with
 Zorro's mask, a list of Jefferson's lies,
 a signed copy of Steal This Book.
 Molly's carries a decoy whistle,
 essays from Orwell, Pollitt and Paine.
 Yours rattles with sketch pad and pencils,
 Bowie knife and Beretta.

After closing,
 air raid lights search sky and building.
 I've memorized addresses
 for safe houses, arms depots.
 Molly takes first watch.
 Laptops charge. A rifle leans
 beneath a Miro calendar,
 between two easels.
 We've shared a bed for years.
 If the magistrates permit,
 we'll marry in the spring.

THE MOON REMINDS

I walk a muddy street,
 boot tread impressions
 brutal, random in February stealth.
 Sliver of a moon dices
 high fog, pitching oak limbs.
 A north wind chills footsteps,
 exposed layers of sweatshirt and sweater
 beneath a borrowed bomber jacket.
 Pausing for the parking turn of a car,
 I shrug a shivering laugh, remembering
 Mother's stories of collision death or kidnap.
 At the apartment door
 I step back to the sidewalk, that cold tunnel,
 center my eyes on Jupiter, waiting for Saturn.
 By the news--mechanics made right,
 we'll return to the moon.

THE POET SPEAKS: *As a rule, I don't write autobiographically. I prefer a larger stage to work on than the trite confessional. So my work is generated mainly from a dark and skeptical imagination. I think of it as method acting, where the actor takes something emotionally resonant and puts it into a received scenario. My poetry is also dense with recognizable detail. I've found if the emotion is real and the details are right, a reader will accept it as true. My influences aren't unusual for a late 20th century poet muscling through the 21st: Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen for their wordplay and romantic surrealism, Ted Hughes for a threatening lyricism and Carl Sandburg for his ability to find the pastoral in an urban setting.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *My work has appeared in Blue Collar Review, Santa Fe Literary Review, Pedestal Magazine, Misfit, Trajectory, The Alembic and Comstock Review. Internationally, it has been published in Canada, Wales, Ireland, Scotland, New Zealand, Portugal and Antarctica. I've had poetry in the anthologies: Travois-An Anthology of Texas Poetry, TimeSlice, The Weight of Addition, Anthem: A Tribute to Leonard Cohen, Kind Of A Hurricane: Without Words and Level Land: Poetry For and About the I35 Corridor.*

TITANIUM BREAKFAST

By Michael Glassman

Poetry Editor Hezekiah's note follows poem.

TITANIUM BREAKFAST

I saw a soldier with titanium legs

Walk unaided into a dining room

With knife and fork back in place

My hands covered my quivering face

Opposite me sat a military mom

Her son deployed in Afghanistan

Only God knows what passed through her mind

When the gallant warrior began to dine.

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: This is such a touching little poem. When I say little, I mean short, not long, and so impactful. "With fork and knife back in place / My hands covered my quivering face" Please read the words that surround this half-stanza...

The Poets Speaks: *'Titanium Breakfast' is my attempt to put into words what I saw and felt at the moment the soldier entered the restaurant and began to dine. Writing poetry is important to me because I enjoy the struggle that takes place to find the words that best express my ideas. I am attracted to poems which deliver on imagery, emotion, and give the reader a unique look behind the curtain of life.*

Poet's Bio: *Michael Glassman is a former high school teacher who has been writing poetry, plays and short stories for ten years. His on line and print publishing credits include: Fleas On The Dog, Voices From Here, Chronogram magazine and Society of Classical Poets, to name a few*

Brain-hatching Euphoria

By Harley Claes

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: "Sipping on the streetlights"... "sweating Serotonin / Into wineglass..." Here we have Harley Claes "abusing the muse." She is perfume maker, and vintage lover...sometimes your bios are almost as irresistible as the poetry...HS (Spacing is poet's own.)

Brain-hatching Euphoria

Sipping on the streetlights
 Jerking off the bottle
 Beaming with the blacklight
 & abusing the muse

Severing the strict
 Eating only oolong
 And sweating Serotonin
 Into wineglass for
 The madhouse patients

Psychonauts in synthesis
 Bums bemused
 And kicking the can
 Pissed in

The bottle is dead
 The sun is opening
 And im a cracked shell
 Ready for sleeping

THE POET SPEAKS: *Brain Hatching Euphoria* embodies life in the underground, the epitome of carefree youthfulness & a thirst for the drug that sustains them. The Beat Generation has always inspired my works in essence, and the flow of 1800s nursery rhymes. Poetry is important to me as it is therapy for the soul, and a mirror of my own experience & fantasy in the works of others

AUTHOR'S BIO: **HARLEY CLAES** is a writer, entrepreneur, perfume maker, and vintage lover from Detroit, Michigan. Her work is oftentimes anachronistic, surreal, philosophical and holy erotic. She also happens to run the Beat-inspired press ANGELICAL RAVINGS. Her first self-published anthology is titled 'Pity The Poetics' and her work has appeared or is forthcoming in 30+ literary journals. You can find her at <http://harleyclaes.com>

Learning to Read

By Natascha Graham

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: To think that I had yet to look, a poem lovely as a book:
Ms. Graham describes a forever lover as a most cherished book you never grow tired of reading.
Go ahead, ignored it and insist on remaining uninspired...I read a book once, red it was...HS
(Spacing is poet's own.)*

Learning to Read

There's something about You that evades definition
 Words
 Sentences
 Which,
 Put down on a page
 Form the space around You.
 Never the truest feeling
 That blooms inside my head, my heart, my body
 It is too pure
 Too big
 Too sweet
 Too much
 For paper,
 Or books,
 Or libraries,
 To hold
 But if, (by chance)
 A book were to come close,
 To holding
 All
 Of
 The
 Stories
 Of You.
 I would read
 Every.
 Single.

One.
 Not once,
 Or a thousand.
 I would not stop
 Not even when I had learned each page by heart,
 Each heading
 And sub-heading.
 The words crossed out
 And the lines in between
 Like the space between stars
 Words, sewn to my skin
 Threaded through my veins
 And with every beat of my heart
 I would fall in love with You
 Page by page
 Over and over
 Over every sudden full stop
 Over every hesitant ellipses,
 Through the curve of every question mark, and every exultant exclamation
 Through every new page added
 And every page torn out in rage
 Every page blotted with tears.

I will keep reading (and re-reading)
 Learning,
 And loving You
 Wherever Our story may take Us.

THE POET SPEAKS:

What inspired your poem?

My wife, Lori. So often I catch a glimpse of her doing the mundane, or, not doing anything at all - just sitting with the sun behind her, and I am overcome with a feeling that seems absolutely impossible to put into words. Learning to Read was my attempt to do just that. (You can read our love story in an article I wrote for The Gay and Lesbian Review [here](#).) Often my poetry, along with my prose writing, is inspired by how a single person reacts, exists or feels, in a single moment in time.

Your stylistic influences?

My stylistic influences were set aside for this poem. My poetry is normally very different. So for this poem, I emulated the way Lori writes. She excels in capturing a feeling or emotion perfectly

in very few perfectly chosen words, whereas I am a glutton for detail. I exhaust descriptive language and delight in its richness, something which is influenced greatly by Virginia Woolf's poetic prose, letters, and essays.

Why poetry is important to you to read:

For me, the sudden, raw relatability and intimacy found in poems by my favorite poets (Vita Sackville-West and Sylvia Plath, to name but two) is what is most important to me. Reading other people's poetry forces me to consider my own poetry in an entirely different light. Often it inspires me to challenge myself to incorporate or try something different, which, on occasion, has become something which has become part of my own personal style, as a writer.

And to write: I started writing poetry by accident as a teenager, as a means to recover from a particularly stubborn bout of writers' block. Words just fell out of me and appeared as a poem on the page. Since then I have used poetry as a means to quickly exercise my brain, and clap the butterfly net over the moment, feeling or thought, in between writing fiction. The lack of rules and immediacy appeals to me. There is (for me) often no planning at all. A thought, a moment, a person plays out in my mind and appears on paper. Unlike prose, there is no long haul. With prose, I take the time to explore around whatever it is I am trying to say, a languid visit to imagination. With poetry, it is a satisfying bullseye.

POET'S BIO: Raised simultaneously by David Bowie and Virginia Woolf, Natascha Graham is a fiction writer, artist and screenwriter who lives with her wife in a house full of sunshine on the east coast of England.

Her work has been previously published in Acumen, Litro and Flash Fiction Magazine.

ODE TO POLITICS

By Watt Burns

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Could 'Watt Burns' be a pseudonym or just a mother with a sense of humor? If it is the latter, I believe he inherited hers. I don't think Lewis Carroll was Dodgson's name either. But tell me if you think he is reminiscent of such eminent, imminent, immanent adamant non-sense. As advertised. HS (Spacing is poet's own.)

Ode to Politics

A quick qualm walks into a glum pub
 And weez wubwubs grumble on about this that or the other.
 They grumble on about the grey skies and the long grizwattles
 With their un-trumexed tattoos and their plancy thighs.

The quick qualm just wants to wannox and shlee
 like Dimples DuCasi and the rest of them in the glum pub.
 But weez wubwubs don't dance.
 And they don't dringle neither.

So the quick qualm fernazzles,
 Chugs a couple Cooperhenny's,
 Then surprises everyone in the glum pub
 With six straight games of perfect WuggerlyBall.

“Hm...” says the elderly wubwub.

“I didn’t know quick qualms were good at WuggerlyBall.”

“Hm...” I didn’t either,” says the other.

THE POET SPEAKS: *This poem was inspired by the lack of political collaboration that has plagued the United States my entire life, and the ridiculousness of neither side being able to see the other’s point of view. Some stylistic influences come from being born and raised in Wisconsin, a swing state, Harryette Mullen, Dr. Seuss, and more. Poetry is important to read and write because it allows us to view reality in a different light, increase optimism, and appreciate the beauty of life.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: *Watt Burns is a poet and playwright from Milwaukee, WI, living in New York City. He has been published in Return to the Gathering Place of the Waters, Edify Fiction, Crux Magazine, In Layman's Terms, Cream City Review, and more. He holds a BA in Creative Writing from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and he once saved a kitten from a busy highway in Atlanta. His play **We’re Not All Picassos** is also published in this issue.*

Goodbye Gone Bad and Trips

by Eben Benibo

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Here are two lovely poems selected from Benibo's entry. The whole is indistinguishable from the sum of their parts, so I won't waste your time quoting lines...okay than just one: "...Once in every two hours / I visit my dreams three times,"

Poem Title: **Goodbye Gone Bad**

There's a stench
coming from the 'waves' of yesterday.
I carry this about,
hoping to preserve our farewell,
in memories constantly refreshed.

Pictures of my little hands
'waving you goodbye' still dangle firmly,
between the chambers of my heart.

How was I to know hopes decay too?
When does pain
transcend being a wound to a scar?
If these are scars,
why do they still bleed?

My mother's heart is now home to healing.
Constructed on the foundation of highs and lows
Designed by bullet marks

“Once beaten, twice shy”
Death now fears this place,
Life lives here with eyes ‘wild’ opened.

My mother’s heart is now a filter of pain,
a furnace with fire and ice
and at its foot
lies a note- ‘Welcome.’
I should visit here more often,
climbing unto the walls of her heart
before I get drowned
by these ‘waves’ of- Goodbye.

Poem Title: **Trips**

Sometimes,
I am found lost in my wild thoughts
Beneath hard rocks of golden diamonds-
Seated at the bottom of my being
For my inside's full of treasures,
Precious gems
Wrapped in poetry shapes.

Other times,
I drive down the Memory lane

A narrow path

Between express and shun

A junction of the said and the unsaid

Leading to the land-

Ruled by choices made.

Most times,

Under grey skies

I miss steps and stumble

Falling into tunnels and dusty paths

Dusty paths

A clear map-

To green pastures untapped.

Always,

Once in every two hours

I visit my dreams three times,

Like a mother hen-

Nursing her eggs before they hatch

I climb onto the walls of my own heart

Hoping for an escape in a clogging world.

I find my strength within-

Just enough courage for my return,

As I go back in search of my fears

Ready to fly!

THE POET SPEAKS: *What Inspired My Poems:*

My first poem 'Goodbye Gone Bad' was inspired by the memories that have grown with me through the years.

My second poem 'Trips' was inspired by my love for travelling and exploring new places. However, this time, I engaged in an inside out journey within myself, which turned out to be the best!

My poems are an overflow of my childhood days. At three, I was grown. Grown enough to 'hear' when the eyes speak. Grown enough to read the handwritings on each wall life built. Poetry became an escape to me in a clogging world, and it became more fulfilling to see that even unconsciously, my words created a pathway for others too.

With this, I began to write with a consciousness of leaving 'a light at the end' of each piece. I try to write for a 'nontechnical' audience. To reach as many as can relate as possible. However, my poems are influenced by everything that breathes. Like a long stare at the skies, the wrinkle that escorts a smile, and even the sound of a baby's laughter. Everything.

I see poetry as life. My life. From the sibling I never had, to the reason I wake up sometimes with a grin on my face.

So, poetry being important to me, is like the essence of life in itself. Poetry is life. Like water, life. When it flows from a source, its outpour lubricates dry places. Gradually quenches a thirst. Fills a longing. Refreshes the soul.

Reading and writing poetry is everything to me. I love its prowess in absorption. Its storage of time past. Its ability to convey so much in few words. And most of all, I love the life I see/feel within each line. The spark!

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Eden Benibo is a young writer and poet currently transcending the phase of simply inscribing the stories she bears to voicing them. Her works revolves around finding a light through the various tunnels of life. Her works have been published on platforms such as - The Evergreen Poetry Journal, Poetry International, Kalahari Review, Praxis Magazine, Libretto Magazine and others.*

Dog Days

By Larry Thomas

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: More poems from Texas: I must confess, or at least declare, I never thought they were such a sensitive state; when standup comics don't hesitate to liken them to rusted-out trucks, gun wracks and death row. It is a shame I didn't realize they also have such a profound proclivity for poetry. I guess when you're a lone star, "as the brightest in all of heaven." I just stole Larry's last line. Here is a lovely tail of Orion and Sirius and heatstroke—not to be missed. Dare I say, Texas is full of yellow-rose nosegays. HS

Dog Days

after Orion and his faithful dog, Sirius

Of summer days the sultriest,
 known for heat and stroke,
 these are the days when the dog
 for which they're named, tethered
 to his wild, eternal howl,
 is closest to the Earth

and rises with the sun;
 the dog whose slain master,
 felled by the arrow of jealousy,
 was memorialized in stars
 by his lover/goddess of the moon;
 the dog who so impressed the goddess

with his faithfulness, searching
 hysterically for his master,
 she turned him, too, into a star
 not only to shine at the starry feet
 of his master but to reign forever
 as the brightest in all of heaven.

THE POET SPEAKS: *Being an ardent lover of dogs (and other animals as well), I was disturbed for a long time about the common phrase, “the dog days of summer.” It was always used in a pejorative sense referencing the hottest, sultriest, and most uncomfortable days of the year.*

My abiding concern about the use of the phrase eventually led me to research its origin, and, although I was heartened by what I gleaned from my research, I became even angrier about the manner in which the true, salient meaning of the phrase was reversed. Hence, my poem “Dog Days” was born.

The vast majority of my poetry is triggered by the natural world, and I found particularly appealing, early in my development as a poet of seriousness, the work of poets who shared my reverence for Mother Nature, poets like Ted Hughes (former poet laureate of England), Theodore Roethke, Robinson Jeffers, David Wagoner, and Mary Oliver. Such wonderful poets continue to inspire me to this day.

AUTHOR’S BIO: *I am a member of the Texas Institute of Letters and served as the 2008 Texas Poet Laureate. I have published several books of poems, including *As If Light Actually Matters: New & Selected Poems* (Texas A&M University Press Consortium 2015) which received a Writers’ League of Texas Book Awards Finalist citation. I am an eight-time nominee for the Pushcart Prize, and I was longlisted for the 2007 National Book Award. My wife and I are the proud owners of two Long-haired Chihuahuas, Pecos and Piñon. Visit him at www.larrydthomas.com*

No Place like Home

By James W. Gaynor

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: *Here is another good one. (Not that I haven't passed on many during this Poetic Pandemic; please don't be discouraged and keep sending them, circumspection is my most vulnerable trait. I am belied and loath, yet never loathed to edit in my however short tenure.) Jim, I hope you didn't mind me using you as a platform. There are so many wonderful works not listed, still "toast / can be made from many grains." Forgive me Mr. Gaynor for stealing a wonderful, unpublished line. Here is a fantastical little ditty I couldn't resist. I won't recite another word, but it begins and ends in black and white "and kills two old women of color" So I lied... Your frequently passed over Poetry Editor who spends much of his time and most of his money asking his therapist "Am I real? I mean, really?" [a line I absconded from a certain nameless senior editor who may or may not speak Italian.]*

No Place like Home

American stories begin and end
in black and white
Dorothy's is no different

she visits a place not in Kansas
makes new friends
and kills two old women of color

after which she returns
to live once more
in black and white

THE POET SPEAKS: I've always been fascinated by untold stories of the minor characters in famous fiction, such as the first Mrs. Rochester, Rosenkranz and Guildenstern, the unnamed French governess in *War and Peace*—and I still wonder whatever became of Mrs. Danvers.

Recently, I watched the *Wizard of Oz* again, which I hadn't seen in at least 25 years. I was fascinated by the dramatic change from B&W into color. But this time, as Dorothy left monochromatic Kansas for Technicolor and multicultural Oz, I started thinking about the movie as an appropriate metaphor for the current racial division in the US. Not unlike today, white Dorothy gets away with killing two old green women. She can simply click her way back to segregated America, where she and the audience will live happily ever after. The subtext called out for a poem.

This awareness of things happening beneath the surface began when I was in 7th grade and read (and memorized) Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." I knew then that I wanted to be a poet. So, I started what was to become my shadow career, and by the age of 18 had accumulated both a collection of 22 rejection slips from *The New Yorker* and a resultant thick skin about rejection that has served me well in the intervening years.

My stylistic influences include Emily Dickinson (bespoke punctuation and seductive rhythm) and Gerard Manley Hopkins (invented/inverted words and meaning) — and poets whose voices I can actually hear when I read their work, e.g., Gwendolyn Brooks, Basho, Rumi, Tony Hoagland, Frank O'Hara, Apollinaire, David Bergman, Sharon Olds, and Dorothy Parker (to mention a few).

I'm particularly attracted to works that draw me in with a story or images I can easily understand at first reading, poems that elicit a smile of recognition and then give me time to think about what other dimensions the poet may have in mind. When I read a poem that has that effect on me, I can hear Dickinson, who knew it was poetry if she physically felt as if the top of her head were taken off.

And I really like having the top of my head taken off.

AUTHOR'S BIO: I've been writing poetry since I was 12 — somehow, and I have no idea how, I'm still here, post- Stonewall, the Vietnam war and the AIDS epidemic --- we'll see how I do with the current viral tsunami --- and still writing. And still examining what it means to observe, to record my experience of the world from my evolving, now 71-year-old, queer perspective.

I'm the author of *Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice in 61 Haiku*, and have published articles, book reviews, poems and essays in *The New York Observer*, *OTVmagazine.com*, *Peeking Cat Poetry Magazine*, *The Gay and Lesbian Review / Worldwide*, *Down in the Dirt*, *Rust + Moth*, *Little Rose Magazine*, and *The Good Men Project*.

MY VOICES

By Ashton Marley

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: If youth is wasted on the young, it has yet to effect or affect Mister Marley. Here are some burning lines from a burgeoning poet. Someone we each wish we once were. I would be honored to hope that he, someday, looks back on them. HS

My Voices

By: Ashton Marley

I hear voices in my head

They fight and disagree more times than not.

The voices in my head? They never shut up,

They never know when to quit, they're such a noisy lot.

One voice speaks of the goodness in my soul, the purity of what I may bring

Another speaks of the evil in my heart and revels in others suffering

There is a voice that encourages, pushes me to pursue my dreams

But no matter what

I am the last person I should trust

there is a voice that believes I can't do anything

One voice, always looks for the good in the world

Even when there is none

A voice tells me to quit,

It's at odds with those that say push on.

Some think five plus five is ten

And some are completely wrong.

These voices in my head,

I often wonder, from where they came

As I lie awake at night in bed

I ponder, if I'm the one to blame

Did I create these voices?

Are they a product of who I am?

Did they come to life through my choices?

Do they exist in a better man?

I think I remember life without them

Perhaps they'll still argue when I'm gone and dead

With all I don't know, one thing's for certain:

I hear voices in my head

THE POET SPEAKS: *The inspiration for My Voices is the inner monologues of man as he makes his way through everyday life. I believe that voices of doubt, along with those that inspire, and choosing which one to guide you to tomorrow is a subject that a lot of people don't like to talk about. Mainly, because if worded incorrectly and without context, you run the risk of sounding like a schizophrenic. Nevertheless, finding the encouraging voice, in the sea of fear that could possibly be one's mind, is something some might find too hard. Everyone is in a battle to decide which voice in their head to listen to, hard fought or not.*

One of my most early exposures to literature was Dr. Seuss. I know a lot of people would scoff at the idea of One Fish Two Fish being inspiring literature, but not I. The way Dr. Seuss always found a way to rhyme, and the unpredictability of the rhyming patterns in his work, to this day fascinates me. Couple this along with what I later found out was an uncanny ability to make beauty out of unimaginable darkness and you have a major influence about how in view the literary world. In my more dark and gothic writings, I take a large influence from Edgar Allen Poe.

Poetry is important to me because it allows for an artistic expression like no other. Whether you beat around the bush of your theme or you are up front with the motif in every stanza (if you have stanzas at all), anyone can share with the world a window to their beliefs and life. With every poem that is written a small part of someone new enters the universe in a different way. I have always been rather shit, at being up front with my thoughts, but through poetry, I'm brave enough to confess my love, challenge social norms and explore the world around me.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *My name is Ashton Marley and I am currently in the United States Army. I have been in the army for a year and have never been published before. I like to write about stuff that could possibly get me sent to a psychiatrist.*

4 POEMS from the MANUAL of MINDS + 1

By Seth Rosenman

To keep the poet's spacing, Hezekiah's note appears after the poems.

The Dreaming Mind

is an inebriate
doing her taxes, jumping through loopholes
to figure cells in storyboards with the tools
of a surrealist accountant: concordances compiled
using esoteric criteria, lists of homonyms
and domains of deities, encyclopedias
of world cuisines; an expert in arithmeticking
with fuzzy calculators and novelty pens,
taking break after break to down 100-
proof whiskey and cortisol in shot glasses
with pertinent logos served on a pillow-top bar
in a pub on a planet peopled with monsters
Frankensteined from movies and the news,
and others known straight from the files

of consciousness.

The Delusional Mind

is a blowing out
and lighting of candles; is a feverish mind,
tossing and turning in a gutter in a puddle
of its cold sweat; is a grandiose mind,
burning like a star, a lonely star being tested
by rejection, close to figuring out the test;
is a paranoid mind, not recognizing itself,
spotting imposters at the dining room table,
messages on labels in the cupboard;
is a healthier mind after the cutting off
of the diseased projecting part
that projected onto itself another self,
the chemical amputation that left behind
a phantom itching to clutch the reins,
a warning, a sick healthy warning.

The Lustful Mind

is an accountant
adding up to zero,
punching the figures
in the blue universe of his mind
onto a spread sheet, projecting a film spliced
with notches on his belt, random fantasies,
and a cornucopia of porn into the black
hole of desire. The seconds to come
longing for eternity.
The building to a release
into nothingness, then the return to the red
world, the real world, the need,
like for water, for life, the call for a hand
to touch his on the bed, to acknowledge,
to share a counting: two then one then zero.

The Musical Mind

is a mathematician pacing his cell,
counting his paces, smokes, time,
closing his eyes, filling the gaps
that locked him up,
orchestrating master schemes
discordant in their complexity,
beautiful in their harmony,
the bars humming, the space perfect,
the silence, figuring his play,
calculating misconduct,
counterpoint, revenge,
its instruments, strident solutions
from the strains in his head
that never die down.

The Attractions of Home

Stations of disturbed tombs, suicide blasts,
the oppressed ghosts of broken protests.

Transfer stations of missed love mused,
terminal stations of ignored horrors.

The city's edge, smoke and light of idling cabs
and snack stands, darkening roads.

I work at the northwest corner of the blue box
at the map's crux, a former city gate,
towers of old technologies. The station that goes by
something else, so I'm drinking
drunken alleys of chicken bones
and wooden skewers. My old stop, her stop,
the airport express. Tourist stops of dancing displays
and weak snacks. The Museum of Bathing, Revolution Park.

The new line on a free rag's cover, views of slums
from the elevated, billboards selling chicken picked
easily off bones. Dry spiced succulent skewers. Then the deep,
radically particular attractions of home.

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: *Rosenman has a mind certainly worth sharing with our faithless Fleas readers. It is also rare that we receive poetry relating accountancy imagery, especially right around the old deadline: Here are some lines we're indebted to credit him: "doing her taxes, jumping through loopholes," "is a paranoid mind, not recognizing itself, / spotting imposters at the dining room table," I love that one. And there is something about "...terminal stations of ignored horrors." ...*

THE POET SPEAKS: *The poems about the different states of mind were inspired by the DSM, advertising copy, personality tests, a little Buddhism, and, of course, my experiences. "The Attractions of Home" was inspired by living in different cities: exploring a new place, making a part of it my own, and getting comfortable. It was also inspired by my love of planes, trains, automobiles, the places they take us to, and the space they provide that's neither here nor there.*

My stylistic influences include Whitman, rock music, and artfully done movies and TV. I love poetry because it blows my mind that a few lines of carefully chosen words can affect my thoughts and emotions more than almost anything else. Poetry is the best vehicle for a voice, vision, and experience to be shared.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Seth Rosenman lives in the Philly 'burbs. He has taught high school English in the 'hood and the English language in China. He currently does a little bit of this and hopes to move on to some of that. He would like to return to China but will probably not return to being a rideshare driver or the womb. He reads often, writes occasionally, and submits rarely. His poems have been called poems by poets and readers of poetry alike.*

Insider Poems: A Quarantine Mini-Collection

By Janet Colson

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Some free associations are priceless. Here is a sweet short stack from an abstract thinker...Don't miss **NAMING THE DAYS...** (Spacing is poet's own.)*

Insider Poems: A Quarantine Mini-Collection

I Was Thinking

If we took down the mirror
 Inside our room
 We might be able to fit more stuff. A desk.
 It's the only mirror I can see myself in
 It's the one I look in
 We're not taking it down

What It Isn't

Wondering if I need to put on pants for the Zoom meeting.
 Got the day wrong. Didn't find out until the next one.
 The children are swearing.
 Germs are spreading through our eyes.
 I only go outside with dogs.
 It's none of these things.

Worrying about the soup

that's been sitting in the refrigerator
 I don't want to toss it because
 that's wasteful

No one is going to eat it but I leave it there

It's the color of blood with potatoes and carrots

I'm worried

Special Delivery

People will orderbags on Amazon
 When the people who collect the bodies
 are too busy, or too scared, or sick
 When the trash collection stops
 Because the workers have their own trash
 People will orderbags on Amazon
 And who will pick up the bodies?

(I ask my daughter this because I can't help it. You're too much, she says.)

NAMING THE DAYS

The day that didn't feel like a day:

Nonday

And continued into the next day:

Sameday:

And then the day that didn't happen:

Unday

It was a two day week.

THE POET SPEAKS: *This mini-poetry collection was inspired by a call for writers to reflect on the moment, which for me is as much about the day-to-day as it is about a global pandemic. In the poems, I experience the coronavirus as another character in the room, insinuating itself into conversations about furniture and soup. Throughout the journey, I hang onto my anxiety as a familiar companion in the face of the unknown.*

Read the poems out loud. They're better that way.

My poetic influences as of late are Dennis Hinrichsen and CAConrad. I also like Langston Hughes, Emily Dickinson, and Dr. Seuss. And Henry Rollins.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Janet Colson is a playwright/director/pole dancer in Lansing, Michigan. Her hybrid piece, Storycatcher, is pending publication in the upcoming issue of The Champagne Room. She is a collaborator for Ixion Wheel's rUST, a theatre piece that has been postponed due to coronavirus. Janet has just completed ZA-92, a short play about putting on a show during a zombie apocalypse. She is currently working on a play about coming out in quarantine. Coming Down was performed in the Take Ten play festival at Goddard College where Janet received her MFA in creative writing. Her play **Coming Down** appears in this issue.*

SPOON SHAPE

By James Latham

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes... Here is a pair of poignant poems varying distinctly in style by James Latham. **Spoon Shape** is an alluring read appealing to the vicissitudes of coupledness. "Curled around you in bed, your back to my belly. You call it spoon shape. This morning it felt like two question marks." **nothing but static** "you let the cards blow away, / and the lantern burn out." "you dance the forgotten dance of spoons, / a waltz atop the ruined walls of broken rooms." Latham should be read aloud. A melancholy pair always trumps contented solitude. HS (Spacing is poet's own.)*

Spoon Shape

I've said good-bye to you twice in the last six months. Once when I drove away across country and again this morning driving you to the airport.

I said so many things to you in the last week, curled around you in bed. I wanted to promise you everything and had nothing to spare.

Curled around you in bed, your back to my belly. You call it spoon shape. This morning it felt like two question marks.

Tom Waits sings that when you get far enough away you're on your way home. That sounds true, but I'm not anything as much as I am tired.

I'm on the other side of the world and I haven't gone far enough yet, no matter how much I want to turn around and come home to you.

Tonight I want you to slit me open with a curved knife and slide my guts onto the cold tile floor of this six-dollar room, my blood gleaming in candlelight.

I want you to stand barefoot, the room awash in blood and slime, your bare hands deep inside of me, and drape my intestines on a rickety chair to predict a future where hope is stronger than fear.

Sew me together with jagged blue stitches and hold me spoon shape, my back to your belly. Sew me back together and tell me a future where hope is stronger than fear.

nothing but static

what do you do
when there are no more cards to play,
when there's nothing left to say
and no one to listen to?

when you can't stare at the moon
because it's the rainy season?

you get up, put the cards away,
blow out the lantern,
and turn off the radio
playing nothing but static.

what do you do
when you talk to fill the quiet,
when you've run out of words to try,
and there's no one to talk to?

when you can't ask the moon
because it's the rainy season?

you get up and put the cards away,
blow out the lantern,
and turn off the radio--
it plays nothing but static.

what do you do
when you know nothing but static,

when you burn your brightest dreams
on the highest mountains of the moon?

you let the cards blow away,
and the lantern burn out.
you forget about the radio--
it played nothing but static.

you dance the forgotten dance of spoons,
a waltz atop the ruined walls of broken rooms.

THE POET SPEAKS: *My poems, like most of my writing, are snapshots of emotion with the shutter speed set from minutes to weeks. The goal is to capture the moment. That's why I write poetry and that's what I look for when I read poetry.*

Spoon Shape is three snapshots taken on three lonely nights missing an ex-lover. I wanted to know the future would be better than the present and I wanted to be held.

Nothing But Static was written in a wildlife reserve in western Uganda. Camp was set up in and around the ruins of a colonial-era hotel. At night we played cards in the yellow light of kerosene lanterns and listened to music on cassette tape until the solar batteries gave out. Some nights I stayed up late and walked the broken hotel walls.

Influences include Richard Hugo, Michael Ondaatje, Charles Bukowski. James Lockett, Raymond Carver, Elmore Leonard, and Amanda Hartman.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Jim Latham's work has appeared in Rue Scribe, The Pagosa Daily Post, Dezman's Archives and Opium Magazine. Originally from northern California, he now works in the oilfield and lives in Anchorage, Alaska.*

8 POEMS

By Dee Allen

To keep the poet's spacing Hezekiah's note appears after the poems.

POETRY SUBMISSIONS FOR FLEAS ON THE DOG #6

DISCOVERY

There'd be no Dita Von Teese,
No Princess Farhana,
No Julie Strain,
No Suicide Girls,
No Coco Lectric,
No Christy Mack,
No paintings
By Olivia

Jenna Jameson,
Debi Mazar,
Renée Zellwiger,
Gemma Arterton,
Millions of Goth
Females worldwide
Would've never
Played dress-up

Without the one discovery
Of two Black men

Virtually unknown,
Totally unsung.

Leading musicians into battle
With Bebop Jazz notes
Wasn't enough for
Cass Carr.

The Jamaican bass player
Led another phalanx of men
Hitting beachheads like
Hell's Kitchen, Harlem, upstate New York
Pastures, kept his other
Weapon of choice close at hand,
Took advantage of every precious shot.

A beautiful rainbow
Crafted from each photo
Puerto Rican, African, Caucasian
Glamour models

Cheesecakes and nudes—
Of the fairer side
Of Carr's pictorial rainbow,
Only one stood out as exceptional—

Coal-black hair
Framed her smiling smile,
Light-blue sapphires
Posing as eyes,
Perfect hourglass
Figure, pale as moonglow.
All the curves in
All the right places.
The finest woman
Ever to cross

His flashing camera sight.

With her homemade nightwear on
Or bikinis or without,

She felt no shame
In her game.
Audacious Tennessee rose
Born to strike a pose.

Handcuffs were slapped on the wrists
Of Carr and twenty-two from his
Camera club when police raided a farm.
Nude photography, harmless act
A crime anywhere in Truman's U.S.A.

Carr's discovery, also arrested & charged.
"Indecent exposure" she resisted.
"Posing was fun", she insisted.
The judge gave her what she gave
The entire courtroom: Disorderly conduct.

Word on the scandal
Found its way in
Whispers, hearsay, loose talk.
Thereafter, the model,
Her sweet name, her sultry image

Were given
Underground notoriety.

Patrolling the street
On the Brooklyn beat
Wasn't enough for
Jerry Tibbs.

The married N.Y.P.D. officer

On some days would shed
His dark blue uniform & wore
The sable one he was
Born with.
Just a man enjoying his spare time,
His busy hands worked a camera.
On Coney Island's
White sandy beach,
He found her.
A Southern transplant
Curious about her
New Northern home.

His eyes saw
"Model" in her
Straightaway.

His clicking Kodak©
Truly loved her
From the start.

Stance per stance,
Pic per pic,
Tibbs' work seemed
Ready to be shown.

Then again, he thought
Something had to be
Done about his subject's
Already movie star looks.

Jerry Tibbs talked her
Into wearing short-cut
Bangs with her long ebony hair.

Cass Carr took her
Picture again and again and they

Sold well in Manhattan nightclubs.

And the shutterbugs
And the barflies
They knew why.

The playful
Pale lady
Many have seen

Cracking a whip like a dom,
Tied with robe like a sub,
Taking a bubble bath in vibrant colour,
Dancing seductively with her partner
A stuffed clown doll in grainy black-and-white,

Splashing happily in water
On Miami Beach shore,
Gracing men's magazine covers
Dressed in a leopard print skirt
Or her famous black lingerie and nylons—

Men back then wanted to date her.
Women right now want to emulate her.
Bettie Page, Queen Of Curves
Would've never
Lived that title

Without being guided in the right direction
By two Black men

Virtually unknown,
Totally unsung.

PROGRAM

NASHVILLE 1934

*C'mon, Goldie!
C'mon, Love!
C'mon, kids!
Let's git a
Sit-down circle goin'!
Grab all your
Newspaper
Magazine
Movie star pictures!
It's time
For a round of*

PROGRAM!

*The game where
The stars of
Radio and movies
Bring Hollywood
To you!*

This was more than
Her source of amusement.
All the sitting children's
Eyes had amazement
Flashing from them

As 11-year old
Bettie danced the hula
To ukulele music
Like a born Hawai'ian,
Played cute & cheerful
Like Little Orphan Annie,
Went melodramatic
Like Greta Garbo
In the movie
Grand Hotel
Wanting nothing more
Than to be alone,
Bickered back & forth
Like Fibber McGee & Molly,
Smear'd her pale
Face black with
Shoe polish to do
Amos 'N' Andy,
Be laughing & elegant
Like Jean Harlow
Would in her trademark
White satin
Evening gown.

This was when she was
First bitten and
Infected by the acting bug.
This was when she first
Exercised her power
To entertain
And enchant the masses.
Those days at
The downtown
Orphanage.
Poverty
Had split apart
The Page home, so

There the boys stayed
With Mama Edna.
The washerwoman
Never wanted girls
Anyway—her words.
Playing a kid's game

Taught Bettie early on
How to pose—

W: Thankstaking 2019

THE BRIBE

NASHVILLE 1936

*Here's some dimes, girl.
Go outside and
Have some fun.*

A handful of dimes.
Roughly \$2 worth.
Given to Bettie as 20
Shiny silver Liberty heads.

*Go to the movies,
Since that's
Whut ya like.*

Dimes enough to hit up
All the theatres in town,
Buy popcorn to snack on and a Hines©
Root beer at the drug store counter afterwards.

*Now, Chummy,
Whut happened t'day
Stays 'tween us.*

The silver screen, the black-and-white features

It showed, was a sanctuary for
Bettie, age 13, sacred as
Another Sunday in church.

*So lissen
Real good,
Ya hear?*

On the screen, gods and goddesses of
Tinseltown played, actors made her happy place safe:
Katherine Hepburn, Clark Gable, Roy Rogers and
Wavy-haired singing pretty boy Dick Powell.

*Don't tell
Yo' mama
A thang.*

Cinema was her sanctuary, away from
Grabby hands reaching under her blouse,
Sliding hands moving much lower,
Probing hands scarring her in private

Outside and in,
Forceful hands robbing her of innocence—
At home, the word *molester*
By another name was *Daddy*.

A handful of dimes.
Roughly \$2 worth.
Pay given to Bettie to keep
Roy Page's abuse quiet.

W: 12.5.19

1947

The passion of
High school
Went cold
After marriage.

Returning to Nashville
From San Francisco
Failed to rekindle
Any dead embers,
Failed to reignite
The old fire.
Separation between
Bettie and her
Husband Billy was the best
Way out of that.

Bettie left for
Miami, her
Future sanctuary
From the pressures
Of the North.
Secretarial work
For a furniture
Making firm brought her to

Haiti—Land of searing
 Caribbean sun,
 Mangoes, sugarcane
 And rum.
 Whirlwind romances
 Happen as quickly as
 The phrase's name implies,
 For Bettie was caught
 In a whirlwind
 Of fondness for
 The island nation's
 Weather, people, culture
 And a local man.

His own fondness
 For the blue-eyed
 Visitor made her
 Forsake her
 Jim Crow upbringing.
 The White teen-ager
 Who shouted rude names
 At two Black girls
 For snatching movie star
 Trading cards from her

Left for dead
 In Port Au Prince.

The forests of midnight
 Had music all their own:
 Conga drums,
 Kreyol chants,
 Masques covering
 Faces wailing
 To their *loa*,*
 Black feet

Pounding out a dance
Around a bonfire.
Voodoo rite
Bettie & her companion
Saw through the
Trees and vines
Gave her
The mother of thrills.

President Truman
Refused to give
Haiti foreign aid.
President Estimé
Failed to calm
His money-poor citizens down.
With haste, Bettie
Boarded a plane with
Other Americans & flew
Rather than face
The people's rage.

Back in Miami,
Working the nightclubs
With a local
Hack comedian somehow
Stirred into
Awakening from
Suspended animation
Her dream
Of becoming
An actress,
Wanting to be seen
On the silver screen

And the tall skyscrapers
And bright neon lights
And show biz venues

Of New York City

As shown on
Some new contraption
Called television
As seen from
A store front window

Caught her eye.
Her destiny

Pointed
Northward—

W: Summer Solstice 2018

*KREYOL: "God".

THIS LADY VANISHES

Winter 1957: Brooding, anxiety over her future
 MadE this lady leave New York City.
 The Kefauver obscenity hearings
In D.C., an atTempt at rushing her bedroom window
 TakIng a fatal plunge into the street,
Receiving typEwritten notes from some stalker,

Unexpected Protection from the F.B.I., used as
 Gorgeous bAit, luring out his 16-year old sick ass
 Gave her ample reasons to vanish
From our gazE, beyond our reach—

W: 6.28.18

GOLDIE JANE

*Are there any more
At home like you?
Hume-Fogg High School
Football and basketball
Hero Billy Neal asked
A debating team hopeful
Studying at a park.
Yes, there's two
And they're so much
Prettier than me
Bettie answered,
Selling herself short
While avoiding any
Additional pick-up lines
From an athletic bad boy,
Knowing Mama
Didn't want her
Dating anyone.*

Young book-smart
Bobby soxer Bettie

Knew the family
Situation well, having
To care for them daily
Like an assistant mama
And regarding the female
Half of the Page household,
Indeed there was
Another like her:

Same long black
Hair, only curlier,
Deep chestnut
Brown eyes, sharp contrast
To Bettie's baby blues.
Otherwise, same
Porcelain complexion,
Well-rounded hips,
Shapely legs, winning grin.
Mama Edna's younger,
Prettier duplicate.
Spiritual twin
To her famous sister.
Belle of the backyard
Beauty pageants
From childhood,
Tailor of her own
Dresses and swimwear,
Easy on photographers'
Eyes and their cameras,
Burlesque queen of the STL*,
Abdicated her crown and
The nightclub stage for
The quiet life
Of suburban housewife,
Mother, painter, art teacher,
Poet, songwriter, woodworker.

Glamour and creativity
 Rode her pallid skin
 At once, mileage attained
 On that other woman from
 Nashville known as
 Miss Page, Mrs. Brem,
 Gloria or to her kinfolk,
 Though ill-fitting for a brunette,
 Goldie Jane.

W: 5.3.19

*Abbreviation for "Saint Louis, Missouri".

FISHNETS

Swimming fish
 Are spared
 From human
 Capture today.

The fishnets
 Have captured
 Another living thing
 Or two, encircled

More tightly
 Wrapped around
 A nice
 Pair of

Smooth shaven
 Lady legs
 Standing on
 The subway

Platform, awaiting
The next
Train leaving
West Oakland.

Mexican, twentysomething
Slender female in a yellow
Dress & pumps across from me
Owned it proudly

Transparent,
Shadowy
Second
Skin.

Those fishnets
She's wearing
Reminds me so much
Of pin-ups from the 1950s:

Centered in the spotlight
Showcasing her luscious form,
And dark-webbed calves:
Burlesque red-head Tempest Storm

Or Nashville brunette
Dark Angel Bettie Page
Posing in the photographer's studio
Netted legs made to walk any stage.

Those fishnets
Can catch
More than
Schools of fish.

They're good, I think,
For trapping

Eyes of males, aroused, wanting
Then pulling them in.

W: 11.14.16

LONE WOLF

Long before
This perilous time,
Long before
This unhealthy clime,

Long before
Death tolls in every land,
Long before
Infection held the upper hand,

I've distanced myself from the crowd—
Strong intention from my heart—
To extract myself from willful
Ignorance which I had no part,

To secede from the arrogant,
Their every petty construction,
To leave before they overwhelm me—
Orgies of reputation destruction.

I have more respect for animals
 Than for the human race.
 Six feet apart, for me,
 Isn't enough space.

I've met some good people—
 They're few and far between—
 Because my heart felt wounded countless times,
 I shun the social scene.

These are words of experience
 From one humble creature.

I roam the harsh wilderness
 A lone wolf—by nature.

W: 4.4.2020

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: There is something about Dee Allen I just love. Her words spell like incantations. She is a menagerie of notions. "Interesting stuff going on and I like the narrative imprint that runs through the 8. They challenge because they are outside the mainstream of underground but still dirty, still septic." That is a quote from Senior Editor, Charles Pinch himself...no sense me prattling on...

THE POET SPEAKS:

Dee Allen.

THE POET SPEAKS

[END-NOTES FOR FLEAS ON THE DOG #6]

DISCOVERY

I've been a fan of the 1950s American pin-up model Bettie Page since early 1998. The Bettie Page revival actually began in 1992. So I'm willing to admit to coming to that party late. In late 1997, I first learned of Miss Page's life and achievements through an essay in *indigo #7*, a Chicago-based Gothic personal 'zine created by editor Michelle Aiello [where two hand-written poems of mine were published at the time]. Then I walked into a funky gift shop one cold day and found, hanging from a clothing rack, a black Bettie Page t-shirt. The front image was a reproduction of a cover for a magazine from 1956 called *Fantastique*, featuring Miss Page sitting on a bed with a striped spread in her black lingerie, leather opera gloves and big black platform boots, pouting seductively. I've had a celebrity crush on her since then. So as one of her fans, I had to write this bio-poem and inform potential readers on who discovered Bettie Page before anyone else. And they weren't White.

PROGRAM

Reading *The Real Bettie Page* by Richard Foster inspired this part-persona poem. It's a glimpse into Miss Page's Great Depression/New Deal-era childhood. After he made a 17-year old girl pregnant, washerwoman/beautician Edna Pirtle Page had divorced her auto mechanic husband Roy. The daunting task of taking care of six children by herself was too much. So Mama Page placed her girls [Bettie, Goldie and Joyce—nick-named "Love"] into a Protestant orphanage in downtown Nashville for one year, while the boys [Billy, Jack and Jimmy] remained at

home. To amuse themselves while staying in such dreary surroundings, Bettie and her younger sisters made up a game where they danced and imitated their favourite Hollywood movie and radio stars. They called it "Program" and it became popular with the orphaned kids. In an online interview at Starwave's Celebrity Lounge in March 1996, Miss Page attributed her later ability to pose in front of the camera to this children's game of hers.

THE BRIBE

Another part-persona poem inspired by *The Real Bettie Page*. This one focused on the time when Mama Page made one of the biggest mistakes of her life: Renting out a room at the house to her ex-husband Roy, who in Miss Page's words was

“the worst womanizer of his sort”. It was then Roy proceeded to molest his own daughter constantly. Daddy Page would reward her with a handful of dimes, on the condition that she’d keep his sexual abuse silent. Young Bettie’s means of escape was going to the movies and the pharmacy soda counter.

1947

Another poem inspired by *The Real Bettie Page*, as well as interviews, biographies and a 1997 E! True Hollywood Story episode. This chapter of Miss Page’s life focused on leaving her first husband and brief work as a furniture company secretary in Haiti, only to leave on an aeroplane in the midst of civil unrest. Her return to the United States [via Miami] was the crucial point where her interest in becoming an actress was reborn.

THIS LADY VANISHES

My first attempt at a mesostic poem, which uses one capital letter per line to spell out a word pertaining to the poem’s subject. In this particular case, I used one capital letter per line to spell out the name Bettie Page. This one briefly covers the factors leading to Miss Page’s departure from New York City, after 7 straight years of modelling.

GOLDIE JANE

Inspired by the book *Bettie Page: The Lost Years* by Tori Rodriguez and Ron Brem [the only child of the title woman herself and Bettie Page’s nephew], as well as *The Real Bettie Page*. Basically an ode to one of Miss Page’s sisters; the one who followed her everywhere, even into the world of photo modelling. To start out the poem, I had to re-create the first time Miss Page met her future husband Billy Neal at a park in Nashville, while studying for their high school’s debate team. Neal’s first words were key, as was young Bettie’s coy response. This exchange served as a segue to discuss Goldie Jane.

FISHNETS

Based on an actual incident at West Oakland B.A.R.T. in November 2016. One Sunday afternoon, while leaving one subway train from San Francisco headed for the Dublin – Pleasanton area, I waited on the platform for a Richmond-bound subway train. Across the platform from where I stood was a young, attractive Mexican woman standing in wait for a train of her own, headed for S.F. Airport.

The woman wore a short-sleeved, bright banana-yellow dress and matching pumps, along with—black fishnet stockings. At that moment, I couldn't take my eyes off her. Wearing those fishnets with her ensemble made this woman much more attractive to me, like a 1950s pin-up picture brought to life. Then her train finally arrived; she stepped on it

and left the platform. When the subway train departed, my sweetest dream was over.

LONE WOLF

In the age of the Coronavirus pandemic, one of the ways to slow down the spread of this new disease is social distancing, which, according to the U.S. Centre of Disease Control, means standing/sitting six feet apart from the next person. Truth be told, I've practised social distancing my whole life, before this unforeseen turn of world events. I did that primarily to avoid crowds and not to endure other people's bullshit, especially being subject to vicious rumours and back-stabbing. This poem is my confession to having an anti-social temperament.

STYLISTIC INFLUENCES

Get your eyes and attention-span ready for this:

Etheridge Knight [the late, great Black prison poet]—for his straight-forward, sometimes profane nature on the page; Langston Hughes; Countee Cullen; Claude McKay; Gil Scott-Heron; Lucille Clifton; Amiri Baraka; Haki R. Madhubuti; Mumia Abu-Jamal [the Pennsylvania state political prisoner/news reporter]—for his ability to extract truth from the State's/Mass Media's lies; Janice Mirikitani [the San Francisco Japanese

poet]—for standing up for her people; George Jackson [the late San Quentin politicised prisoner]—for giving my people on the outside wisdom about themselves, in the face of a racist society; Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Neeli Cherkovski, Maxine Kumin—for teaching me to appreciate the natural world through verse; Diane DiPrima; Frederick Douglass; the song-lyrics of Ice Cube; MC Ren; KRS-One; Robb Flynn [from Machine Head]; Burton C. Bell [from Fear Factory]; Trent Reznor [from Nine Inch Nails and How To Destroy Angels]; Valor Kand [from

Christian Death]; and William Faith [from Faith & The Muse and The Bellwether Syndicate].

WHY POETRY?

Because it's not only my creative outlet, but a way for me to communicate myself and my observations to our greater society.

I don't have a ready-made human family of my own [wife, children and household pets]. So everything I've created on the page are my children and that's the legacy I want to leave behind after I leave this wretched mortal coil. A full, published/posted body of written work.

AUTHOR'S BIO: African-Italian performance poet based in Oakland, California.

Active on the creative writing & Spoken Word tips since the early 1990s. Author of 5 books [*Boneyard*, *Unwritten Law*, *Stormwater* and *Skeletal Black*, all from POOR Press, and coming soon from Conviction 2 Change Publishing, *Elohi Unitsi*] and 24 anthology appearances [including *Your Golden Sun Still Shines*, *Rise*, *Extreme*, *The Land Lives Forever* and *Civil Liberties United*, edited by Shizué Seigel] under his figurative belt so far.

BENEATH ALL THOSE LAYERS

By Charu Sharma

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes:

Here is a beautifully fluid poem submitted by Charu Sharma. Try a slice, "Ashamed at my very own absence / when I needed me the most, a steely taste of guilt / always remains in my mouth;" She writes with a passion that somehow combines timidity and ferocity tenderly wrapped in fine paper with a profusion of ribbon and bows. HS (Spacing is poet's own.)

Beneath all those layers
you are stark naked,
despite all the company surrounding you
you are alone absolutely.

My cavernous heart
houses deep within its gut
a burning flame of warm *Nostalgia*
keeping it from going cold
but quakes erratically by the sonorous echoes
ricocheting off its walls,
most biting words from sentences
running parallel to my very existence
(but never ever meeting it),
uttered by those who stayed
only to leave.

My past, an albatross around my neck
fills me with a nauseating embarrassment,
my head hanging on the edge of my bed
in an anticipation of finally retching it out entirely,
only to carry it forward to yet another day;
could have saved myself the pain,
could have protected myself,
could have just done something!
But I didn't,
I didn't, I didn't, I didn't, I didn't!!!
Ashamed at my very own absence
when I needed me the most, a steely taste of guilt
always remains in my mouth;
against the dark, the contours of this guilt

stand in complete contrast,
that's why nights are so hard, I haven't slept for so long...

You build your house
on my grave,
my past will haunt you
when it would have left me
defeated by the coagulating years
accentuating an already approaching *Forgetfulness*
rendering it powerless for it would finally be
without a countenance, just lessons
both my body and soul would have gotten
deeply acquainted with;
just wait for it!

I dream of the sea, all the time...
I envisage myself tracing
the unsteady periphery of the sea
marked by the receding waves,
not allowing even the dribble of seawater
to touch my feet;
my bare skin exposed
to an open sky holding a flaring sun
with a condescending and indifferent confidence,
color me golden!
There will come a day
when I will relinquish
this inclination towards disparate colors,
for I will fully embrace an all encompassing White.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I am a very sensitive person due to which I tend to feel all kinds of emotions with unwarranted intensity which gets overwhelming at times. Also, I am an introvert who loves to stay alone (I am no misanthrope in any sense, I have ten friends!) and I have been "blessed" with a hyperactive brain that doesn't let me sleep for most of the nights owing to which I always have time to think too much and also to imagine too much. So poetry is a necessary evil for me to cleanse myself of all the hyperbolic feelings and emotions I carry on a daily basis and a containment/ map of the intangible that most of the times is nonsensical. No wonder my head feels so heavy and chest clogged!*

*Anyway, I have been writing poetry since 2016. My poems at the beginning followed a strict rhyming scheme but eventually the level of books I was reading advanced and so did my writing. The first shift from the poems with a rhyming scheme to the poems with continual flow emerged right after I finished reading *The "God of Small Things"* by Arundhati Roy. Right after that my first encounter with Magical Realism through *"One Hundred Years of Solitude"* by Gabriel*

Garcia Marquez changed everything for me. That book introduced me to a concept of expression that could both elaborate and yet disguise my personal experiences which I have never really wanted to share with the world and yet I wanted to express them. I fell in love with it and since then I have been trying to incorporate the element of that genre in all my poems. Although every year, my style of writing shifts to the genre and the work of creativity I am exposed to. But it wasn't until the last year that a significant change in my style appeared owing to the dreadful encounters my life was putting me through and my introduction to the amazing poets like Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson and my burgeoning inclination to pen down my emotions only after they have matured to their full capacity. Though because of that the frequency with which I write poems now has decreased but the increasing quality of my work and the fulfilment I achieve after writing a piece of poem has compensated for that.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *My name is Charu Sharma, I am 25 years old and I am from India. I have been writing since 2016 but only recently I have started submitting my work for publishing. So far, I have managed to get published at two collectives only.*

I am an aspiring writer and I am aiming for improving my poetry as a form of expression of my emotions in an exhaustive manner. For that I read a lot and fortunately enough, I have come across some amazing works from different genres of creative writing in both prose and poetry which have helped me better my art. But the major influencer of my writing style has been Magic Realism genre.

Life in the Time of Covid-19 and other poems...

By Howard Brown

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Here's more from our pandemic of poetry. The first one is as much an engaging narrative as it is posy. If you miss **Like Lazarus** you have no business clicking on our site. I have no compunction not quoting lines from Brown; he is too prolific and a clique unto himself. HS. (Spacing is poet's own.)*

Life in the Time of Covid - 19

What we've taken as reality has become something else altogether; everything turned on its head, so that we find ourselves adrift in an off-kilter, alien world.

Cable news filled with political flagellation, financial markets precipitous, people crowding stores, pushing, shoving, going absolutely bat-shit, as they buy up liquor, groceries and—go figure—guns, ammunition and all the toilet paper in sight.

So, the question becomes one of how you'll choose to meet this new reality:

As a true believer, on your knees, praying for deliverance;

An apostate, believing that prayer is useless, because even if there is a God, he's strictly hands-off, letting things play out as they will;

Like Chicken Little, scurrying about, squawking that *the sky is falling* until you find yourself in the arms of Foxy Loxy, who proves to be every bit as deadly as the virus from which you've been fleeing;

Or, perhaps you'll find that still place within which tells you that life is filled with all sorts of disasters, but things are also in constant flux and, accordingly, this too shall pass.

Yet the question remains, will it pass before you do?

3/29/2020

Like Lazarus

Remnants of yesterday's snow
linger beneath a veil of fog which
obscures the sun; the infinity
which surrounds us now seemingly
reduced to a very close space.

And, like Lazarus, we find ourselves
in a state of cataleptic repose,
impatiently waiting for the great
stone to be rolled away.

2/9/2020

Ineffable

Down the mountain in a blur; the air crisp and cold; the sky an infinite dome of blue; the mind empty, yet humming like a singing bowl; the heart luminous, basking in an ineffable state of bliss.

Eventually you reach the bottom, reverse course and head back up the long climb, each turn of the pedals now a struggle as everything begins to change. Still, the bliss remains; only the paradigm has shifted.

3/1/2020

Greyhound

The Greyhound station lies on the outskirts of town, not far from the airport, on a stretch of two-lane, black top, sandwiched in between a long line of rusting trailers and mildewed, cracker-box bungalows.

It's a delusory, single-story affair, the parking lot empty except for a yesterday's blowing plastic bags and empty beer cans, (no bus anywhere in sight) and fits right in with the rest of the neighborhood.

Transience is the word which comes to mind as we pull into the parking lot. As in *I don't want to hang around this f**king place too long*. And, from the look of things, neither does anyone else.

The guy behind the counter barely looks up when we inquire about our bus. But, eventually, we learn what we need to know and take a seat in a waiting room which reeks of Clorox and b.o.

A handful of patrons are scattered about the place, mostly young and grungy, in nasty, thrice-patched pants, hoodies, and

partially laced work boots, a couple with earphones, adrift in their own insularity.

Then the bus--long, sleek and gleaming in the morning sunlight—rolls up to the back door. And with the hiss of air brakes, the riff-raff in the waiting room finally begin to stir,

Then rise, grabbing their back packs and bed rolls—not a single suitcase to be had among their number—as the driver steps down and calls out: *Okay boys, get a move on, this dog's getting ready to run!*

2/14/2020

Rolling

Rolling down a four lane blacktop that stretches across the endless hills of north Alabama.

Carcasses litter the road; deer, coyote, possum, racoon, an occasional armadillo—none ever knew what hit them.

Beneath a lowering sky, vultures circle. Right and left, the residue of last season's corn harvest bristles in water-logged fields.

Just beyond Burnout Baptist Church, I cross a stream, its fetid surface thick with Styrofoam cups and half-submerged plastic bags.

Could this stygian landscape be any more depressing, I find myself asking? Then, in answer, flashing blue lights appear in my rear-view mirror.

12/21/2019

THE POET SPEAKS: *My poetry in general, and these five pieces in particular, arise from everyday life experiences: i.e. coping with the current shutdown of the country due to the corona virus (“Life in the Time of Covid-19”); the uncertainty of day to day weather and its effect on life as the seasons change from winter to spring (“Like Lazarus”); the euphoria of riding a bike down and back up Lookout Mountain, TN on a Sunday morning (“Ineffable”); a visit to the local Greyhound bus station (“Greyhound”); and, the feeling of utter dejection on getting a speeding ticket in the middle of nowhere in North Alabama. So, writing poetry, for me, is very much like keeping a daily journal.*

My favorite poets are Wendell Berry, Mary Oliver and David Whyte, although not necessarily in that order. They say straight out what they have to say, unlike others who hide their message beneath multiple layers of meaningless metaphor.

AUTHOR’S BIO: *Howard Brown is a writer who lives in Lookout Mountain, TN. His poetry has appeared in Burningword Literary Journal, Printed Words, Blue Collar Review, Tuck Magazine, The Beautiful Space, Pure Slush, Poetry Super Highway, Old Hickory Review, Devil’s Party Press, Truth Serum and Lone Stars Magazine. In 2012, he published a collection of poems entitled The Gossamer Nature of Random Things. He has published short fiction in Louisiana Literature, F**k Fiction, Crack the Spine, Pulpwood Fiction, Extract(s), Gloom Cupboard, Full of Crow and Pure Slush.*

THE TRACK

By Neil Flory

Poetry Editor writes: I adore Flory's wordplay in this piece. Here is hoping the assonance is contagious.

the track

all on the old track but then it *cracked* chuckled
 the slap-happy red-faced old man *went*
all to trash and uselessness yet once my slip forward *oh*
the muck but watching watching the
 crack for sudden open thoroughfares wait the cypress
 trees *it's the trees* stabbing upside down the egrets dancing
 flailing frantic up (down) my nostrils the dank
 algae-cruste'd tunnels to yawning caverns drill eleventh
 reiteration into the soft core into
 the other side of the,
long-ago palaces
once from the moment
to come

-Neil Flory

THE POET SPEAKS: *Poetry is a vehicle for Truth, and Truth is what the world needs. When Truth voices itself, then, the hearer must channel it into the world. When I become the conduit, how could I possibly justify any choice other than channeling? And so I write poems because I must.*

Poems find their way to my consciousness from anywhere and everywhere—I have encountered them in thick pine forests, while driving on busy interstates, while standing in line at the grocery store. They spring from any of the million layers of inner and outer experience, and from the countless points of intersection therein. Each poem has its own backstory, its own personality, motivations, priorities, and idiosyncrasies. Could I really expect anything resembling uniformity among them, then, in light of life's infinite variety? And so I am eclectic, swearing no particular allegiance to any aesthetic paradigm or school of thought, but instead listening, without agenda, only to the poem in my presence.

I am also driven to listen to Truths in the poetry of others, and here I am similarly unshackled, constantly reading poets old and new, famous and unknown, of any style or none in particular. My unquenchable thirst for poems and poets that I've never read burns just as keenly as my thirst for poems that I haven't yet written.

I find life bursting with revelations and discoveries. To channel the Truths that voice themselves to me has been a deep and consuming need for some four decades. I'm only too grateful that the joyous work continues to seek me out.

AUHTOR'S BIO: *The beaches of Texas and Florida and the heavily wooded lakeshores of New York State have long been places where poems have emerged from the ocean or trees and introduced themselves to me, like old friends met for the first time. Another old friend is the piano, who often speaks to me in long afternoons of improvisation or slow notations leading to a composition of one sort or another. Some of these poetic and musical musings have found themselves published, the former in various journals such as Down in the Dirt, Eye on Life Magazine, Cokefish, Alternative Press Magazine, and Mind Matters Review. When not by the lakeshore or at the piano, I find myself spending time teaching music and overseeing the music program at Jamestown Community College, in Western New York State.*

WITHIN THE PAPAYA and other poems...

By Abasiama Emmanuel Udom

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: Within the Papaya, "lies the seeds of tomorrow," Who could deny this lady with lines such as these? Right from the outset, is she quoting someone else? I would rather remain in sheltered ignorance than stoop to Google. I prefer to believe they're hers. 'Scattered words' like flower petals. No need for me to go on so long as she can...HS

WITHIN THE PAPAYA (13 LINES)

lies the seeds of tomorrow,
 hungering for the deepness of earth's womb
 shouting to be out to bed,
 crying, calling a future unknown
 still a future anyway.
 Within the Papaya,
 is buried tomorrow's song and a future heir,
 all calling and praying,
 praying amiss yet not caring
 for to be born it's prime desire,
 looking towards the tomorrow of 'maybe'
 a land of uncertainties and laughter
 of smiles and a change.

**FOREVER BY DAY.
(16 LINES)**

Maidens will throw their trash in newly hewn gutters,
mother's will flaunt their remnants in freshly dug paths
and forever by the day, rats it be that will visit,
to dance and play amongst laughing children,
to feast on uncovered bread, laughing in the face of our disgust,
for it be us that let them roam, these carriers of what we fear.

Father's will push the papers into government roads,
and pray the rains come down to wash them
further down the lane to their neighbour's--
So forever by the day, rats will call to their friends
wearing skin grey and sick, take the streets of the Delta
ravaging, nibbling all in their path be it food or foot.

Forever by the day, temperatures will run high
sweat dancing down our necks and faces,
the signs of the virus that is here.
Still we do as before, forever by the day.

**WHISPER SORRY
(18 LINES)**

Should you not ask me if,
 the fire of hunger in my soul is quenched
 before I am named a glutton for eating too much?
 Should you not seek, if,
 you'll find hurt in my spirit
 afore you call the hawks to peck on my wound?
 Should you not search, if,
 within your heart lies a thicket of darkness
 before you quench the light arisen in my bowels?
 Should you not watch out if my will is gone,
 then make me weak, fit for the grave--
 Find my why, then send the consequences,
 before you name me, seek to see through my eyes.
 I do not pass the blame,
 but do not tell me 'be careful'
 when all I want is a whispered sorry
 a soothing of my loins, a balm on my sore feet and hands.
 Should you not?

THE POET SPEAKS:

What inspired my poems?

Life.

The constant inspiration for my poetry is man, his actions and inactions. I like to explore man's tears, failures, successes and his mind (difficult).

In these poems, I explore themes of change, of how we all call others names, take sides without fully understanding a situation and how it hurts. Forever by the day, then carries with it this air of resignation and a call to action. It mirrors southern Nigeria and our common practice of dumping refuse in gutters which leads to flooding.

My poems have come from a place of awareness and a wild hope.

Stylistic influences:

The first poet to influence me was Robert Louis Stevenson. I love the way his work breathed with him (awareness of him) even after all these years. He also displays a different variant of English.

The Poems of Maya Angelou and Emily Dickinson have also influenced my writing with simplicity of diction, message, and a slight touch of irony.

Why poetry is important?

I always liked the pull of the unknown poets and writers had but poetry became more important to me from 2013 when I was battling with depression. Reading it from then was for not only for pleasure but to heal my soul.

Poetry writing for me is a tool, my way of relating with the world, telling snippets of my life's experiences and using it to tell things that I cannot say to your face for fear you would not hear me.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *I am a Writer with works in Still Point Literary Magazine, Sandy River Review with others forthcoming.*

5 poems

by kenneth pobo

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: I have no idea what DWORNS are but I just love this poem and “the original / oatmeal people.” “I say Thanksgiving / comes in November. He says he is thankful / for decay.” You can’t pick TRILLIUMS in Ontario unless it’s a poem. Fleas are much obliged to publish Pobo’s well-deserved poetry. HS (Spacing is poet’s own.)

DWORNS

I’m a king, I rumble,
and I rule the original
oatmeal people. I love them,
as much as a king can love.
Which isn’t much. My dark red
coat with a gold lining
makes me look like I’ve been set
on fire.

Sometimes people bow and I bow back—
then we go about our days planning
to rob sexual banks. I’m good
for one thing: I protect everyone
from the dworns. Nobody knows
what they are, but I’m ready for them.

I stuff poems in my gun.
Explosive, they can’t kill,
but they can make the dworns
think twice.

DULCET TONES SAYS HE CARRIES NOVEMBER IN HIM

He looks all moony and summer relaxed,
torn blue shorts, flip flops,
and short sleeved shirt with a picture
of a barred owl on the back. He says
I shouldn't be taken in—
he carries November in him.

I might take a chill if I get too close.
No one gets too close. He doesn't allow it.
He waits for hummingbirds to return,
but they flee from cold. I say Thanksgiving
comes in November. He says he is thankful
for decay.

It dresses better than he does.
And tells no lies.

TRILLIUMS

The trilliums have just
come into bloom,
raising little white flags
above brown fern fronds.

Why raise flags of surrender?
Each conquered winter.
These should be victory flags.

They see summer carrying
a large scythe. They know
they can't get out of the way.

They wait. They ask pebbles
for help, knowing how silent
pebbles are, how they
don't listen,
even to the Earth.

SOMETIMES I STUMBLE

upon a Virginia bluebell,
right where it's supposed to be,
still a surprise—

I had forgotten how heaven
sometimes comes in
near the ankles.

This flower,
a blue key
that opens the door
to spring.

ON THE PORCH

My rational friend Zondervan says
I shouldn't believe in dragons.
I'd find his argument persuasive—
except a dragon breathes fire
next to him. I ask him, Zondervan,
aren't you a little warm
from the dragon's fire?
He says it's not fire.
It must be a heat wave.

I invite the dragon to live with me.
She stays on the porch.
When Zondervan comes over,
we sit on the glider, drink iced tea.

The dragon, named Clara,
falls asleep to the buzz
of carpenter bees
just beyond the screen.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I've been writing poetry since I was fifteen, heavily influenced by Tommy James and the Shondells and T. Rex. I'm sixty-five now, so that adds up to half a century of poetry writing. I love it as much now as I did then. One reason I read poetry is that it helps me*

to see better, more clearly—and in fresh ways. Poems call me back to them, to reacquaint, become great friends all over again. Different poets influence me at different times. Lucille Clifton. Tomas Tranströmer. DH Lawrence. Anne Sexton. Well, it's a long list.

The poems in this set vary in what inspired them. "Dworns" is a reference I found in a T. Rex song from 1970 called "Dragon's Ear." I wanted to write a poem using that strange word. I like poems that are small character studies, like photographs found in a drawer. "Dulcet Tones" and "On The Porch" are in that vein. The other two are garden poems. The garden is a never-ending source of poetry for me. Gardens aren't just "sweet" or "sentimental." Struggle is what makes a garden.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Kenneth Pobo has a new book forthcoming from Assure Press called Uneven Steven. His work has appeared in: Hawaii Review, The Queer South Anthology, Nimrod, Mudfish, and elsewhere.*

Dating App and other poems...

By Erric Emerson

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*Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: To review all of E. Emerson's ten poems would intrude on what time you have at hand (I'm given to understand, some people call it a wristwatch). "Dali's persistent pocket watch." The first few pieces read like the evolution of an online relationship beginning with **Dating App** "Blasé thumb" "Do you like the abs I once had?" Chaotic cantos in a romantic stream of semi-consciousness; and the aberrated structure of **2nd Date** "I speculate your naked, / stark curvature." And so on. He consequently appears to abandon that plot and turns to a cavalcade of thoughts and ideas, themes and images. "The warmth of deli / counter conversations," **Having A Problem** deals with the struggles of addictions and is beautifully written. There is certainly an uncommon thread throughout Emerson's work. I'm not always quite sure what he is saying but I revel in his words and turns of phrase. "I am the muck / and you're the least / boot that's ever / foot stepped."HS (Spacing is poet's own.)*

Dating App

Blasé thumb

habitual swipe left

fuck-this-shit profiles

or commonplace attributes

Catdad to Dogmom

My beard is brawny

There's just something

in the way you hoist Bud Light

as a catch all

Do you like the abs I once had?

Let's discuss the deal breaker:

Are you allegiant to the Flyers

or the Sixers?

Are you FUN?

Please notice my solidly placed

Like

My embellishment of bells and whistles

How panoramic the scenery to exude

the safety of well off

Let's find a low-key joint

frequented en masse

discuss our sameness

and lose ourselves in

some Dave Matthews karaoke

2nd Date

We s w a y
 to the sounds
 of Indie.
 Eyeballs stung
 by
 bar
 balcony fog
 and strobes
 pulsing out
 tertiary hues.
 Engulfed falsetto man- disembodied
 croon.
 Noise of tambourine spanking hi-hat.
 My
 palms at the V of your hips, chin
 pit-
 stopping shoulder. They play their
 signature-

Your tongue capers
 where my tonsils
 used
 to be.

Your retinas stand-down.
 I embody coy,
 till I don't-

I speculate your naked,
 stark curvature.
 We are all
 giggles,
 agency of

k n o w.
 On the sub, we are
 all over us.
 I pretend we
 haven't slipped
 into

spect
 acular.

That I don'tfuckup-
 such subtle, decades-worth

of try.

XOXO

Hotels line boarded walkways

facing sea, fish-stink swirls
through famed thoroughfares.
Casinos vie for awed spectacle
at dusk, promising chance
or turn arounds. Jitneys wheel
about for meager tips,
mumble local histories.

I watch you watch me
through mess of hair,
Irish-flush of cheek,
wind goads a lazed
summer kiss where
bums piss off piers edge
into rollicking waves.

Turning 30

Stuck on the drudge of numerals
and the sneak of milestone.

How many times have I tried
to Nope the fuck out of here.

Bottles & botched plots
for turned leaf.

Quarter-life crises.

Observe occasions of note
the way my father done-
Quash brain cells
till mind's gloop.

Yet, there's been more
than lethargies,
Dali's persistent pocket watch.
The revolt of staggering
last stands.

There's been stanzas,
sudden-highs of Art.

The oft-sought erotic
slick pangs of love.

And what I've willed
into existence.

Kind acts-
affinity for trash
offsets dumpster fire,
plumed black smoke,
piled ash.

The warmth of deli
counter conversations,
the way elder generation
dialogue the weather
genially.

Do not forget how
the Lynx rogues the snows
on vacant stomach.

How light pillars

appear as skyward

appendages rarely.

The sheer lasting

of grave mounds

through ages.

The ever-present now-

How I came about

by accident.

By the time I discovered

the pleasantry

of Bob Ross videos,

the practical techniques

for tree lines, I was more

than happy

Before a New Annual

I cling to pages my own.

How smear, and bent upon

the *kidding me?* of fucked mental,

my quill: opening-closing of digits,

feathers plucked from own back,

wording of doppelganger,

this- the Back Slider ragged form

dangling scoffs and flitting smirk

over glass-eyed subsistence of ego,

must I remind you of stake?

Highest? Let's swagger across wire
taught between buildings and sway
with the knowledge of nets.

I've made resolution to
bucket-list worst tendency,
blurt sweetness at her,
are you ever not the screech
of owl playing the songbird
at standing water baths?

The impossible bottle ship
shaken to scrap in rage
of vaguely directed slight?

I'm reminded of tugboats
hauling tankers the size of
stadiums- the whole state
of New Jersey is a trigger.

The 4th- the way pastime
is blood ritual of mind these days,
how sparklers, snaps, snakes,

their infinity and glow can go snuff itself
into burnt smoke, how all ceremony
can go right ahead and
walk off nearest cliff, implode
into hilarious, utter meme-moment-

I can go back to middling on a Tuesday,
not be raptured by the idea of
warmth of palms enveloping fingers
with forever rings, a home we built
from derelict scaffolds that teetered
but held in torrents of downpour, found
ourselves- we're staring at walls expecting the paint
not to chip, our whole troop- spewing champagne
at ceiling as if mold doesn't gestate
the moment we collapse into couches,
the world over watches various, million dollar
balls drop slowly to effect, glasses with year
card-boarded over them, the essence of now,

I make good of it- I choose words over blackout,
I'm cagey, like a half-standing up guy asking for change,
I go into the new numeral quiet as a bank line,

I don't watch or know it's happening,
when I wake, sunlight will invade senses
and for once, it won't be the shuddering
and panic-laced doom of-
am I? where, what is, when.

Over-shoulder Looks

We are the mole at the highest level
of each other's governments,

I am the cyanide capsule you chomp
into if caught,

you are the briefcase I've sown
into a mattress, my secret document,

this line of work is erasure
in polaroid.

Having A Problem

Evidence: my esophagus a scorched field,
 my stomach drowned men by the dozen.

 my head a zeppelin flaring,
 my eyes that of a man with a month in the hole.

 my elbows prize fighters in their twilight years,
 my knees child-dirty, my words my own language.

 I construct a mannequin from Vodka fifths
 and used Nicorette gum. I make a bet with myself
 as to who will fall first. I lose.

 I promise myself I'll quit three and a half years ago. Make it four.

Deterrent

Woahh, there.

Stay back.

I am the muck

and you're the least

boot that's ever

foot stepped.

I'm a bit too air siren

and too air raid

and you're too flee

the cobblestones.

You don't need

these westerlies

swamping skiff

midafternoon.

I don't need

not to blow.

You are very sparrow.

This is communal web

of a thousand generation

spider tricks

I've been known

to grow the size

of dinner plates

and pounce

upon little flitting

vibrations.

Universe Ode
For The Bang

Thank you,
expanding existence.

And those who've/

who're historizing what
can never be fully named,
penetrated, sussed.

Whatever irks,
devastates,
is pacified by the musing
of vague dark matter,
the candor of physics,
and daunting luminosity
of quasars.

I am beholden to vastness
and the rarity of us
in it all.

The truest compass
in this patchwork realism.

Sometimes, I don't judge empty
slogans hanging in foyers
as harshly.

Every once and a while
I'm *better* for the sake of it.

Marilyn Manson Ode
For Brian

Much obliged

for the How-to-

Get-Through-High-School-

Guide-for-the-Confused-and-

Proselytized.

And ridiculousness.

Lay Reverend of

Controversy.

prophet of

between the lines.

purveyor of fuck all.

A generation scraped by

on you.

You were the birth

of my jesting
at a small stick
nailed to a tall stick,
horizontally.

THE POET SPEAKS: *This series of poems was inspired by my fallible twenties- failed romances, milestones, fuck ups, attempts at turned-leaf mentality. I wanted to convey finding oneself by taking the path of most resistance. I'm drawn mostly to poets who speak with a heavy dose of colloquialism- from Bukowski to the very talented Sam Sax.*

Poetry is, for me, the way I delve deeply within to find a little magic or witchcraft. It's therapy, it's Zen, it's a way to meld emotion and intellect into digestible snippets and present information more bizarrely than it initially appears. I read poetry to get glimpses of others inner worlds, admiring the craft and innovation of those continually pushing the genre in exciting and unexpected directions.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Eric Emerson has published two collections of poetry, *Counting Days* by Reckless Heron Press (2017) and *Which Way Is Up?* by Coyote Blood Press (2019). He has published extensively in print and online zines, in anthologies, and as features. He served as Poetry Editor and as a founding member of Duende and currently reviews poetry for Aji . His collections and notable poems can be found at erricemerson.com*

LIFE COULD BE OTHERWISE: a collection of moments of grief in the workplace

By Amelia Holzer

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes:

Reality poetry—a hybrid between verse and journalism. It reads like a cleansing reckoning, prose for the purging...I hope it was cathartic, or at least some of the anguish has been cast out...“(I measure the time you’ve been gone the way I used to measure your birthdays).”Many fine lines, I had difficulty choosing my favourites, like:

I’m sorry I don’t know anything else.
I’m sorry for your loss
I’m sorry for their loss
I’m sorry

And

Life continues, the world spins and your artwork is replaced with blank walls.../ Something that tastes a little less like grief and a little more like gratitude.

(Spacing is poet’s own.)

Life Could be Otherwise: a collection of moments of grief in the workplace

June 13th

You’re not supposed to text and drive.

And, I don’t. (Not *really*)

Except on June 13th.

Bumper to bumper traffic on the 91 E.

I chanced a glance at my phone.

J- passed away

Heart stops with the brakes of my car

Fuck.

The text replays on loop for the rest of the drive.

One Year Later

This wasn't what I expected.

I had *plans*.

For a death day party—to make a sad day, not so sad

Karaoke and ice cream

How naïve was I to think things would go accordingly?

This was not the time.

June 3rd

I spent more time than necessary doing my eye make-up that morning

Only for it to stream down my face an hour later.

D- passed away

Documentation

I couldn't breathe, but I made a phone call anyway

Is there any [gasping for air] paperwork that [descends underwater] I need to fill out?

24 hours

Even death—the worst case scenario—was time sensitive.

I had 24 hours to fill out the paperwork.

Questions

Did the client die?

Yes.

How did the client die?

I can't say this professionally. I can't say it in a way that won't keep you up at night.

Were they admitted to the hospital?

I don't know, I wasn't there.

If so, what were they admitted for?

You honestly want me to call a grieving family and ask for more information.

Was any medical attention needed beyond basic first-aid?

Yes.

If so, what?

The works.

Did the client die?

Yes.

Three days

I was told I got "three bereavement days"

Three

Pack up your tears, your memories, your heartache

Put it in a box

Put it in a bag

Take it to your neighbors across town.

And make sure you're back in three days.

A lifetime

A whole person

Thirty eight years

And all I got was three days.

Apologies

I'm sorry, I know she was a big part of the art center.

She was sick for a long time.

Yes, we're all sad here. Yes, we will watch your son/daughter. Yes, I will keep you updated if I notice anything. Yes, she was a really special lady.

I don't know about a service. This happened yesterday. I wish I had more information to give you

I will keep you updated as I know more. Yes, I will send a letter home

I'm sorry I can't give you this information.

We'll miss her here, for sure.

I'm sorry I don't know anything else.

I'm sorry for your loss

I'm sorry for their loss

I'm sorry

Phone calls

Hello, can I please speak to _____?

Im sorry, she's passed away

Phone calls vol. 2

Hello, can I please speak to _____?

She's not here, can I take a message?

Do you know when she'll be back?

She's in the hospital, I'm not sure. Maybe I can help?

Phone calls vol. 3

Hello, can I please speak to ____?

Shes not available, can I take a message

Will she be back tomorrow?

Shes on leave right now; she'll be back in May. How can I help you?

Phone calls vol. 4

Hello, can I please speak to ____?

She's out today

Will she be back tomorrow?

Yes, I can have her give you a call then

Conversation

How do people die?

Our bodies stop working

....your batteries lose charge?

Yeah.

Blue

Zayn was playing right before I found out you died.

I need

Somebody to

Love me

Blue

I skip it every time.

The Plague

Theres a story in the Bible, isn't there?

God sent the plague for one reason or another to punish people.

I'm still wondering. What did we do to deserve:

Fleas

Raccoons

And two deaths.

Details

I asked for details, when perhaps I shouldn't have

I wanted to hear them

To make sure it was real

To have someone to blame

And then all at once, I wish I hadn't heard them

The details are all I think about

(Im looking forward to the day I stop thinking of you writhing on the concrete and can instead see you playing basketball)

Taylor Swift

Shake it off, shake it off.

The soundtrack for the next month as I attempted to "shake off" the bad days

The sad days

The overwhelmingly quiet days

The days I left feeling hollow

Because there was a hole about her size in the studio and an empty office that was an all too prevalent reminder that she was there

And now she wasn't.

Shake it off, shake it off

I told myself I could dance it out.

That this would do the trick. I could shake my worries away

The drums would fade out in the song and soon be replaced by a phone ringing.

Asking for her

I press repeat

Shake it off, shake it off

I-I-I shake it off, shake it off.

Tr(easure)ash

Cleaning out her office once she passed brought back memories of cleaning out my grandmothers home.

Why is it that every older woman has a tendency to hoard kleenex?

Paperwork

Condiments

Dried out pens

Cotton swabs

When you've camped out in one place for 29 years, trash is bound to accumulate.

Greeting cards

Candles, small gifts.

Artwork

Framed photographs

When you've camped out in one place for 29 years, treasure is bound to accumulate

Interviews

An older woman came to interview for the open position

Are you healthy? I thought

We can't take another death around here

It couldn't be the reason I wouldn't hire her

But it was absolutely the reason I didn't want to hire her.

Forgiveness

I keep telling myself I should have known.

Because in all the trainings I've been through in my life, the message was clear: behavior is communication

So I should have known.

I should have done more.

I should have made another phone call, another report.

I knew! It was right there!

But you didn't. There's no way you could have known.

Statute.

After 31 days I am no longer allowed to cry at his empty desk.

I will stop wearing sports jerseys to work

After 31 days, it is okay to let someone else use his colored pencils; to throw out the nail polish bottle and the uneaten pretzel; to delete his name from the sign-in sheet.

31 days and the knot in my stomach will go away provided I learn how to forgive myself (*this is harder*)

Exhaustion

A clients caregiver approached me, and said he was “tired of hearing about J-”.

His grief was exhausting for him

I repeat: his grief was exhausting for *him*

Trauma

Something as simple as a greeting card became triggering

Is she okay?

...Its a birthday card

Oh! I thought she was sick.

Trauma vol. 2

I'm sick, I can't come in today

That's fine, thanks for letting me know!

No, no, you don't understand. My throat. I'm worried.

Like J-? I can't be sick like her

De-install.

I am hesitant to take down your artwork.

It feels like taking down your life. The second the art comes down from the walls, is the second your presence starts fading.

(is it bad that I've grown accustomed to your ghost?)

I walk into that room and things hurt a little less. A little color, a little movement—my troubles get smaller.

Is that how you felt making these?

Life continues, the world spins and your artwork is replaced with blank walls.

Make room for some(body) thing else?

Something that tastes a little less like grief and a little more like gratitude.

Trying to remember there is room for everyone (everything) here.

Forgetting

I almost forgot

(And I couldn't decide if this was what "moving on" looks like

Or just an accident caused by a full schedule

And a lot of distraction)

But then I remembered

It the 3rd.

And it seemed so silly. Because you're still everywhere

I couldn't forget if I tried.

Candles

Your birthday would've been this month

Do we still celebrate?

Blow out the candles. Make a wish.

Light a candle on an altar. Make some art.

Hope you're doing just fine.

(I measure the time you've been gone the way I used to measure your birthdays).

Reason

I started drawing magazine covers after you died

First to remember you

Then because it brought me joy. [express yourself]

It didn't occur to me that other people would like them.

Tan France thought I was amazing.

Karlie Kloss double tapped.

I don't believe everything happens for a reason.

Because I would much rather see you dancing in the studio than see "likes" on an Instagram post.

But it happened.

Its happening.

You're still the whole reason.

Community

Is it bad that I found comfort in knowing someone else was crying too?

That I wasn't *insane* for wanting to leave the office door closed

A little bit longer

And I wasn't *naïve* for refusing to move his desk

Just in case he ended up coming back.

It wasn't just my candle on the altar.

It was a forest fire.

It wasn't just my tears using the Kleenex

It was a community

Little Things

Its all about the little things.

Its about the people you knew better than they knew themselves

It was about how much they were missed when they left.

Taking with them those little things that you loved *so much*

The ones you miss the most

Because they're the things that just can't be replaced.

Little Things vol. 2

Vogue

Madonna

I think about the time you found a jersey in a goodwill

And got so excited, you decided to strip and put it on

Right then

And there

Hot chips

Nail polish

I think about how happy you were

Just to be here.

Little Things vol 3.

I would give anything just to get one more high five from you

Band-aids

There are no magic fixes.

There is not one grand solution to "finishing" grief

There is just a bunch of *little things*

Strung together

That make it okay

Memory

I took out your sketchbook the other day

The sketchbook you were working on

That's unfinished

Because you had every intention of coming back

You left it on your desk

You left for the day

You left this world

And for the first time, I didn't cry.

I just hope you're finishing it

Somewhere

THE POET SPEAKS: *Life Could Be Otherwise* is a collection of poems inspired by the life-experience of having two people die within the same year at work. I work as a mental health clinician, and much like doctors and other helping professions, sometimes we lose. As a therapist, we have the privilege of doing long-term work and can get to know individuals over months, sometimes years. Their sessions and presence become routines in our own lives, which makes these losses tricky and devastating. I am drawn towards poetry that tells a story and feels authentic. My writing is influenced by April Green and Tyler Knott Gregson, as well as the raw voices of countless celebrity memoirs I have read over the years (Amy Poehler, Mindy Kaling, Misty Copeland...). Until this year, poetry and writing was never a form of expression I was inclined to do (though I am an avid reader). I am a traditional-turned-digital artist and expressing myself through imagery and movement were always the go-to. But, when tragedy hits, you search for words to say the difficult things for you and for the first time, I couldn't find a single text that was able to articulate everything I was experiencing. I decided to write in hopes of providing texts and "helping" someone else.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Amelia Holzer is a practicing art therapist and artist based in Los Angeles, California. She holds a Masters in Art Therapy and Counseling from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a Bachelors degree in Psychology from USC (Fight On!). This is her first foray into writing, aside from research publications primarily centered around grief, death, dying, and how loss impacts daily life. When she is not writing, she enjoys making art and hiking.

THREE PROSE POEMS

By Eliza Minski

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: Minski, Minski, Minski: I haven't read it in years, so don't challenge me, but for some reason Eliza works reminds me of Pirandello's, 'Six Characters in Search of an Author' ...well you've found her. (Spacing is poet's own.)

Miss High and Mighty

The girl was always threatening to run away, saying that she'd disown the family. Can you imagine? She was uppity that way. She acted like we were horrible people, as if she was on a shelf above us. Always talking about going to college, like she was better than the rest of us. College this, and college that. Miss High and Mighty - Miss Highfalutin, that's what we called her. Well, you know what we told her? We told her that she'd never amount to anything.

She finally left us. Not one of us can admit how much we miss her.

Dour Weather

The weather is off. The atmosphere is burning. Inside their oily houses, bodies sag. The world shrugs, creases its brow before turning its face away. The heat is vinegar. The sun is orange and glowing and laminated in plastic. The cottony snow tastes like fish. Metallic clouds produce pock-marked rain.

Leaving

She hadn't left the house in two years. During the mornings, she looked through the blinds at the street below. In the afternoons, she watched *Judge Judy*. In the evenings, she took a hot bath and turned on her electric blanket. She hadn't left the house in two years.

She hadn't left the house in two years. Her husband had died. They had been married a long time. The grocery delivery left the groceries on her porch. She hadn't left the house in two years.

She hadn't left the house in two years. Her daughter lived far away on the East Coast. Her friends had given up on her. Her neighbors had stopped asking about her. She hadn't left the house in two years.

She hadn't left the house in two years. She liked it inside where it was quiet. She found the walls peaceful. She watched the light changing. She hadn't left the house in two years. One day she left the house. She took tentative steps down the stairs. The bright light hurt her eyes. The noises frightened her. She hadn't left the house in two years.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I've been writing since I was in high school, filling notebooks that must number into the hundreds. There are daily entries about what I'm feeling, or what I'm working on to be a better person, or I write about mundane subjects like the weather - posts about it once again being cloudy in San Francisco. Exciting things like that. I'll write poems in my notebooks and the beginnings of essays and short stories. I never particularly know where I'm going when I write but just let it take me there. I suppose I could say that in *Miss High and Mighty*, I was playing around with showing how a highly dysfunctional family is cut off from showing love, or in *Dour Weather* I could claim that this was my response to global warming, images strung together to portray a sick world, or that in *Leaving*, it was all about an exaggeration of the healing process. But of course I never really know what I'm doing and I like it that way for the discovery that writing offers. Mostly I'll just start with an image that pops into my head, like vinegary heat, and take it from there.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *I am a 73 year old woman living and writing in San Francisco, California. I only started sending out my work about five years ago. Since then, my work has appeared in Entropy, Poets Reading the News, the Eunoia Review as well as many other publications. In 2017, I was a finalist in the San Francisco Writers Conference contest, in adult fiction. That same year, I was a finalist in UK's Fortnight Poetry Contest.*

Slam Wail

By Clarice Hare

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:

Here is an epic, enraged, engaging epistle. Take a sip from this stanza “I want to tear off the sarcoline / platform heels I always wear with these / tiny cocktail dresses, and stiletto slam / your skull. Knock your eyes off her!” I’m not sure which finishing school Ms. Hare attended, but it sounds like a dorm worth sneaking into. “milk that you’ve missed since / mommy shoved you off?” Believe me it gets better in its exquisite exasperations. Clarice sounds like a lamb not to be silenced, but who would dare try? She has declared herself “neurodivergent.” I too often feel similarly but it is admittedly self-diagnosed. She certainly exercises her spirit with a vibe most heatedly scribed. HS (Spacing is poet’s own.)

Slam Wail

“I am black! Black! I scream, my hair
drying into talons.”

I want to tear off the sarcoline
platform heels I always wear with these
tiny cocktail dresses, and stiletto slam
your skull. Knock your eyes off her!

Can you seriously sit there right
beside me and not feel how the

hotness rolls off me like hot
batter from a sizzling and
screeching dryer? Pouring down my
neck in incarnadine channels of
Clarice Hare

Slam Wail, page 2, continue stanza

milk that you've missed since
mommy shoved you off?

I know you're grown up to
full attention—the blue washes out, but you
have eyes like lapis lazuli. More precious
than pearls!—that you'd cast before
her, and not me?

When I can make for you cerulean days, or
a coquelicot butterfly southward go in the
water's wake; I can make your
midnight amaranthine!

Can I light your skeleton? Oh, just
consent!

I'll whisk you off to Thailand, Zen
 juice to the face, hot bath of porphyry
 frangipani overlooking Sagarmatha. We'll do L.A.,

Clarice Hare

Slam Wail, page 3, continue stanza

we'll do Shanghai, we'll do Formentera,
 we'll do Firenze, we'll do Paris. De la France
 à l'île Maurice pour l'hiver, oui.

You'll do me and I'll do me on plages,
 playas, spiagge, pantai, planes—
 first class all the way.

I know my anthropologie, does she?

I'll shake you up like a soda can and
 pour you like champagne.

I'll warn you, though, I'm not a
 bottomless well of fulvous sunshine—I'm
 a shiny rumble, a taut, crossfit
 eburnean rock-tumble, blowing
 you to hell and back and pummeling

when you stumble. I'll hit you
with the audio equivalent
of a full-blown self-published
novel.

Clarice Hare

Slam Wail, page 4, begin new stanza

I am the green-eyed beast, I'm
Smaug, I'm smaragdine.

I'll spit your glaucous worm juice back
in your face till you beg for it like I'm
your mom.

I'll paint your portrait in caput mortuum,
spotlight your dick privileges in bastard-amber,
dress the ashes of your self-esteem in bias-cut
flame-of-burnt-brandy organza.

Your affinity for my feminist aphorism I'll twist and
twist harder until your face turns absinthe.

I shall bestow a lyrical baguette-

meet-head to your puddin' here—see if she's
all “Drink it, fuckin' whites!”, or if she'd punch back.

I could forget I was white, out of sight, while I fight

Clarice Hare

Slam Wail, page 5, continue stanza

her for the right to you—Wobble-Downward

Twister, sisters after misters, how to take

a mummy out of the jungle and paint

Clarice Hare

Slam Wail, page 3, continue stanza

the shades of my dark life with his

ground gout—ooohhh, I

could just—

Ow! Fuck these shoes! Hey,

wait up!

THE POET SPEAKS: *As a neurodivergent person whose wonky brain functions far better on a concrete, intuitive level than an abstract, analytical one, it is difficult for me to describe the genesis and gestation of my writings. In most cases, everything I wish to (or, quite often, can) communicate about my poetry is contained within the poem itself. I am also gravely cautioned by*

*W.H. Auden's statement (opening the forward to *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*) that "[i]t is a sad fact about our culture that a poet can earn much more money writing or talking about his art than he can by practicing it." And since these days I have a perfectly secure, if deadly dull white-collar job (which I'm sure would be quite far down any list most of my past acquaintances might make of fates likely to befall me), I anticipate few incentives to try and grab such money. (If that's even possible, because if the dude thought the writing business was hard in his day...)*

My obligatory kicking over the traces done, I can say that "Slam Wail" was inspired by the many amateur coffee-house poetry slams I attended during my college years, and is a sort of amalgamation of multiple fuzzily remembered sociosexual interactions I observed at these events. The speaker is a young, upper-class white woman—probably a poet herself—who's gotten herself sexily but inappropriately up in a short cocktail dress and sky-high platform heels, and is now watching huffily as the guy she's set her sights on grows increasingly enamored of the black female poet currently on stage.

The first two lines are her scornful mental parody of this poet's proud, aggressive words (with a nasty stab at her hair thrown in); the rest is all her. With mounting desperation, she tries to convince the guy that she's hotter than the black woman reading (which she doubtless is, by mainstream American standards...but that's probably not what he's going by); that she'd be better in bed; that she can take him on fancy vacations she naturally assumes the other woman couldn't afford. Realizing that he actually seems to be attracted to the black woman's expression of strength and aggression, she tries to assert her own—rather ludicrously. She even lunges, briefly and desperately, into rap-like rhythms. In the last two lines, just as her pique threatens to demolish all her attempts at eloquence, she is forced to abandon them anyway, and scurry after her target in her impractical shoes as he goes, most likely, to compliment the poet on her reading, and invite her out for drinks afterward.

Throughout the poem, I had fun incorporating various obscure and archaic color words, as the speaker assumes it's her whiteness, with its concomitant associations of blandness, that's failing to interest the guy, rather than her personality. (My personal favorite is "flame-of-burnt-brandy"—I would totally buy a flame-of-burnt-brandy organza dress if I could find one!) "Slam Wail" as a whole is intended to poke fun at white artists (and white people in general) who resent the perceived incursion of POC into domains they see as theirs, and for taking things that they want (because the speaker, with questionable feminism, really does view a dick as a thing). The title, while indeed referring to an internal wail being let loose at a slam, is also a homophone of "slam whale", which is a derogatory term used for an overweight woman in certain corners of the internet; here, its use to title a torrent of female-on-female derision is a statement of how sexism and looksism—while arguably stemming from patriarchy—are not confined to men.

All of my poetry flows from an inborn love of language and of writing, which—though not encouraged by my family—remained a psychological lifeline to me from a difficult childhood, through many far more difficult episodes of adulthood, and into my current, relatively dull life. I have written in the best of times and the worst of times; in the latter, it has helped me quite

literally to survive. “Slam Wail” in particular can be traced all the way back to two humorously vicious persona poems by Robert Browning, “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” and “The Laboratory: Ancien Régime”, which provided my revelation, as a first-generation college freshman, that poetry could express more than prettiness, pleasantness, and piety—it could be a vehicle for personal venom more succinct and concentrated than fiction.

*While my subjects and images are the products of that wonky brain of mine and the experiences I have subjected it to, the language in which I struggle to express them aspires toward the irregular yet arresting rhythms of Marianne Moore and the subtle internal and slant rhymes of Sylvia Plath. Many of my poems come from the falling-apart notebooks and journals I’ve lugged with me on my life’s journey like normal people lug clothes, furniture, spouses, and children: some lifted almost entire from the stained, fading pages, others substantially reworked. Still others, like “Slam Wail”, were written more recently but drawn from past experiences. I’m only now taking my first timid stabs at publication, and am grateful to appear in *Fleas on the Dog*.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: *Clarice Hare prefers to remain a mystery, as anyone who knew her in previous phases of her life—before settling into comfortable obscurity in the southern United States with an assortment of furry and scaly pets and a single, occasional, though admittedly gorgeous younger lover—would understand.*

THREE POEMS

By Ashante Ford

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: 'I was immediately entertained.' I do believe that the bestselling book is still the Bible. It is tricky for a pagan to read much without its reference and reverence. I cannot mistrust it as an acronym 'basic instructions before leaving earth' and I am nothing if not pat. Just one sorry man who consistently confuses caritas with cupid; but, no doubt, charity is best in all its forums. Let's allow Ford to engage us further, she is an angel without saying and thankfully not unspoken... Going too far is my worst fate and best feature. HS (Spacing is poet's own.)

This is What it feels Like to have Long arms:

Sometimes,

I feel like I can fly.

Like

If I stretched out my arms far enough,

Elongated my biceps and

Dislocated my shoulders,

My arms would fall far past my feet and finally be floppy enough to float up and down...

Touching the ground,

Then pushing the tips of my fingers into clouds at a rapid speed.

Then after that,

I would sprout Golden Feathers starting from the backs of my calves,

Up to the outer corners of my trapezius muscles,

Wings.

And after that,

I would fly so high,

That when I looked down,

Nothing but a glorious array of mixed colors would entice my eyes for the moment.

I'm so jealous of the Birds,

They really see shit like that every day.

-Cloud surfing, or resurfacing?

It Makes Sense if it Makes Sense

I ran to the other side of my mind; it was a poor attempt-- running headfirst into escapism.

I thought I could lose them, these trifling ideals of love and what it means but

I have this fixation for romance.

The tendency to fall into and out of something I can't really grasp

A concept that deters my complex individuality

An ideal.

Something to think about when I'm thinking and something to need when I'm needing

Like attention, it alters my state of mind.

I find solace in love poems written for people I don't know.

I find solace in music, especially when I listen to something sweet.

It's interesting to see how love pans out, the different variations dance around in my head and the contrast of them all stop,

Then look at me.

They peep through the holes left inside my mind whenever somebody new takes a piece.

I fall into a distraught perception of myself as I try to unlearn that being alone is not good,

My conscious eats me up while I'm still looking for a meal

Searching for something

Searching...

My eyes become test tubes as I seek something to please them.

My ears become instruments as I tune them into all the right words and briefly skip over the wrong ones, a new you placed in front of me.

My mouth becomes a tool, maybe for sucking the life out of you or vice versa but we need this to work, it's communication.

My heart crawls upwards towards my brain and takes a seat right on top of it-- pulling the levers and making me think in Romantic subtitles and grand gestures,

The American thing.

I fall into susceptibility, into illusion, into fantasy.

All the while, forgetting to fall into myself.

Forgetting to take my own hand.

Forgetting me.

Forgetting.

Searching.

Convoluting love.

Love.

Wishful, whimsical, beautiful, passionate, love...

They don't teach you how to harbor that for yourself.

-Sentiments from a Pisces

A Mishap.

They left. Just like that,

They were gone.

They came charging into my garden, leaving footprints that are now embedded in my heart.

Left me baffled in storms of uncertainty and snipped me away like a

Thin piece of thread,

It hurt.

Being with them felt surreal--

In my times of susceptibility

I began Letting them charm me...

With their intellect and sometimes more than that.

Filling my head with beautiful compositions of "I love you's" and birthday cards

With 'To my dearest...' carved in the opening like a

Witches stick engraving my name on a Tombstone--

They left.

Tugging you by the collar--

Lifting the levers they bolted down into your back,

They took. Leaving you without a brain and me without a

Friend.

-it's for the best

THE POET SPEAKS: *I wrote my first poem when I was in the 4th grade. Now, I'm in my Junior year of college and I still can't stop writing these damn poems. They came in the form of*

a butterfly and I ran off with it after my classmate gave me eight words of encouragement: "That was pretty good for a fourth-grader." I guess my head got big and stayed big from that moment to now. I've seen my poems transform along with my body, my spirit and my mind. I have a fixation for beautiful words; something about them just makes my heart smile. My poems are birthed from sorting out my emotions and from experience. My style is influenced by a mixture of Emily Dickinson, Maya Angelou and E.E. Cummings, but also inspired by the little voices in my head of course. When I wrote these three poems in particular, they were all during different stages in my life: when I realized I could fly, when I thought I had fallen (hopelessly) in love and when I got my feelings hurt on some cold evening. The poems are just long-winded explanations of all that.

AUTHOR BIO: *"Journalist, singer, author and poet- Ashante Ford is a woman who believes that the complexity of words woven through scriptures can empower millions. Someone who laughs at the world's distraught problems and abides by the four agreements. A queer woman who lives for love and understands that the route to happiness lies between the spirit and the soul. Here lies the words of a woman, unfiltered and extraordinary. Her work can be found on Sad Girl Review and on her personal blog; spirituallyajar.blog"*

The Spirit Inside the Tree

By Reed Venrick

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes:

The one that got away: Here is a submission overlooked from our fifth issue. Yes IT can happen (at least to the least of Flea's editors). I guess the best imagery is meant to stick, and Venrick did. I am one of his "careless crew." It reeks of untimely testosterone and the timelessness of trees. "—with legs / for trunks and wrists for limbs / and fresh finger leaves." ... "so the amputation begins." So what's stopping you? Read Venrick. HS (Spacing is poet's own.)

The Spirit Inside the Tree

A lumber-loading truck cranks up,
dirty, diesel clouds pouring out, and
standing beside, a careless crew
and a bulky, sweating lumberjack.

His company logo stretched across
his back—sharpens his chain—with
a T wrench—screws tight the bar;
gazes up at the 100 year old red oak,

His trigger finger twitching, his ears
deafened, muffled, blocked—He
cannot hear the vibration of fear,
nor can he feel the trembling inside

with arms outspread in branches,
the body locked inside an un-
phenomenon design, matching
what is not understood when

life overlaps the Venn—with legs
 for trunks and wrists for limbs
 and fresh finger leaves. With a voice
 growing faint, the living spirit inside

the trunk tries to warn the men,
 who stand outside, but the jack,
 who has run and gunned shrlll-
 buzzing chainsaws for years can
 not hear, so the amputation begins.

The Poet Speaks:

This poem was inspired by “The Vitruvian Man,” envisioned by the Roman architect, Vitruvius; later emulated by Da Vinci. As a hiker in forests, I sometimes see trees shaped with trunks and arms outspread, like a human in abstract. My key poetic influence, at least in terms of style, is Yeats.

I emphasize concision, and allow non-essential words only to serve rhythm. I prefer to write poems over fiction and CNF because poems emphasize not just message but also foreground language.

AUTHOR’S BIO: *Reed Venrick lives in Central Florida; often writes poems on themes of nature, and the symbiotic relationship between humans and the natural world.*

First Run of 2018 and other poems...

By James Croal Jackson

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:

Who? Other than a poet, would write about a toothache rather than have it fixed? Jackson is a dear soul. I only know this because he keeps resubmitting his work; but he remains as good or better than most taken on the fly...still he persists, and a fine candidate for a guest /guessed / ghost poet editor. 'Surry down to [his] stoned soul picnic' It's Jackson...I only write in two dimensions—paper and print... But he doesn't... "charred remnants / your ghosts live" Don't dare to miss 'Love in the Time of Snapchat' or 'Autumn' either...HS (Spacing is poet's own.)

First Run of 2018

Mid-June. Don't judge.

The list of ways to better
myself always melts off
the tongue: be grateful, eat
carrots, exercise. Period.

Used to be I ran for courtship
but now I think how settled I sound,
gliding over the sidewalk's grass clippings,
a product of suburban domestication.

Stones jangle in my stomach
as they do at the start
of each new thing: I'm leaving
this city, finally— magenta

in the sunset peeking out
from possible storm clouds.

It rained earlier. And at the end
of my route I'll be a lake

packing for the move. Boxes

to open later— memories
of transformation, every
day running from
the younger self to now.

Viola

In the grass, at the top of a steep hill
off Route 28, a viola lays in open case.

Panes rattle from the wind, cold
shivers up and down the spine

of the landscape, a cartography
lacking names of streets I know

I walk each day without
any kind of passion.

The Lion Takes Pride at the Salon

To have a mane
like the lion—
long, luscious,
and fertile.
Instead
I roam
the countryside
with black carpet
of hair. I
could not sleep
last night
between
car windows,
cracked-open,
in the void

separating
 the grasslands
 and savannahs,
 summer air
 a suffocation.
 At least
 I still look
 enough
 like myself
 to pass
 for myself.
 In Los Angeles
 I was vulnerable
 to indifferent
 eyes, took shit
 personally
 when I should
 have dug
 my claws
 into the sand,
 said *I look
 enough
 like myself.*

Rural Restlessness

Now, when I am shackled in my mother's home
 in the middle of the woods, with nothing to do

 but write & fuck & consume, especially the day
 after Thanksgiving, when not frigid enough to stay

 inside forever but it *is* frigid, I want to roam
 what seems the unattainable world, missing

 the skyscrapers I hate & the open seasons over
 Pittsburgh & the rows of rowdy bars I get wild in.

I want to drive my Ford Fiesta up the hill in shadow
& never come back down, accelerate to a hundred

and become the blur of pines, windows
down, forest mornings so thick with unease

I want to be shackled by trees & serve
the unattainable world the oxygen it lacks.

July 4th, 2019

We cook corn over the mountains—
all are doomed. Smoke billows
from grill to everlasting wildness.
I take a pan and season trees
with what I deem appropriate:
water, oil, roots. I bring
my shovel and dig
a deep hole for the world.

This Morning You Texted Me

Years ago there was a normalcy
we documented. The theater

rife with real life. Now
the beacon: a speck

of light on an electronic
device. So cyborg. Brain connected

to a netherworld of litigious
desire, purple forest of thirst

in the leaves. I am allergic
to attachment, instead a soft clay

to be passed
on the highway, tires

roaring toward
a familiar entryway.

Small-Town Comedian

maroon cardigan against brick—
I fade into the city's
aging architecture. chameleon
piled on comedians,

a mountain of forced laughter.
haven't found success
outside my tiny town, a steady
hand to click a shutter
to capture a memory, as bland
as they were, just few
in the crowd staring vacantly
at nervous laughter
that filled small stages, how
the water glass steady
on the stool began to tremble
as I lifted it to drink,
how thirsty one can be for a
reaction, how blank
faces stamp eyelids, present
still with closed eyes

trying to impress you

trying to impress you through stained

window you are more cat the way
you watch the world & react a hunter
I am more insect so full my own buzzing
an *artist* I take mustard splotches on glass
& call it canvas but I show you &
see your eyes already bumblebee

I attempt to translate the goo in my brain into something both palatable and relatable whilst contemplating my grim employment prospects. Zigzag, zigzag go the roads in a city I never expected to inhabit. Pittsburgh's hills are steep. I expect at a certain acceleration at an erroneous angle my Ford Fiesta will slow-motion backflip and scrape the top side metal against the gravel and I'll drop to where I started. You ever read Catch-22? I keep picturing the pointlessness of the flying. The missions, day-to-day. Figure eights inside the clouds and never further. I can't with supervisors. Hierarchy, don't tell me what to do. I will, though. Mop, drive, fetch, catch, *good little doggy*. I can barely keep my tongue in mouth. Can barely control my saliva.

Why the Butterflies

just a little simple contact
inconsequential fist bump
against the knuckle of

your silver bling fingers
the rain has ceased
underneath this bridge

and you polish your new
tattoo of blue butterfly wings
you say the ink is peeling off

and I get it how something
beautiful can quickly turn
into blears of dark how long

it took to learn you to get
the rhythm of you we have
been cruising through the

busy streets of Pittsburgh
in constant contact swerving
to avoid listless walkers

and even that I understand
how I wander through the
world underneath the cig

smoke sky not caring that
the secondhand will kill
me when I choose to inhale

THE POET SPEAKS: *I am a little obsessed with the retention of memories. Poetry, for me, serves in the way journaling used to: personal accounts of my life that will always somehow be meaningful for me, and depictions of my life in that moment. In that way, my poems are my skin: flecks of remembrance and perception that have floated off into the river, landing— hopefully— on someone else's shore.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *James Croal Jackson (he/him) is a Filipino-American poet. He has a chapbook, *The Frayed Edge of Memory* (Writing Knights Press, 2017), and poems in *DASH*, *Capsule Stories*, and *Ghost City Review*. He edits *The Mantle Poetry* (themantlepoetry.com). Currently, he works in film production in Pittsburgh, PA. (jimjakk.com)*

3 Poems

By Michele L. Austin

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: *This poet writes, ‘My poems are not double spaced because the spacing I chose impacts the meaning.’ (Now I’m used to being maneuvered, motivated and manipulated.) It might make it a little harder to read between the lines, but don’t fret, the words are even better yet: “Consequences drift / lazily, untangling / gelid webs, deep within...” And just in case you’re not enticed, scroll down to **LOVES ME NOT:** “This box / Particolored allure / Sempiternal soul” ...I’m not quite sure what it means, but I love it, read on. I am forever fond of jaded romance...it is a contradiction that transcends a world of hyperbole, paralleled paradoxes and preys on ox-like-morons. Was this more me than her? HS (Spacing is poet’s own.)*

SPRING SOLSTICE RUMBA

Consequences drift
 lazily, untangling
 gelid webs, deep within
 dusty cranial interweavings, Green
 goddess sprouts soft, palest emerald
 fingers. Calyxes
 irrupt! First flash
 imprinting, fragile hyacinths
 blush. Burst! Billions
 efflorescent, all
 chromaticity.

Subtle zephyr strokes
 my visage, first awakening
 a perianth of laurel. It stirs
 floral faces; they rock
 the rhythm. It stirs
 cogitation, swims

lazily, this impudent breeze
 discontent, swims
 crazily. Coquette vamp.

Memories caressed
 by fresh current, let go
 of berths in time, abandon
 timidity, and waft again
 amidst unripe mind music, weaving
 in crevices and corners of
 id, mixing, mingling, rallying
 vernal cognizance, reviving
 me, reviving
 salubrity long dormant.
 Spring's terpsichorean egress
 imbued.

I DON'T CRY

Only people
 you don't know are supposed to die.
 Today a tightrope
 circus man fell. I hoped. Maybe he didn't
 want to live. I don't know
 him. I didn't cry.

Today I know Granddad
 will die. Soon. I hoped. I'm sure
 he loves
 to live. But he didn't
 die, yet. I didn't cry.

Ruthless fortune, all
 I could carry
 For one day, today
 Death
 would not let me rest. Just a girl,
 seven, once

lived next door. She was four,
 I fourteen, and we
 were friends. She
 moved away. Space astray. But I
 remembered her
 sometime. Today affinity
 expired. My tiny friend
 died.

Circus man, I indite
 your elegy. Granddad
 has time, still time, still
 time.

My little friend, seven
 nimble years are forever
 expired ... forever.
 Expired.

I don't beg for my
 life, I wish only
 to understand. Maybe I
 do understand. Maybe that's why
 I don't cry.

LOVES ME NOT

This box
 Particolored allure
 Sempiternal soul

This box
 Confidential compartments
 Verboten chambers

This box
Is not yours

These keys
Are not yours

These keys
Tangled, bespangled
Dangling, jangling

These keys
Coaxing, cajoling
Inveigling, invading

Avaunt!

THE POET SPEAKS: *Poems are such fascinating literary critters. Their endless leeway won't sit quietly in a corner but, rather, demands continual meddling and tweaking. With a handful of thoughtfully arranged syllables, a work can ping every note on the heartstring scale.*

I've only dabbled seriously in this genre recently because prior effort was expended wrestling with fickle talent. My focus has been writing humorous personal essays and nonfiction articles. Poetry is newfound deliciousness.

Penning a poem feels like painting a canvas with splashes from the color spectrum. Broad blueberry brush strokes with smatterings of sangria and an occasional black blot. Voila.

My inspiration seems to be random thought (for which there is no shut-off switch), random emotion, or mismatched words that insist I stop and play. Reality will sneak in and commandeer the process, though, as in "I Don't Cry."

I'm not a follower of rules, structures, forms, formats, styles, genres, mores or people. I do worship rebels, both literary and societal. I read whatever attracts my inner magnet, and I write whatever ends up on the page.

AUTHOR BIO: *I grew up in the frozen tundra, Wisconsin USA, and relocated to sunny Florida in early adulthood to escape the winter blues.*

My passion, besides writing, is world travel (40 countries & counting), with an eventual goal of becoming a homeless wanderer.

I'm an Ultimate Killer Sudoku freak (I dream number grids), an avid ballroom dancer, and an alto sax player in a performing doo wop quartet.

I'm easily distracted from worthwhile projects by the call of karaoke.

BACK TO EARTH and other poems...

By Daniel J. Fitzgerald

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: Dan Fitzgerald poetry either reduced my vibration or lowered its frequency. It's not likely I understand either—(I may give up all my prescribed pills), but he's like sleeping with a cat, living next to an ocean or cuddling in a blanket, on a Saturday night, fresh out of the dryer... when you have nothing else to do. I bathed in his rhythms and basked in his words. Tell me if you do? Wait, Fleas is not interactive, thank goodness. I can only wish for a need to know, or hear back. Scretch the wretched retch of the north...HS.

Back To Earth

I climbed the highest mountain
to stand naked for all to see.
Looking out and over and all around,
there was no one who wanted
to know if it was me.

Math

Her hand lays
 in my lap,
absent-mindedly counting to one.
Too bad, I think sleepily,
she isn't better at math.

Cost Of Living

I used to sell
my body by the hour.
Now I am just hoping
to be an organ donor.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I started writing as a form of memoir/journal/release. I found it difficult to write in regular sentences, so I kept mostly to poetry. I try always to have music playing, just whatever fits the day. The combination of music and writing helps me find those words and sounds that inspire everyone through their lives.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Dan lives quietly in Pontiac, Illinois, tending to home and garden. His poems have been published in The Writer's Journal, PKA Advocate, Nomad's Choir and many others. His work is also included in several anthologies. He has written off and on for a number of years.*

RELINQUISHING GUILT

By Stephen Mead

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:

Well this reads like a lovely laundry list of a longing for lethargy. Mister Mead just might be my most favorite motivational speaker. "the room fill with / tuna cans." "Guilt is crabgrass. / Set goats loose." Note to self, Stephen Mead is a man after my own heart. HS

Relinquishing Guilt

Call in sick to work.
 Ignore bills.
 Leave the bed unmade.
 Lounge around, eavesdropping
 on neighbors.
 Hear just music playing.
 Top 40. Blue grass.
 Put on jazz.
 Harmonize.
 Awed squirrels
 sneak a peek.
 This is luxury.
 Pile laundry.
 Let senses slip,
 the room fill with
 tuna cans.
 Penalize anxiety.
 Invite the cats in.
 Guilt is crabgrass.
 Set goats loose.

THE POET SPEAKS: *"Relinquishing Guilt" is, as they say, based on a true experience and written way before this current Covid-19 pandemic. Like many I was raised to religiously believe "sloth" was a sin, and a poor work ethic akin to a poor moral character. This of course resulted*

in a lot of overcompensating and a certain hypersensitivity in regards to "I did not do enough. I could have done better." I might have these thoughts even in a toxic and unhealthy work environment, thus the poem is about kicking such self-flagellation to the curb and recognizing the importance of mental health days.

My stylistic influences are actually more rooted in prose, from fantastical to memoirs/history. Reading especially is like life blood and oxygen to me, and the writing is more of a genetic mutation finding its outlet.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Stephen Mead is an Outsider multi-media artist and writer. Since the 1990s he's been grateful to many editors for publishing his work in print zines and eventually online. He is also grateful to have managed to keep various day jobs for the Health Insurance. Currently he is resident artist/curator for The Chroma Museum, artistic renderings of LGBTQI historical figures, organizations and allies predominantly before Stonewall, <https://thestephenmeadchromamuseum.weebly.com/>*

Misspellings and other things

By Samantha Barnes

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Cheek is not without currency here (our meager egos cannot resist): Samantha cites the editorial staff in her vary verse. Pinch says, "The girl has pluck." Here's Barnes "Hmm, contrary creature that I be, / I threw my hesitations, / under the mulberry tree." Who can resist there name in print...

Misspellings and other things

By Samantha Barnes

Barnes is a name oft
miss-spelt in my country.
Without the 'e'.
And miss pronounced Baroness,
as in Your Highness.
So do I dare
do this?

To open my ruminations
to your scrutiny and to those of keen mind,
with more extensive vocabulary
than me.
'I' may be correct grammatically.
But 'me' sounds so much better,
you see.

Hmm, contrary creature that I be,
 I threw my hesitations,
 under the mulberry tree.
 Where they belong indeed.
 After all, if a fine, somewhat eccentric
 band of editors, boast the surnames;
 Ball, Pinch, Wang, Quehl, Hands and Sretch

There is hope for me,
 you see.

THE POET SPEAKS:

At home alone, under lock down, a ray of sunshine cast a slice of welcome warmth on Samantha's tiled lounge floor. Sam was struck by the thought that she, like the sun, could share some sunshine. No poetry academic, when asked her stylistic influence, Samantha responded with 'inside of me'.

Poetry is special, because it is an expression of being human; a form of exploration. No subject is off limits. Poetry is subjective, while powerful in its ability to connect and convey a message. Oh, and of course (Samantha's words) she is inspired by journals such as Fleas On the Dog and their publishers. Because in them she has found her tribe and we all need that

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Samantha Barnes lives in Port Elizabeth, a coastal city where the wind blows a lot so the air is clean and fresh. There are beautiful beaches and friendly people. Sam lives in her imagination much of the time which is a good quality in a writer. She is unleashing latent talents during lock down and rather fancies herself as a pastry chef and when lock down eases, wants to sing in a band. Sam wishes readers joy, peace and miracle breakthroughs.

ON MORTALITY, STILL AFLOFT and A MIGRATION OF CONGRESS

By Mary Ann Noe

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:

Ms. Noe is a treasure. The first poem relates an image in a puddle. Who waxes poetic over a spill? Thank goodness she had a pen at hand instead of a mop. "The water, leaking away in the heat," "The beautiful bone birdcage / Lies tipped in the grainfield," Noe's voice has a lovely rhythm to it. "Look! She's still aloft!" Read on...HS (Spacing is poet's own.)

On Mortality

The beautiful bone birdcage
Lies tipped in the grainfield,
The birds within absconded by buzzards,
Coyotes or wandering wolves.
No heart, no bellows, no sack of stomach left.
What remains, faint threads of red,
Drape like embroidery floss awaiting the stitcher.
Below ears still poised to catch a predator's padding,
Eyes, already resigned to their fate,
Peruse what retains a sense of form,
Without the form itself.

I stop, drawn to the beaten trail in the field,
Too wide for a slender deer run.
Foreshortened, the abrupt cul-d-sac
Reveals the memory of success and failure.
The turkey vultures rise en masse.

Still Aloft

Once I was a Piper Cub, red and white striped,
Flying high and light,
Doing loop-the-loops and barrel rolls,
Wagging my wings at spectators.
They hid smiles behind hands
To keep me from getting too hoity-toity
From my exuberance and my sleekness,
Though they admired them all the same.

Having outgrown the Cub, I became a blimp.
Floating serenely—looking serene, at least—
Above mere earthly concerns; I ignored them all.
Those watching no longer hid their smiles,
But shook their heads at my arrogance.
I drifted, wrapped in my bulk and my thoughts,
Ignoring their tut-tutting.

But now I've loosened my skin to become
A biplane, old-fashioned in the extreme.
Out of date, perhaps, but still able
To fly with exuberance,
If not with sleekness and speed.
A certain satisfaction comes with being refurbished,
Still drawing spectators who point and marvel,
"Look! She's still aloft!"
I tip my wings at them,
More dignified—and safe—than a waggle.

A Migration of Congress

I swear, Congress in session flew over yesterday,
 Honking and carousing and carrying on,
 A true Washington conglomeration.
 They might have been discussing
 The most efficient route to Florida.
 I watched them wheel and shift,
 Changing leaders to break trail,
 Providing moments of recovery for the others.
 Much like Congress, they wrangled
 Confabbed, changed direction.
 First south, then west, then,
 With a complete turnaround, north again.
 Yet, generally, the members found the path,
 Gradually set the sun in their western quadrant,
 And moved with noisy discussion toward their common destination.

THE POET SPEAKS: *Thanks to my father, who could drive and spot wildlife at the same time, I inherited a good eye. The strangest things appeal to my poetic sense. Spotting a cluster of grounded turkey vultures while biking one day, I rode over and found what was left of a deer; hence, the poem "On Mortality." The contrast of the military precision of a jet flyover with the blimp floating serenely above the same football game made me realize that, while we may not be jets or blimps any longer as we age, we're "Still Aloft." As for "Migration of Congress," no matter where you live, governing bodies don't seem to differ much, always wrangling and wrestling, much like a gaggle of geese beginning their winter migration. When poetry strikes me (hunting for it is too deliberate, and too elusive), I trail along behind Frost, Whitman, Moore, Cummings, Atwood, among others, lapping up their imagery and, in some cases, wry humor. I want that "pop" at the end, or the line that lingers before the Aha! moment sets in. Poetry can do that, and that's why it sticks with me, and I with it.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *I have been writing since I could pick up a pencil, though my early poetry and writings should probably line birdcages. However, since then, I have published short stories and non-fiction, as well as poetry. My work appears in Women's Fiction; Haruah: Breath of Heaven; Main Street Rag; and Green Prints: The Weeder's Digest, as well as in the online travel magazine GoNOMAD.com, and in the anthology Dumped: Stories of Women Unfriending Women. Along the line, I taught high school English and psychology for, well, many years, but am now retired and free to write even more. Visit her at maryannnoe.com*

EITHER WAY, I'M LOST and CRY

By Alexander Cortez

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes:

"Staying up all night, / lying between revolution / and apocalypse" This line resonates with me and Flea's deadlines. Wait, what? "Wonder if I'm overwhelmed / or an overindulge fool." How can you resist a poet that speaks directly into your heart? "Spring day, no flowers bloom, no sunshine, / only clouds cry, cry, cry." "From placenta, blooms ancient hands" Cortez fills my emptied head with all the right echoes. HS (Spacing is poet's own.)

Either way, I'm lost.

Staying up all night,

lying between revolution

and apocalypse.

Wonder if I'm overwhelmed

or an overindulge fool.

Wonder if I'm hopeful

or fearful of such outcomes.

Either way, the cul-de-sacs

remain littered with silence.

Either way,

this where I am.

In between
isolation and
civilization.

Cry

Spring day, no flowers bloom, no sunshine,
only clouds cry, cry, cry.

Humble souls pray, seeking ancient wisdoms
Searching for better days, within their mortal prisons

From placenta, blooms ancient hands
knocking on Heavens' doors.
Its barbed wire gates, reminiscent of their fate,
Human's hate conquers Human compassion.
Souls pray, livin' for another day

Winter day, the sun shines,
water precipitates— Rivers gutted,
debris rises; souls pray
and they cry, cry, cry.

THE POET SPEAKS:

*I find my poems are inspired by equal parts of my fears, doubts, and life all mixed.
Cry particularly was written around the summer of 2018, which was when I wasn't*

sure what I wanted to do with my life. It was also time when in Sacramento, the heat and drought was taxing. Either Way, I'm Lost is my attempt to make sense of Covid-19, and whether I believe it be a catalyst for change or destruction. The beauty of poetry, both in reading and writing it especially is its power to heal devastated spirits and hearts alike. I also find as poets we have a nondualist sense of reality, in which the beauty of reality cannot exist without the beauty within ourselves and vice-versa.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Alex Cortez is 23 year from West Sacramento, California with no publishing credits nor a penny to his name. His age puts him just on the cut off for being a "Zoomer" or "Gen Zer" as it is usually called and not a millennial like he would wish. So, as you might imagine, he spent his formative years of high school jumping into mosh pits, pleasing others before himself and getting riled up into all sorts of trouble he has yet to amend. Despite that, he's going to college to become a Journalist.*

cock

By Chenoa Ashton-Lewis

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: ‘Cock’ is wistful longing. “except for the taxidermy rooster on the dresser / it stares at me / when i sleep / when i eat / when i drink...” and “i don’t want to not touch / please give me touch / give me back your touch” ...a deeply moving and insightful poem written by a womxn through interesctionalist eyes on her journey through a life of transformation—the language here is prayerful and hallowed yet real as blood, vital as air. And there is the haunting question that rises through the tumble of words? Cock? A stuffed bird or a body part? HS (Font size and spacing is poet’s own.)

cock

feeling god
 i won’t force it
 i meant good
 feeling good
 singing to myself
 when the other else
 sings to myself

there’s a window
 and a tree on the outside
 no leaves, it’s sleeping
 but it’s still alive
 you know?
 we’re still alive
 even if we are barren
 solemn with our fragility

other window
 egg yellow wood frames and
 white old english slats

ain't much beauty in that

except for the taxidermy rooster on the dresser
 it stares at me
 when i sleep
 when i eat
 when i drink
 when i shit
 when i masterbate
 when i sleep
 alone
 it keeps staring
 but i don't even think it's looking at me
 are they ever really looking at you
 or a reflection of their self through you

it's early
 late for me
 6 am sun rise
 i'm facing the wrong side
 lonesome branches
 cream panels and frames keeping me inside
 from touching

i don't want to not touch
 please give me touch
 give me back your touch

THE POET SPEAKS:

My middle name is Zazen, which literally translates to seated meditation and is the Buddhist study of the self. For me, poetry is kind of like Zazen. It is me stripped down in my honesty, my loneliness, my tragedies, my contempt. It is a conduit for the pain, hedonism and halcyon past that inspires me. I'm mostly talking to myself and whoever else is willing to listen, but is anyone ever listening or are they listening to a reflection of themselves? Poetry is a reminder that there is a difference between a Chenoa and an idea of who Chenoa is. To me, it is finding wisdom and revelations in places I didn't even know existed. They usually lie in the liminal of each line. 'cock' was inspired by dreary Chicago winters, the trees that

remain dormant for nearly half a year, the last day of work on a 2-month long television show and a taxidermy rooster that sat on my dresser.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

As a Black, White and Jewish womxn, I seldom write about my racial identity in fiction, non-fiction and poetry. I've examined race since I was conscious and as I approach a quarter of a century, I am more fascinated with exploring themes of birth, sexuality, death, family and substance dependence.

I double majored in cinema production and creative writing at DePaul University, and was a staff-writer for Shredded, a web-zine developed by womxn and nonbinary writers. My published works include: op-eds, poetry, short stories and cultural photography projects. Unfortunately, the web-zine is no longer active.

Currently, I am quarantining in Glen Ellen, CA and learning about being a organic wine-grape grower while babysitting a 60-gallon barrel of natural wine I made in October. Before, I was an Associate Producer on a docu-series about a transgender woman's rise to prominence in the auto-industry of the 1970s.

I split my time between Los Angeles and Glen Ellen where I am building an off-the-grid yurt to live here more permanently.

THE PASSWORD IS + 2 more

By Joanna Collins

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:

Here is a poet of great delicacy: "Besides, your trigger finger / Is somewhere left of my button / Nope, that's the off switch" "Casualties of a soggy hippocampus" Even if Georgia O'Keeffe wouldn't admit it, Collins does. Follow along, panting by numbers...(Spacing at poet's own) HS

The Password Is

My vagina is a flower!

A snapdragon.
A Venus flytrap.

With a steel reinforced drawbridge
That slams shut sometimes

Every time.

The crash of iron on iron
Reverberates across the water
The jaws of life couldn't force it open

You trace the shape of a petal with your fingertip
"I want to know"

The password is
The password is...

Uh, here it comes again
The snap snap snap

"Spread your lips apart," you said
"Closed mouth kisses make me feel alone
Like pressing my face against the glass
A department store I can't afford"

But what kind of girl come at you wide open?

Like she'll swallow you whole?

The password is

I kept it under my tongue
 For as long as I could
 Let it soak into my bloodstream
 Swished it between my teeth
 Until it activated bright red

The password is...

I thought of it later
 To ground myself
 Like a mantra in a hurricane
 I thought of it later when I thought of you
 Hoping that it would break the curse

But the trap door was rigged to shut
 Trapped in a basement with dying daffodils
 Desire cut short by a sudden chokehold

The password is [redacted].

The Sound of Her Voice

Inhale the sizzle and pop
 Of my vocal fry
 Like cheesy eggs on a griddle
 At 2am

Your reward for surviving the night

I'm a nuclear test site
 Deep in the desert
 I could leave you faceless
 Peel your skin clear off the bone

But I won't.
 I only sound dangerous

Besides, your trigger finger

Is somewhere left of my button

Nope, that's the off switch

Eat my discarded jokes off the floor
 You're so hungry to catch me in the act
 The act of being a cunt
 <Just like you suspected>
 I do have a few naughty notes to self
 Tucked into the hem of my skirt
 A twisted joke about the king
 A burning insurrection

But they all read like riddles to you
 The unsophisticated, paranoid eye

"I'm a bundle of endings
 With no beginning
 A stack of love letters
 With no quill
 What am I?"

If you ever figure it out
 You just might finally make me explode

Drowning in Sap

Casualties of a soggy hippocampus
 Wet and porous, the memories slipped through

Maple drenched visions of matching cups
 Your dry, naked hands snaking my drain

Surely you loved me
 To pull my wet snarled hair from the pipes like that
 A king rat, resting in your bare palm

I almost forgot all the grime you left behind

THE POET SPEAKS:

As a 90s kid, my brain marinated in a thick stew of Girl Power pop songs and West Wing quotes during my formative years. This led me to believe that, as an adult, every day would be Lilith Fair and that I would be a witty dynamo like C.J. Cregg. I was going to run shit! My president would care if I lived or died!

Out of the mouths of babes.

I grew up and watched my illusions shatter harder than the economy in 2008. Harder than the glass ceiling that shattered when we finally got our FIRST FEMALE PRESIDENT. OH WAIT.

*I discovered the patriarchy, along with the truly shocking truth that not everyone in government is in it for The People, especially when those people are women! Since then, I've been riding the various tidal waves of feminism, trying to answer the age-old question: "What does it mean to be a woman in this world?". Update: I am still trying to figure that out. In the words of Britney Jean Spears, "I'm not a girl, not yet a woman" (yes, reader, I'm 34 years young at the time of this writing). I wrote *The Sound of Her Voice*, *Drowning in Sap* and *The Password Is...* as part of my continued journey to answer this question.*

*I would like to claim that my primary writing influence is THE Toni Morrison, as she is the final word on...words. However, my stylistic inspiration can probably best be described as "Islands in the Stream of Consciousness": the sweet, hopeful notes of Dolly mixed with the chaos of *The Sound and the Fury*. In other words, Very, Very Free Verse. My poetry strives to be the 20-minute Santana guitar interlude in "Smooth". What did stick from Toni is that writing is like a treasure hunt; it's a questioning; an exploration of self and others. I hope that readers revel in the quest with me and don't mind if I lead this feminist party train into a ditch filled with nothing but more questions.*

AUTHOR'S BIO:

*Joanna is a Nashville poet who moonlights (daylights?) as a government attorney. She was the Featured Poet with her poem "King for a Day" in *Nashville Poets Quarterly 2019 Q4* publication (<https://nashvillepoetsquarterly.com/2019-q4-featured-poet>), and her poems "June" and "Dancing on the Head of a Pin" were included in *Indolent Book's "What Rough Beast Covid-19 Edition"* (<https://www.indolentbooks.com/what-rough-beast-covid-19-edition-04-10-20-joanna-collins/>). Her essay, "Reclaiming My Time" is forthcoming on the online publication, *Funky Feminist*. She is a frequent flyer at Nashville poetry open mics, with Poetry in the Brew holding a special place in her dreamy heart.*

*In February 2020, Joanna took to the stage in "My Angry Vagina" and "Beat the Girl" in *The Vagina Monologues at Exit/In*, benefiting Thistle Farms. She, and her original piece, "The Woman Who Made Bob", will be in the upcoming production of *The Mending Monologues*, also presented by *The Nashville Vagina Warriors*.*

Joanna graduated from the University of Notre Dame with a Bachelor of Arts in psychology and American studies. She received her Juris Doctorate degree from Vanderbilt University Law School.

One day she will finish her Supreme Court musical.

Little Houses on the Hill

By Fajer Al Zayed

***Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:** This poem was submitted to us, all on its own, by a Kuwaiti writer who has never been published. One read and we were hooked. We love the clarity and colour of the language and the subtle 'humanization' of the houses, mute and unchanging. It's almost appears too simple but then so does 'Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening' and we all know where that one sits on the totem pole. HS*

Little Houses on the Hill

They look down at the scattered houses on the plain
At the barren trees and silver lakes
and the people in constant motion

They look up at the snowcapped mountains
At the vast straw fields below them
and the horses that long to gallop

But do they know, perched on the hill
they glimmer pink at sunrise
and glow golden at sunset
and have a backdrop of mountains
that look all the more majestic
behind them?

THE POET SPEAKS: *Thanks to the pandemic, gazing out the window has now become my favorite thing to do. I am particularly drawn to those little houses on the hill in the distance, overlooking everything. I often wonder if they know how much I look at them.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Fajer AlZayed. From Kuwait. Currently in graduate school in Colorado, USA (where this poem is set).*

ten poems

by natasha sharma

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:

*Here are some words to be indulged. “hum like the electric feel a band once / sang
hundreds of rip-van-years ago” “my fingernails whiten / on the edge of coffin
wood” “yet my scar-crowed neck creases to pray—” “around the vowels / these
people are / making me feel / queasy in my folds,” There are some fine lines here
scattered about...HS (Spacing is poet’s own.)*

ellie

shaking all my bristles

out the night before I see her

will she remember my whistle?

my gasp before her face?

I’ve worn this thrice, it is soft

even for her brushed cheeks

I go with reluctance,

she has practiced her crawl

I wrap a computer cord

around my forearm to advance

she’ll appreciate this effort to forestall

her gnaw

it's only a show

when her terrified tears fall

my grasp is another toy for her,

her tug actually pierces

this is how she'll grow,

without any of my memory

ellie, my youngest daughter,

classic in her crescendo

for now, all words unknown,

slaps my guffawing face

refugee's daughter

when I was born you

remembered the fleeing, you dropped

me in a well of fear, anger,

diminishing color,

you grew our now planted disease

had you stayed with me,

had you heard me screaming my own sounds

I would've bunched lavender stalks,

rained drops of vinegar on your violet petals,

read sweeping novels of myanmar

anew to remind me how you were,

maybe, there

fifty years after fleeing you stop

my legs from shaking with generous

fury, deep in thought

I need your pretend slap, bristling

beard saved for vacations so

urgently growing you asked,

“why aren’t you crying,” lined me

forever yours

as each doctor, curious

after my bruising asthma,

strokes your daughter’s oils, tell me

does your heart still mend its roughness

against those forsaken yellow fields?

how you look when you sleep

the euphonies of honey mold

dew-like into the pauses

that are really sink holes

into the roads of his inner ear

I drive my fingernails

along these crispy ridges

I twirl my young, black

hair until it holds flat like paper

marks where blue nib meets flesh,

ready for you to lick, wrap

hairy binds around your tongue

this is what I see when I hear you

hum like the electric feel a band once

sang hundreds of rip-van-years ago

while we fucked in a truck bed

lit bouncy red through our exhaust

kissing the dead

“do it,” he whispers

my fingernails whiten

on the edge of coffin wood

the stench of marigolds

weigh in my nostrils

I can taste his fear

on my tongue, I clench

my neck bends toward Amma’s

awaiting skin, crackly

I swallow, sick with wanting

her lips stick to me.

my eyes tighten, saliva

oozes through the teeth:

“do you still love her?” he leans

upon my back till her casket snaps

and we pivot

love letter to my pupil

to be honest, I wanted to lick her inked thumb

but she wants to put only her cream pinky up.

her quill stands out among the chalked pencilheads,

bobbing along down the aisles of this mark'd

classroom.

her school notes croon waxy in any mindspace left

open, across a span of jotted lined papers.

she sits quietly.

I tip my fingertips over her ridged knuckles.

now, we both crave

a raging in that brilliant, red, wooden cage

flying around in her wonderful mind.

funerary conversion

white christ remains glowing, two arms nailed up to heaven

black, nested oil pools along his pores

between the ring fingers, he has crossed against our rebellion

i need the seduction of a blacker horsetail bob,

shaved down, fibers plucky in my mama's naked brush,

yet my scar-crowed neck creases to pray—

mum's eyes rimmed with masala,

targeting papa's royal elephant,

he stands timber in a field of punjabi mustards

papa's crepe eyes rimmed with rice,

stuffing soggy lentils into an oaken rifle,

bending knee before my bleached blossom

my eyes rimmed into ombré palettes of dirt, darks

envious of converted sistercousins spinning rosaries

'round the yellowing armies of our mashed kin

my bicolor palms folded beneath

a contrary idol hung with garlands of marigold,
fresh from amma's pyre smoked from fairy ash

our local gynecologist

he's pulling forth out of the wound of my womb

plucked guitar strings in unison

chevron, black and pink braids stripe down

my back in a woven manner, foresee his attraction

he glues me down and paints black pools under my skin

I press against my veins, beseeching

to be cut out—purged—to not be left

behind, useless he sketches into the burning

backness of me but I do not yield—

the flesh as a tongue seared he plucks me out

and drops me onto a platter of pathologies:

ears, eyeballs, and various membranes

I am left a harmony gathered as thorns

in the brush to tear at the woman-bouquet

of everything cursive

manic beneath some art

my coconut sheen cheeks waft

above a stale mouth [automatic gestures]

eyes rap along a wheezing melody

of this painting [a woman

wearing earrings she's forgotten exist]

this was not at a different time

odors match her beauteous

face [pound for a pound] white blouse

doesn't have frills [nor a V-neck

water metaphor], but her breast

is lighter to the eye who

kneads the darkest inks for love

various moldings [bubbles of flesh]

around the base of her nose

[as if, in faking,] her skin puckers

accordingly. she's had dinner [twice]

already, the effort is making her skin pucker

again

bold & blueish—rust

we walk with dignity,

as though we may

still have pearls baubles

she guides my hand through

broken grass, over

stunted iron leftovers

walking where the police dreamt

we'd never go it is our first time

a fabric rucksack bounces over

our calves, per paperback dramas

I wish there was someone with us

to admonish us, to fear

suddenly, we are here

the empty pool; the empty motel

a weepy rustbelt

a dizzy, religious conversion in St. Anne's Library

I'm scared, mama

their meticulously tucked

messybuns, cashmere

sweaters, scratchy on the inside,

cold on the out

I beg you to hold me down

beneath our sea-gull patterned

quilt, downy with no one's

fur their religiously midwestern

jugular is eating

our old language, once

loud and large

around the vowels

these people are

making me feel

queasy in my folds, mama

I am repeating for you, mama

you said to cozy up every lie

with a repetition, mama,

I repeat for you, mama

this conversion is taking too long,

the night is outlined around mama's

confusion scary for Kali, even

I refuse. I accept. I get

my bearings from their wet

tarmac shaking in my head

THE POET SPEAKS: *Federico Garcia Lorca's interpretation and imagination of the term Duende has been the strumming in my writing life, so far. I am completely wrapped up in the concept the Andalusian duende as a looming red-skeleton, who targets the tormented suffering artists and propels us into the extremities of creativity. Poetry is very much life and death for me. I reach for it as a second generation South Asian American, an individual with Bipolar I, and a dropout from a PhD program. I survive on its blood. For me, poetry is my success, my validation. I work on a poem for days, weeks on end even if I know no one else sees its success because it succeeds to move me. For that introverted reason, I'm extremely honored and humbled when a stranger admires my work. Thank you, many times over, for reading my stuff.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Natasha Sharma's poems represent growing up in the American Midwest as a second generation Indian, touching on mental health issues, trauma, and ecstasies of the everyday. She holds a Masters in English from Miami University of Ohio and is working on her first chapbook.*

