

THE



Stray

Branch

Spring/Summer

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The Stray Branch

Spring/Summer 2023

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Spring/Summer 2023 #31 Vol 28
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The Afterwife by Doug Hawley Appears in Dark Dossier. Shorter versions appeared in Written Tales (defunct) and Short Humour.

Better Than Nightmares by Doug Hawley Appeared in Jitter Pres, Yellow Mama, and Sirens Call.

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Contents

Poetry by...

Anthony Watkins.....	37
Christopher Woods.....	107-109
Daniel de Culla.....	80-81
Debbie Berk.....	110-113
Duane Anderson.....	22-24
Edgar Rider.....	25
Emalisa Rose.....	38-42
Glen Armstrong.....	73
Jeremy Szuder.....	47
Jim Murdoch.....	4-8
John Sweet.....	13
Lamont Turner.....	79
Lee Clark Zumpe.....	103-106
Marc Carver.....	14-17
Michael Lee Johnson.....	44-46
Milenko Županović.....	74-78
Partha Sarkar.....	18
Peggy Carter.....	1-3
RC deWinter.....	34-36
Rick Hartwell.....	32-33
Robert Beveridge.....	94-96
Robert Funderburk.....	56-57
Roger Anderson.....	68-72
Roger Singer.....	89-91
Royal Rhodes.....	92-93
Torie Cooper.....	48-49
Waverly Long Jr.....	43

Prose

Don't Listen to Me

by Laura Stamps..... 9-10

Ready to Burn

by R.P. Singletary..... 82

Fiction

Better Than Nightmares

by Doug Hawley..... 65-67

Finders Keepers

by Eric Burbridge..... 116-120

Frog Father

by Benjamin DeHaan..... 121-122

Little Lady of Room 203

by Benjamin DeHaan..... 123-124

Redial

by Quinn Crook..... 86-88

The Afterwife

by Doug Hawley..... 62-64

Flash Fiction

Dance the Night Away

by Kandyce Hampton..... 19-21

Repressed Memory

by Dawn DeBaal..... 83-85

The Dead Come at Christmas

by Maggie Nerz Iribane..... 97-99

The Storm

by Maggie Nerz Iribane..... 100-102

Photography

Daniel de Culla..... 81

Debbie Berk..... 103

Isabelle..... 58-61

Renee Williams..... 26-31

Torie Cooper..... 50-55

Artwork

Debbie Berk..... 114

Features

Contributors

Daniel de Culla <i>(Poetry and Photography)</i>	80-81
Doug Hawley <i>(Fiction)</i>	62-67
Emalisa Rose <i>(Poetry)</i>	38-42
Isabelle <i>(Photography)</i>	58-61
Michael Lee Johnson <i>(Poetry)</i>	44-46
Milenko Županović <i>(Poetry)</i>	74-78
RC deWinter <i>(Poetry)</i>	34-36
Rick Hartwell <i>(Poetry)</i>	32-33
Robert Funderburk <i>(Poetry)</i>	56-57
Roger Anderson <i>(Poetry)</i>	68-72
Torie Cooper <i>(Poetry and Photography)</i>	48-55



Poems

A Coward's Epitaph <i>by Waverly Long Jr.</i>	43
Guard Dog <i>by Glen Armstrong</i>	73
In Praise of Gnats <i>by Anthony Watkins</i>	37
My Mouth <i>by Jeremy Szuder</i>	47
There Are No Stars In Deerfield <i>by Lamont Turner</i>	79

Prose

Ready to Burn <i>by R.P. Singletary</i>	82
---	----

Fiction

Redial <i>by Quinn Crook</i>	86-88
--	-------

Flash Fiction

Repressed Memory <i>by Dawn DeBraal</i>	83-85
---	-------

Dust

it gathers on tabletops
on bedsides and lamps
on windowsills

wherever nobody touches it
quietly gathering
waiting for
tomorrow
which never comes

I wait in the bed
just like the dust waits
for tomorrow
when you might
touch
me

but you're never there.

I'm growing old
soon the wind
will blow
through me
and
like the dust

I will scatter.

Healing

by Peggy Carter

On the way home
with a numb lip
my eye spots
a pillow meant for comfort
or perhaps decoration
with a pattern that enchants me
very symmetrical made
from sequins,
or something like that,
in the open back of a
moving van.

It will have a new home.
Not sure about
me.

When I heal
who will I be?

A cancer survivor.
Or just another woman with
a spot on her lip,
muddling through.

Porcelain Mask

by Peggy Carter

stares back into
my eyes

from a alien mirror

My skin is pure white
powdered
with faint lines

I peel it away-
new skin peeks out

bright shiny pink
ugly.

The mask is so much more
beautiful

A lesson I have never learned-

Stay hidden.

Lonely City

I dragged my loneliness
down Rose Street,
looking for a cold one,

and we watched a dancer
lose her top
every third record

in this wee corner pub.
I doubt she
was even a native

Edinburgher, perhaps
some foreign
worker or poor student.

We weren't brave enough to
chat her up
but the girl never showed

the next night, nor the next.
In the end
I had to go home but

my loneliness said he'd
stay and wait
for her. "I feel quite at

home here," he said, and grinned.

*Edinburgh is officially the loneliest city in the UK.
Edinburgh Evening News, 3rd December 2008*

This has appeared online as a video poem.

Still Birth

by Jim Murdoch

for Emma

Still, a breath away from life,
a heartbeat away from breath,
still my baby lies

her frozen hand
reaching out
to receive

the gift that was
no longer
mine to give.

Still, everything is still,
until I cry her cry and
shatter that stillness

forever.

First published in Salamander Cove in September 2010 but no longer accessible online.

Losers and Winners

by Jim Murdoch

At the very end
we all held our breaths

just waiting to see
which one of us could

hold theirs the longest.
It seemed only right

she should get to win
one last time before

she died.

Has appeared in print in Jim's collection This Is Not About What You Think.

A Kind of Apology

by Jim Murdoch

His final apology
was a squat ugly creature.
It sat on the curb and made
odd sounds—

butbutbut and iffif—
that made her angry, besides
it wouldn't sit still and it
refused

to look her in the eyes. She
couldn't take to it or trust
it so she left it out in
the cold

but it wouldn't die.

Truth Bites

by Jim Murdoch

The truth is an acquired taste
especially when served cold.

Lies come in many flavours
but truths are mostly bitter
and hard to swallow. A pinch

of salt can help but I find
they still can stick in your throat.

Jim has been writing poetry for fifty years and has graced the pages of many now-defunct literary magazines and websites and a few, like Ink, Sweat and Tears, The Lake and Eclectica, that are still hanging on in there. For ten years he ran the literary blog The Truth About Lies but now lives in relative obscurity in Scotland with his wife and (occasionally) next door's cat. He has published two books of poetry, a short story collection and four novels.

~ Prose Poem ~

Don't Listen to Me

by Laura Stamps

What's next? In this dog magazine. New product reviews. Love those! Yes, yes. So much to learn. So much. Not that I have a dog. Or want a dog. But learning is good. Right? And the reviews. In this issue. Dental products for dogs. Dental sticks, breath chews, plaque treats, dental kits. You know. Stuff like that. Although, I wonder, wonder. About those dental kits. The ones with a finger toothbrush and doggie toothpaste. Would you stick your finger in a dog's mouth? I mean, would you? Really? Brave. That's what you'd have to be. And I'm not. Brave. Just so you know. And yet. Is brushing a dog's teeth like pilling a cat? If so, count me out. Been there, done that. With Paula. And her crazy cat. Trust me. Once is enough. Paula, Paula. She thought this would be easy. That she could hold the cat's mouth open. That I could drop the pill down the cat's throat. Easy. Right? Not even close. When Paula tried to open the cat's mouth. It bit her. Hard. She screamed. Blood everywhere. When I dropped the pill down the cat's throat. It spit the pill back at me. Like a missile. Barely missed my eye. Hit my cheek. And stuck to it. (Cat slobber. Eeew!) We tried again. Again and again. More blood. Paula's. More screaming. All of us. Paula screamed at the cat. The cat screamed at Paula. I screamed at both of them. Until, until. We did it. Finally. The pill

went down the cat's throat. And stayed. Then I bandaged Paula's bleeding fingers. And I disinfected my cheek. (Cat slobber. Eeew!) And I vowed never to stick my hand in an animal's mouth again. Never. Ever. Never. As for dental kits? Forget it. Dogs are easy. Just give the dog a dental stick. It'll clean the dog's teeth. Easy, easy. Now. All I need is a dog. Right? Nah. Just kidding. Seriously. I am. Kidding. No dog for me. No. Don't. Don't listen to me. Okay? Just. Don't.

Laura Stamps loves to play with words and create experimental forms for her fiction and prose poetry. Author of 43 novels, novellas, short story collections, and poetry books. Most recently: CAT MANIA (Alien Buddha Press 2021), DOG DAZED (Kittyfeather Press 2022), and THE GOOD DOG (Prolific Pulse Press 2023). Winner of the Muses Prize. Recipient of 7 Pushcart Prize nominations.

poem for the world we've created

leaves the
house for the
last time the shooter or
the victim the pain or
the self-pity and
after a while
there is no more sense of shock and
 there is no more sense of
 outrage

there is nothing but a monochrome
future filled with more of the same

a neverending supply of drugs
to blot out the sun

mad dogs in their infinite wisdom
chewing up the hearts of all
the pretty corpses

minotaur

by John Sweet

in the end,
i say nothing

walk down this empty street instead
into the face of pale broken
sunlight with the lesser bones of priests
ground into fine powder beneath my feet

with the mother of my children
begging god for forgiveness

empty sounds from a bleeding mouth
empty hands cut off at the wrists
because the idea of war cannot be
considered w/out the idea of pain

the forest is where you run
only after all of
the cities have burned

being lost is what comes
from being alive

news of the arrival, after we'd left

by John Sweet

grey sunlight in the kingdom of oblivion and
the choices you're given here are to
grow up deaf or grow up blind

you are told by your father that
you'll bleed
and your lover agrees and
i am sorry but never for the right reasons

i am the oldest son of slow suicides

had planned my escape and said my goodbyes
but then couldn't decide whether i
was a liar or a coward

couldn't find anyone i hated more than
i hated myself
but got married anyway

bought a house,
dug a shallow grave,
swam to the deep end of the pool
and pulled the trigger

thought maybe it was time i tried
being someone else for a while

thought maybe all of my mistakes might
point the way to a brighter future

recognized the sound of your
laughter for the
blessing it was never meant to be

BURGESS

I drove to the top of the hill
the one with the school at the top
parked the car and watched the sun go down
put the radio on and listened to the classical music
window down waving my arms
I had never even heard it before later found out it was Ludwig van.
I never wanted that sun to go down but knew it would
like it always does, it goes down and then it comes up.

ME

by Marc Carver

Imagine if you could write your own future.

Your own story that would come true.

What would you write?

Lots of love, lots of sexual adventure, lots of relaxing and enjoying yourself. Lots of drinking, lots of friends or maybe all this and more.

Wealth, adventure or maybe you would make it a short story filled with simple things and simple people.

Or maybe even a story of misery and pain, endless torture.

In a way we can write are own lives and go out and live those lives but others simply have to watch and write what they see.

And that is me.

BUTTERFLY

by Marc Carver

I went out with my big net
tried to catch a few smiles or a kind word
to put into my big jar
so
when the nights are long and I am all alone and sad
I can bring it down and look into it
Eventually I gave up and went home
Sorry jar no smiles today all I have today
is a poem.

A TWENTY MINUTE WALK

by Marc Carver

I told someone I loved them
and that was the truth.
That is what it is all about
so tell me your truth if you want
or find me and I will tell you my truth.
Your truth you will not like
and mine
you will like even less
but the sad thing is
if you have the courage
come and find me and I will tell you it all.

What thoughts I get in the rain on a twenty minute walk.
I saw a dog on the balcony of the top of the flats.
I stopped and stared at him, his head started to turn and look down on me as I did
the dog whistle. The intake almost silent whistle.
He could not make me out and kept looking back through the door hoping his mas-
ter would come out but he didn't.
Eventually he started barking so I left him and found another dog tied up outside
the pharmacy.
I told him he was a good boy as I began to stroke him I could feel him shivering still
I stroked him as he tried to get closer to me
break free from his chains don't worry I said your mother will be out soon.
Off I went happy
I got close to home but I needed to piss thought I could make it then thought i could
make it to the bushes but then out it came all down my legs and it felt good and
warm in the rain. It was a first for me and I thought I might feel shame or
humiliation but in the end I felt neither
What a lot can happen in twenty minutes of life.

A corpse on a scorching day

by Partha Sarkar

A corpse on a scorching day.
A leaf without leaves.
A conversation of the birds in the ruins.
There are many proposals.
Comes the ghoul to pick up
The present situations of the corpse –
The illegal problems and
The beautiful uneasiness.

Returns home the envy happily with
The unnecessary stone.

Dance the Night Away

by KC Hampton

Pop! Pop! Pop! The music blares at the highest octave, carrying the drunken bodies from dusk to dawn.

Tequila is burning our throats just the same as yelling at the person next to you. Thrusting and grinding with a complete stranger, to feel a surge of freedom.

Pop! Pop! Pop! More shots, more dancing. We can't feel our feet as people around us float away into oblivion.

I look around for my friend who escaped with a man from the bar. All I know about him is that he's a doctor and lives alone with his three cats.

Pop! Pop! Pop! My ears ring, pulse races from the noise around me. My eyes get blurry from the rush of people, and my friend is nowhere to be seen.

...

Pop! Pop! Pop! Chalk drops from my hand the first day I met my best friend in law school. We stuck together, as he dropped out to become an event planner, and I left to be a mom. It was never in the plans, but what is?

Pop! Pop! Pop! The car spits out as my friend rushes me to the hospital, praying that I don't give birth in his "new" Lamborghini.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Champaign opens at his wedding, spilling all over the neat white cake I made.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Goes the cap to my bottle of anti-depressants. I took one too many after postpartum almost got the best of me. My friend got to me just in time.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Balloons getting stomped on at my daughter's fifth birthday, as my friend saves the cake... this time.

Pop! Pop! Pop! A flat tire puts my friend to a stop on the way to an event that would change his life forever, and he didn't think he would need AAA.

Pop! Pop! Pop! The bulbs burnt out of my old, busted camera as I took a picture of my friend's new family.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Glasses shatter into shards as I bump into one of the servers at my wedding, sending my friend and everyone around him into a roar of laughter.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Hit after hit, he put up with it until I convinced him to take his child and leave that son of a bitch.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Our glasses clinked together when he finally got his divorce certificate and left the man that held him captive for so long. He didn't like the idea of being a single father, going into the dating scene again. Somehow, I convinced him to go out like in the olden days and party until we were so drunk, we wouldn't be able to stand up.

...

Pop! Pop! Pop! The room goes black as something wet, and sticky fills my dress.

I thought a trip into town would be fun. I didn't think anything could go wrong.

Pop! Pop! Pop! The music stops, as screaming starts, and the Pulse goes out.

Kandyce Hampton is a full-time writer and a single mom to an adorable puppy. Born a traveler and currently growing her career in Orlando Florida. Follow her @KandyceHampton and at her website www.theheartofapoet.com

Self-Portrait

I

Nonetheless,

I am here

for what it is worth.

No one is going to jump up and down

based on this little fact

or shake my hand

or keel over from shock.

Maybe die from laughter.

Like I said before,

here I am.

Hey, you over there,

stop laughing.

II

On second thought,

sometimes you are allowed

to do that.

Continue laughing,

you are looking into a mirror.

One of Those Days

Duane Anderson

It was time for a break from life.

It wasn't the first time,

nor would it be the last.

Instead of eating three times a day,

and sleeping only once,

I tried sleeping three times a day

and eating only once,

walking backwards, reversing my steps

to see where things had gone wrong,

talking to myself instead of others,

knowing I may have been the only

one who would have listened.

As I sat in the living room, lights off,

the television off, I looked at a black screen.

Maybe it would tell me the things

I did not know.

It was one of those days,

and who knew where it would take me.

Maybe to a better life,
one known in a day or two,
after returning to earth,
knowing I tried, and it didn't work,
or my life changed directions,
on a compass pointed north.

Duane Anderson currently lives in La Vista, NE. He has had poems published in The Pangolin Review, Fine Lines, Cholla Needles, Tipton Poetry Journal, Poesis Literary Journal and several other publications. He is the author of 'Yes, I Must Admit We Are Neighbors,' 'On the Corner of Walk and Don't Walk,' and 'The Blood Drives: One Pint Down.'

Call It A Momentary Lapse in Deja Reve

by Edgar Rider

Difference between Deja Vu the feeling you have been there before

Premonition usually has a negative context fear that something bad will happen!

Question is it a Precognition which means seeing events into the future ESP reckoning.

Depends on experience...

Dreams and Reality Separate

Simple case of Deja Reve : you know of it before because you dreamed it!

A Vision created!

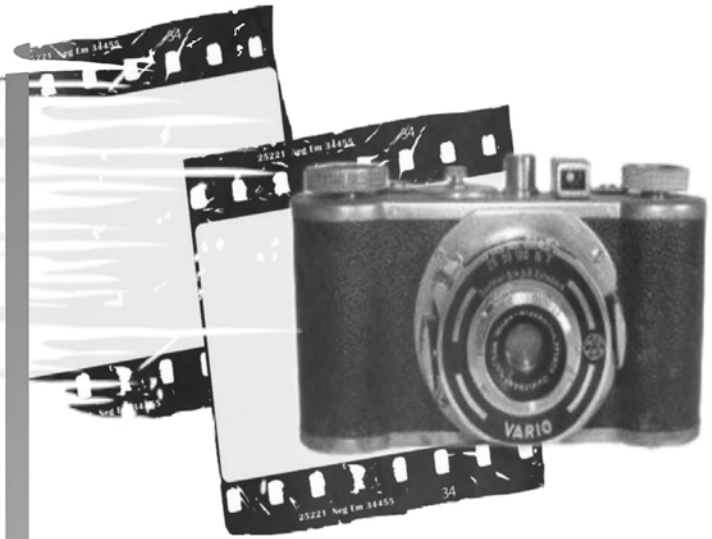
Reality and Imagination could be from REM or some other lucid concept of sleep

Dreamed it Before?

Snap out of it in the Reverie of the Moment!

Deja Reve has woven its way into reality from a state of lucidity

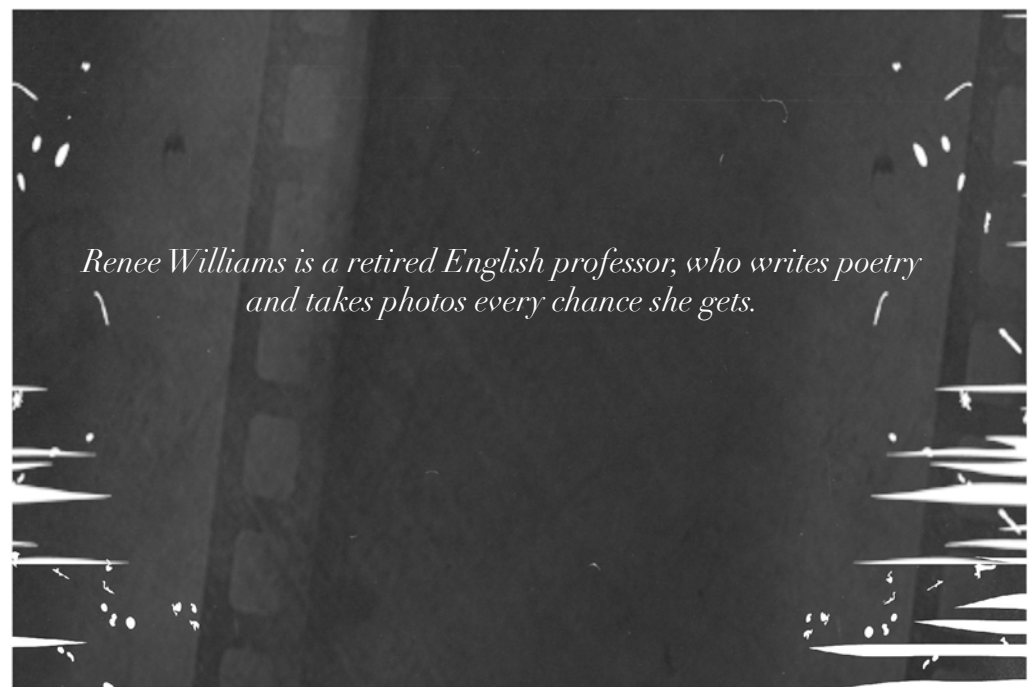
Bob Eager has been making the rounds between visiting Old Town Scottsdale in Arizona as well as currently living in Riverside, California. He would like to send poem about dreaming things that become true. He has published work in Stray Branch, Oddball Magazine, Tuck Magazine, Indiana Voice Journal and Adelaide magazine among others. He has written an abstract under the surface subject matter book called Flipside of the Familiar. He has also written a book called Darkside Relapsing to help people control their inner well of course Darkside.



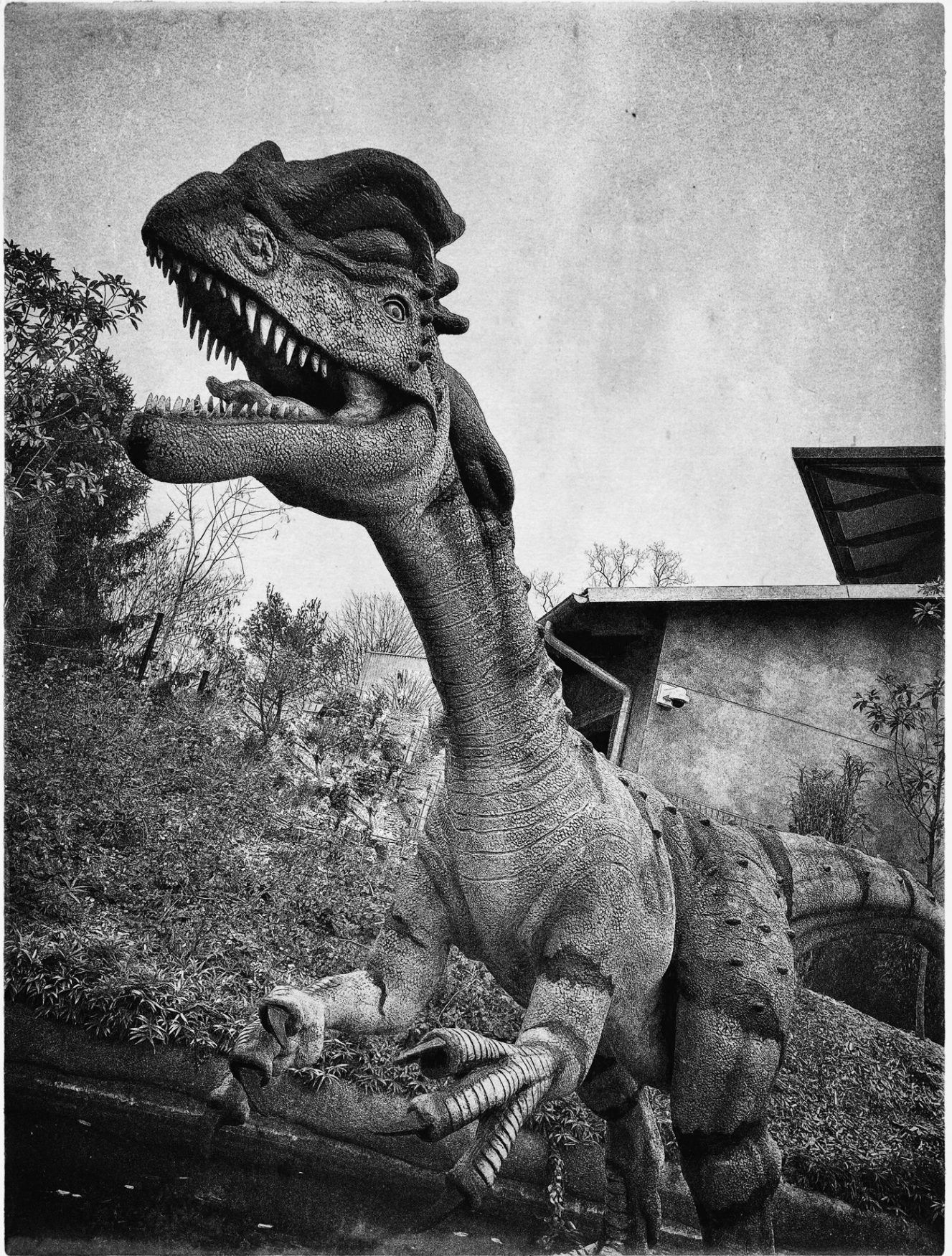
Photography

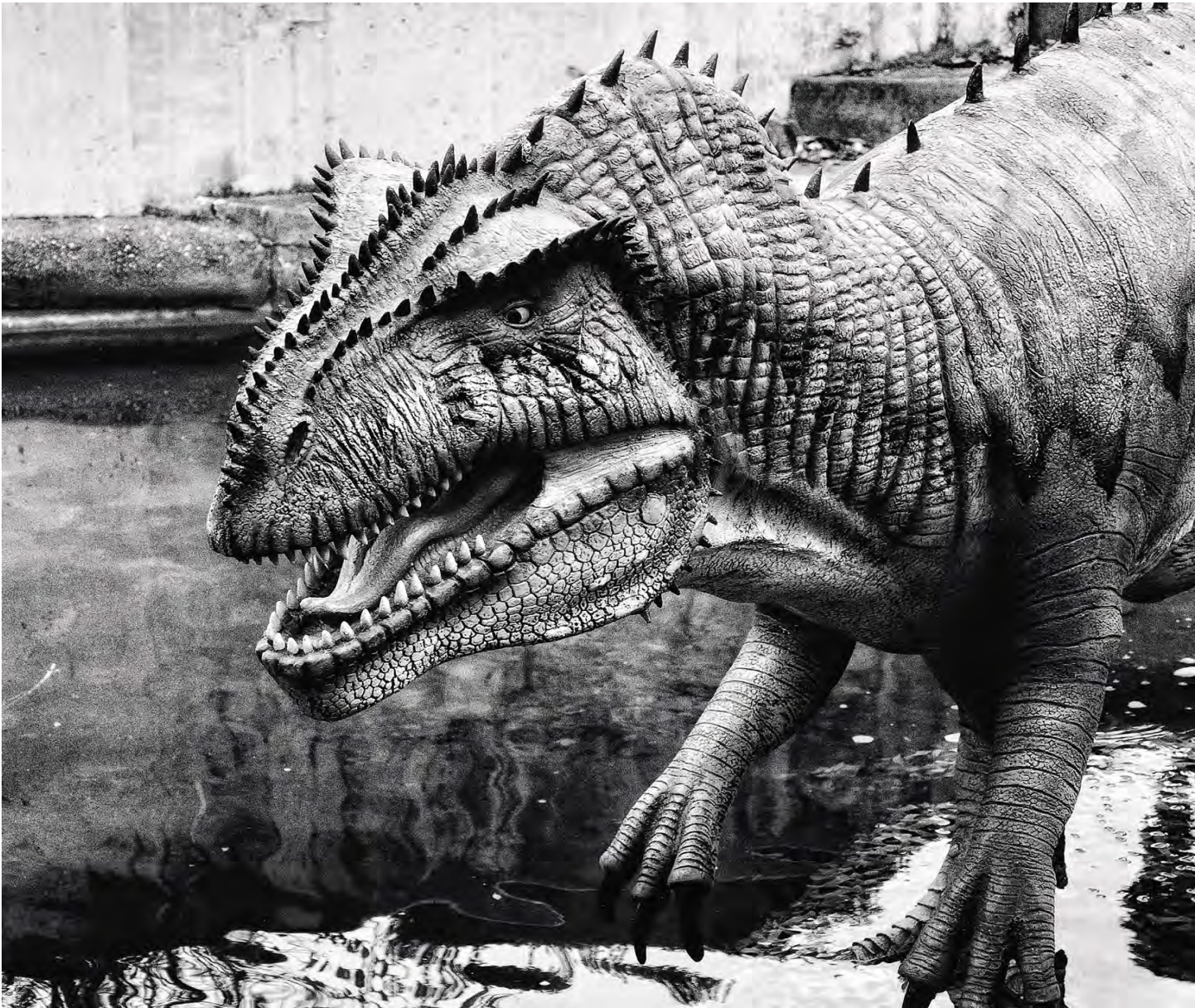
by

Renee Williams



Renee Williams is a retired English professor, who writes poetry and takes photos every chance she gets.











Featured Contributor ~ Poetry



Richard Hartwell

*When hate is in the seeds, you can only harvest weeds. Ernst Jünger, The Glass Bees
In joined hands there is hope; in a clenched fist, none. Victor Hugo, Toilers of the Sea
An eye for an eye only ends up making the world blind. Mohandas Gandhi, The Mahatma*

Remembering the Old Ones

Richard Hartwell

I read the resumé in his hands:
First meeting's firm handshake,
Callused from outdoors' hard labor,
Aromatic from cultivated fields,
Thumb scars from whittled figurines,
A wart from handling toads, or
Kissing frogs, searching for a princess.

Wrinkles, like ripples in a pond,
Spread outward from her smile,
Reaching distant shores of her
Far-flung family everywhere, and
Subdued laughter of wicked mirth,
Which drew him in as no other
Lure than nature had ever done.

The symmetry and sympathy of
Their worlds aligned in memory.

Featured Contributor ~ Poetry



RC deWinter

RC deWinter's poetry is widely anthologized, notably in "New York City Haiku" (NY Times, 2/2017), "easing the edges: a collection of everyday miracles" (Patrick Heath Public Library of Boerne, 11/2021) "The Connecticut Shakespeare Festival Anthology" (River Bend Bookshop Press, 12/2021) in print: 2River, Event, Gargoyle Magazine, the minnesota review, Night Picnic Journal, Plainsongs, Prairie Schooner, Southword, The Stray Branch, Twelve Mile Review, York Literary Review among many others and appears in numerous online literary journals.

doctor's diary

RC deWinter

it's hard to take life seriously these days
the absurdity level is off the charts
but when i see the bodies in the morgue
overflowing into the hallway i stop dancing
and remember they were once me
breathing feeling loving living

now unplugged from everything
but ventilators the indestructible energy
of the universe and the possibility
(because there's no way of knowing)
of a return trip ticket in another body
another life another chance to get it right

and as i go from room to room
checking the levels on the machines
that keep the dying breathing i wonder
why with all the years of training
i can't do more to keep these
bodies and souls together

but it is what it is so i do my best
and sleep with a clear conscience
and sometimes in my dreams i dance
in another life full of hope and promise
that surely will return some day
though i may not be here to see it

dodgeball

RC deWinter

awake too early i reposition myself
in tangled sheets hoping to recapture a dream
but my rebellious mind cranks up
so i sigh and turn to face the new day

morning mist rises reluctantly
knowing it will eventually be swallowed
by the greedy sun peeking between
the thick curtain of summer leaves

i like the mist rise reluctantly too
knowing the fractured bits of that dream
will eventually be swallowed
by the thick curtain of consciousness

then sliding into a t-shirt
and my most disreputable jeans
the pair with a ripped knee
and shredded backside

i remember everything i've left sliding
in favor of daydreams random thoughts
and any other lifeboat i can mock up
to avoid the gaping holes in my shredded future

then unfolding into the embrace of the day
i stumble down to the kitchen to jumpstart my brain
with caffeine and a list of chores i'll ignore
as i scan the horizon for the next lifeboat

Featured Poem ~ In Praise of Gnats

by Anthony Watkins

short moments
uttered
and uttered
and muttered
repeatedly

in honorarium
for those who passed
in past times
and the oil
we burn
in candles
and lanterns
to signify
to celebrate
to mourn

and yet
it is
the gnat
the flaw
that spoils the moment
and brings us
to the now

for the dead
will always
be dead
candles or no
but the gnat is
only in the now.

Anthony Watkins, publisher, poet, painter, and educator, lives in rural north Florida with his wife, teenager, and his 70 lb. pit bull lapdog. He writes about the people and places around him and everyday life.

For the past decade he has been a community teaching assistant at Penn's ModPo, and is also touring rural libraries to discuss poetry, both as subject matter, as well as how it impacts our daily lives.

*Anthony began publishing in 1995, he continues publishing *Better Than Starbucks*.*

Featured Contributor ~ Poetry



Emalisa Rose

When not writing poems, Emalisa Rose enjoys crafting. She walks with a birding group through the neighborhood trails. She volunteers in animal rescue. Her latest collection is "This water paint life, published by Origami Poems Project.

First, come the snowmen

Emalisa Rose

From her hospital window,
she's watched that same tree
as she ails with disease.

Bare branches, battered;
Winter's been wicked, this year.

They say Ann will pass
in the next several weeks.

Spring will be glorious, but
sister, dear sister, we haven't
made snowmen yet.

I'm in no rush for leaves.

The ivy that clings

Emalisa Rose

The strength of the sycamore
refuses to yield to the ivy
that threatens her sovereignty.

I moved round our checkerboard
countering clockwise, of your claim
on my psyche.

Ten stepping stones forward; four
lay forgotten.

The sycamore's silence embraces
the winds, as they chime through
her hollowness and

perhaps I'll get over our breakup
one day.

What I wish I'd told you

Emalisa Rose

Having feared repercussions,
I never told you "that," though
always on the tip of my tongue.

Today it rains, in heavy hues,
concurrent with this day they
bury you.

With deep regret, I watch the clouds
converse, in downpour's truth, the
loss of you and what I wish I'd told
you, all those years ago.

Only her

Emalisa Rose

The scars on my knee, the shame
that I felt when my dad was
arrested, the bra I was stuffing.

She knew all my quirks, the blur of
my lines, how the dots reconnected,
and where skies met the sea, on my
latitude's longitude.

And I wish I could talk to her; from that
scary, but magical place, where no one
but her, would be welcome to visit.

Featured Poem ~ A Coward's Epitaph

by Waverly Long Jr

The choices he made
he would make again
without even trying.
The truth is
he was more afraid of living
than he ever was of dying.

Waverly Long has a B.A. in Liberal Arts (Literature) from Old Dominion University. He has been published in Tucumcari Literary Review, Blind Man's Rainbow, The Raintown Review, and Samsara, Magazine of Suffering.

Featured Contributor ~ Poetry



Michael Lee Johnson

Michael Lee Johnson lived ten years in Canada, Vietnam era. Today he is a poet in the greater Chicagoland area, IL. He has 248 YouTube poetry videos. Michael Lee Johnson is an internationally published poet in 43 countries, several published poetry books, nominated for 4 Pushcart Prize awards and 5 Best of the Net nominations. He is editor-in-chief of 3 poetry anthologies, all available on Amazon, and has several poetry books and chap-books. He has over 536 published poems. Michael is the administrator of 6 Facebook Poetry groups. Member Illinois State Poetry Society: <http://www.illinoispoets.org/>.

Poets Die (v2)

Michael Lee Johnson

Why do poets die;
linger in youth
addicted to death.
They create culture
but so crippled.
They seldom harm
except themselves—
why not let them live?
Their only crime is words
they shout them out in anger
cry out loud, vulgar in private
places like Indiana cornfields.
In fall, poets stretch arms out
their spines the centerpiece
on crosses on scarecrows,
they only frighten themselves.
They travel in their minds,
or watch from condo windows,
the mirage, these changing colors,
those leaves; they harm no one.

Deep in my Couch (v2)

Michael Lee Johnson

Deep in my couch
of magnetic dust,
I am a bearded old man.
I pull out my last bundle
of memories beneath
my pillow for review.
What is left, old man,
cry solo in the dark.
Here is a small treasure chest
of crude diamonds, a glimpse
of white gold, charcoal,
fingers dipped in black tar.
I am a temple of worship with trinket dreams,
a tea kettle whistling ex-lovers boiling inside.
At dawn, shove them under, let me work.
We are all passengers traveling
on that train of the past—
senses, sins, errors, or omissions
deep in that couch.

Featured Poem ~ My Mouth

by Jeremy Szuder

Inside my mouth was a cavern,
this mask I wear is the stone wall
that covered sunshine and filtered it

from coming in too heavily.

Each truth from my mouth becomes
spokes on the wheels that spun miles
of tales, hardened words forging that

cold steel now becoming flexible,
bridging long winded roads that cross
over the many rivers I call home.

But I will not mention the names of others
to check off hit lists and illustrate ill will against,
all the lesser known powers that be, all of them

at half mast and hurling hollowed threats
to fertilize their own inner atomic gardens,
watching the calendar pages and waiting

to harvest whatever same madness that I
wear my armour to deflect against.
As I close my lips together in darkness

for long periods of time, the quiet then begins
to speak in volumes, my levels of energy remain
all the way up,

boiling,

rolling heavily into the red.

Jeremy Szuder is a chef by night and creator of poetry and illustration work by day. His past track record in the arts includes; 15 years as a musician in various bands (drums, vocals), graphic design work for clothing/skateboard companies, 25 plus years of self published Zines, showings of fine art in the underground art scene, a 10 year plus stint spinning vinyl at various events all across the city; and at present time continues to have both illustrations and poems published by over a dozen fine art and literary publications all across the U.S.A. as well as Canada. Jeremy Szuder continues to call Los Angeles California via Glendale his home at present.

Featured Contributor ~ Poetry & Photography



Torie Cooper

Torie Cooper is an American-Australian who enjoys writing poetry; taking photos, drawing, and painting. Her work has appeared in a variety of journals and her books are available on Amazon.com.

Forever Young

Torie Cooper

He was drunk
and twenty-seven
when he refused to leave the pub
with his mates.
Moon was dizzily high
when he left for home,
stumbling along
the train tracks.
Police scraped him
off the rails
the next morning.

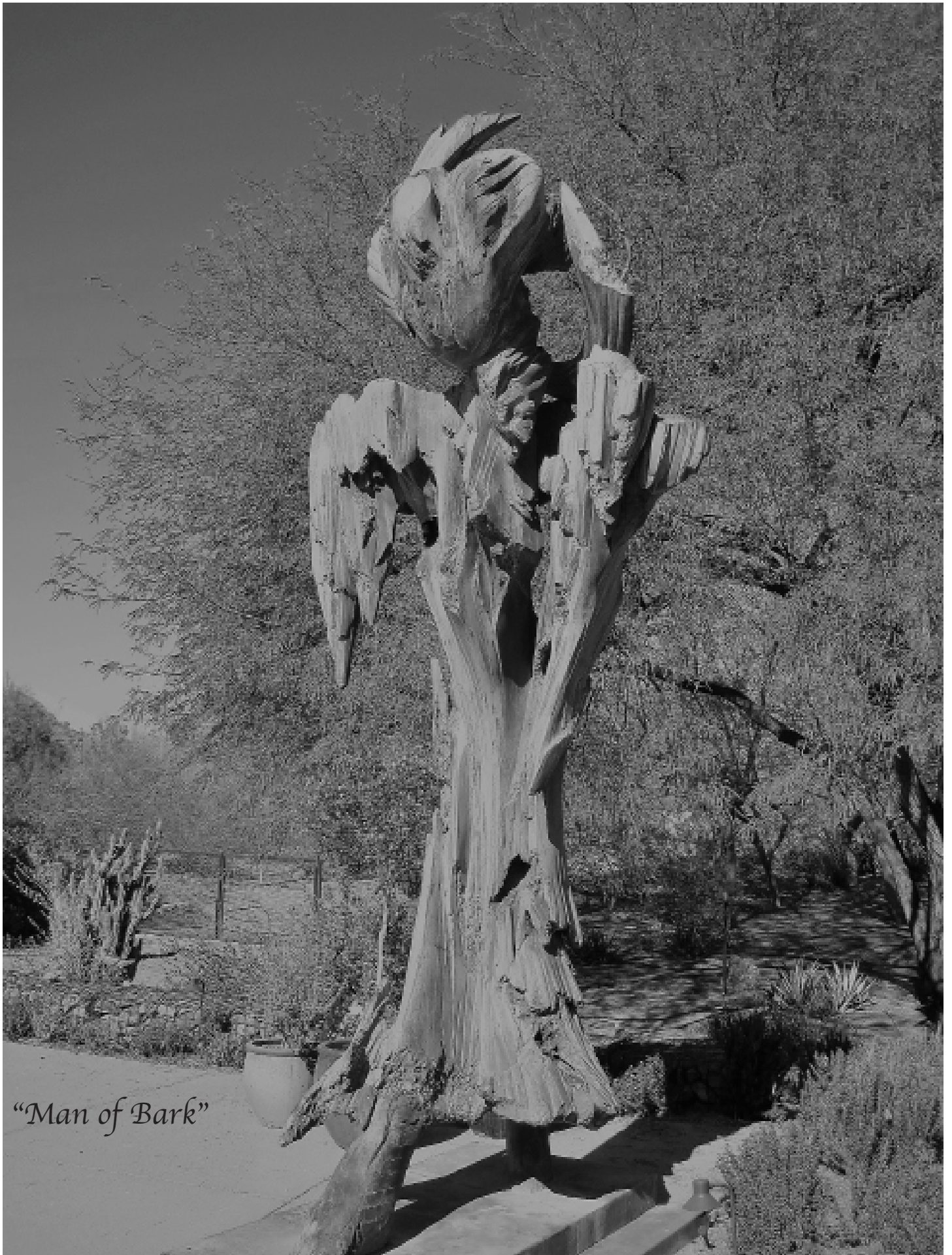
Anthony Bourdain

Torie Cooper

You strung yourself up
like a Peking duck
at a Chinese market.
We cried,
chopping onions
with a dull knife.
Slowly stirring simmering pot
of congealed wounds,
adding too much salt.
Most of us
die horizontal.



"Plant Man"



"Man of Bark"



"Data's Head"



“Silent Pond”

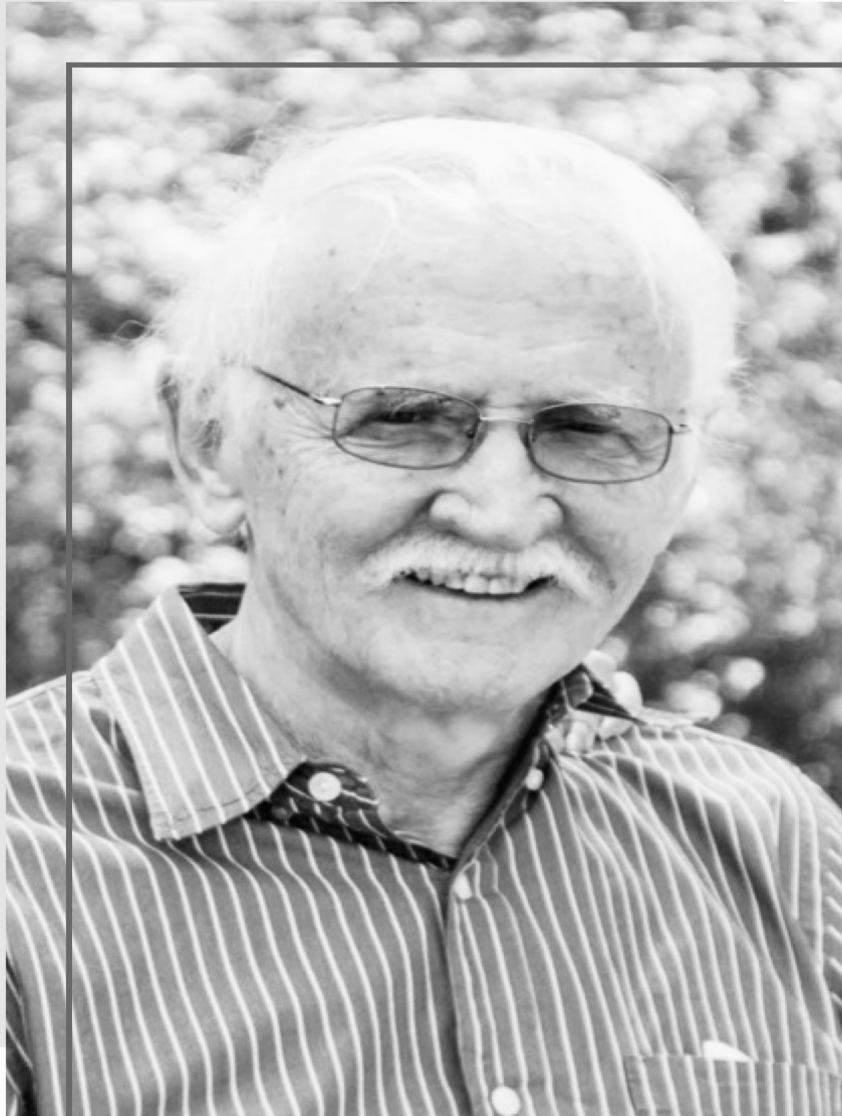


“Winged Man”



“Haunted Ride”

Featured Contributor ~ Poetry



Robert Funderburk

Robert Funderburk was born by coal oil lamplight in a tin-roofed farmhouse outside Liberty, Mississippi. He moved to Baton Rouge, graduated from LSU, and now is a retired parole officer spending his time writing and enjoying a country home on fifty acres of wilderness with his wife, Barbara, in Olive Branch, Louisiana. Robert has had seventeen novels published, along with fifty poems and two short stories in various literary journals.

That Starry Friday

Robert Funderburk

(Accepted by Poetry Quarterly, Winter 2021 Edition)

Beneath a purple dome
Pierced with lights
As I gazed at your eyes
More eloquent than
The tongue's glib mutterings
An errant wind
Blew through my soul
Scraping sorrow's ancient leaves
Across the tumbled stone

I could only imagine
What lay beneath
The dew-soft glimmering
Of your breast
A wall, stone and mortared strong
Or a music box
Filled with burnished memories
And crystal fears
Bereft of time's consoling song

The Last 5 AM

Robert Funderburk

Candle burning down,
smoke of a final cigarette
drifts toward the lost morning.
I rise for bed and, in total
surprise, leave an old
familiar sorrow. Companion
through countless vigils, he
yields to relentless exorcism
of the years.

To sleep at last in darkness,
the past no more than smoke,
will sustain this interval
of life into life.

Featured Contributor ~ Photography



Isabel Gómez de Diego

– Isabel Gómez de Diego (b. 1991) is a Poetess, Photographer and Erudite Young Women. Photography is her ideal médium for her inspiration and investigation, but her much Evidence is derived from Art. Bachelor of Arts, Plastic, Image and Design is also member of Spanish Centre for Reprographic Rights (CEDRO), and herself concerns with photographs, the written word, and print media. She was a characteristic performer in Berlin, Hannover (Germany) and her publications can provide a fertile field of inquiry; and she wants to sing with native birds and insects

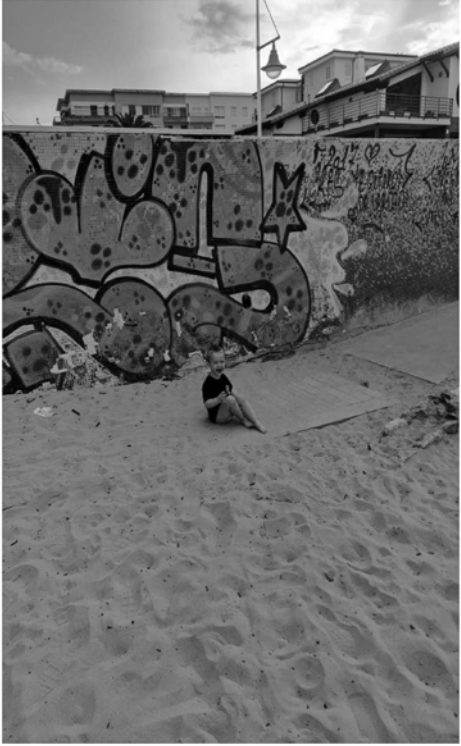
SEA & SKY IN A GLASS CUP
(ISABEL GOMEZ DE DIEGO'S PICS
IN SUANCES, CANTABRIA, SPAIN)





~ Isabel Gómez de Diego





Featured Contributor ~ Fiction



Doug Hawley

The author is a little old man who lives with editor Sharon and cat Kitzhaber in Oregon USA. After doing time as an actuary he writes, hikes, and volunteers.

Website <https://sites.google.com/site/aberrantword/>

The Afterwife

by Doug Hawley

Duke had been married to Sally for twenty years before she died of cancer. To his extreme unhappiness, he found out that Sally didn't believe in sex after marriage. During those twenty years, Duke tried to get sex everywhere, but Sally checked on his every movement and every minute. She examined his cell phone and social media every fifteen minutes. Because she had a lot more money than he did, he stuck with her for the financial benefits, but he longed to cut his leash.

After his Sally died, Duke feverishly pursued his freedom to the limits. The first day he arranged for an escort, but she came with her boyfriend who beat him up and took his money. Next Duke came home with a drunk that he met at a bar. Before they could get to the bedroom, his hookup became sick and after her projectile vomiting started, they decided that it was a bad idea to proceed.

A week after that Duke's boss Sheila agreed to go drinking with him after work. On their way to a local dive bar, his car was T-boned. Duke had one lung punctured and Sheila got a broken arm from the crash.

When Duke had healed adequately he went to Aphrodite's Men's Club and got a lap dance. Afterwards, someone stabbed him in the dark parking lot. It hurt like hell, but it was a minor wound.

The morning after, he got a call. The caller ID was Sally / Heaven.

When he picked up he heard a spectral Sally "Damn it, I told you no women. The next time you try to hook up with someone, you and the woman will die a horrible death, and your afterlife will be hell. You lied when you said there would be no women after me. You even used that corny quote from 'Titanic' 'Our love will go on.'" It must have been all about my money."

"Sally, there is no such thing as hell and if there were and you are in heaven, how would you know anything about it?"

“In heaven we get three thousand television channels, one of which is Hell. We get to see what happens there. I admit I get some savage pleasure out of seeing what happens to war lords and politicians. Let me tell you about what some of the inhabitants of the outer ring of hell do: Run naked through fields of nettles and blackberries over ground covered by legos. You may doubt me on this, but did you also doubt that I could hex all of your attempted liaisons? What is probably most important to you is that as your wife I can veto your admission to heaven.”

“Just an FYI Duke about how wrong you were while I was alive. I wasn’t frigid; you were just a lousy and selfish lover. I had a very active love life, but you never cared enough about me to wonder where I went during the day and where I went on my solitary vacations. Things haven’t slacked off in heaven, it’s a continuous orgy.”

Duke gave up his earthly possessions and joined the Immaculate Monastery. After his earlier painful experiences, he found that keeping his vow of silence much harder than giving up sex.

Appears in Dark Dossier. Shorter versions appeared in Written Tales (defunct) and Short Humour.

Better Than Nightmares

by Doug Hawley

Day 1

The nightmares started shortly after we inherited a fortune from my in-laws. I would go to sleep and immediately go into a dream in which my late in-laws tortured me. Before the first dreams, I had started to adjust to a life of leisure and luxury, but it didn't last long. These were not like normal nightmares, they were completely realistic. I heard all of the words spoken by me and my tormenters. I felt all of the pain inflicted on me. To try to make sense of it, I wrote all of it down.

The first night I was just continuously insulted by my former father-in-law Grayson Jennings. His remarks are imprinted in my brain:

“You miserable pig, what makes you think that you could possibly deserve my daughter. If she hadn't gone slumming with bad boys, she never would have gotten pregnant, and ended up married to you. After that, you had her get an abortion which caused her to be infertile. She'll never have a chance to have a baby with a real man, now that you ruined her life. What do you have going for you, a little muscle and a glib line? Once she was stuck with you, you treated her like dirt. Maybe you never left any marks, but you didn't mind twisting her arm a little, maybe slapping her from time to time. She was so ashamed, Mandy and I could not talk her into leaving you.”

“Too bad old man. She's stuck with me, I've got your money and you are dead,” sleeping me said.

“There are worse things than being dead, as you will find out”, responded dream Grayson.

The first night could be chalked up to guilt or an upset stomach, but it seemed that dead Grayson knew things that he should not have known. I wasn't too upset; I thought it was a onetime thing.

Day 2

It started with my late mother-in-law Mandy.

“It is so funny that your name is Duke. You are about the furthest from royalty imaginable. Were you even able to get our daughter Jessie pregnant, or was that one of your friends when she was drunk. I know that all of the sluts that you hang out with wouldn’t get in bed with you if they weren’t drunk or high. You don’t have manhood, you have boyhood. Are you stupid enough to think that all of the quack doctors with their pills and surgery will do you any good?”

I had no response.

Day 3

In the morning, I started to be really worried, because I hadn’t actually called any doctors yet, but I had been looking at ads on the internet. My jaw was really sore, and I didn’t know why. I hadn’t been physically abused in my dream – yet.

Strangely, Jessie hadn’t noticed any disturbance during my sleep.

When I thought it couldn’t get any worse, it did. At night my in-laws didn’t talk, they tag-teamed me. I was unable to respond to their kicks, elbows, slaps. All I could do was yell at them to stop, but they acted as if I had said nothing, they just kept hitting me.

After the beginning of the dream torture, Jessie noticed bruises and welts all over my body. She thought I had hurt myself sleepwalking, and there was no way I would tell her the truth.

Days 4 - 10

Some nights I would wake up bleeding, sometimes I would have contusions, I never knew what would happen, but it was always bad. I can tell you, take the verbal torture, words don’t hurt like fists do. Pliers and knives are worse than fists.

They know my worst fears. One night they are all friendly and we go for a walk. It was a beautiful day. We come to a cliff and I am slowly pushed to the edge and then thrown down. I scream all the way to the bottom. After a little time in extreme agony I wake up sore in every part of my body.

Another night started friendly, at a picnic. We were having barbeque. Just before we started eating, Grayson squirted me with lighter fluid and threw a match on me. As I went up in flames, everyone laughed.

Day 11

I gave up and went to a doctor who guaranteed that he could stop my dreams. He prescribed six different pills. He wanted to tell me about the side effects, but all I could hear was “No more dreams.”

Day 12

Dreamless sleep is great. I'm back to my old life. I've just got a minor tremor in my left arm, probably the side effect doc talked about. I can live with that after what I've been through.

Day 13

I've got to fill out some forms and am having a little trouble remembering my social security number. No biggie, I'll just look it up.

Day 14

cant anymore pretend. Stumbel, no reemebre. Say doc med stuf. Nitmare or zomby. Take zomby. Not last much. Wish no burn Grayson house.

Appeared in Jitter Pres, Yellow Mama, and Sirens Call.

Featured Contributor ~ Poetry



Roger D. Anderson

Roger D. Anderson and his wife, Judy, reside in Omaha, Nebraska.

Roger loves to read and to write poetry. He only writes when the words and emotions and feelings are suddenly moving about in his head. They beg him to quickly write them down, lest he soon forgets them like last night's dream. He sometimes writes as himself..... other times, feeling as though he is inside another person. Sometimes he writes on the dark side, and other times in the glow of the most cleansing and purest sunlight.

Recent credits include Fine Lines, Westward Quarterly, Cholla Needles, Nebraska Life, Chronogram, and Scarlet Leaf Review.

I am quite fine now, thank you

Roger D. Anderson

though the man with the thin, pale face
did make me feel quite unnerved
when I first saw him

he wore a black suit and a thin black tie
looking out of place, just standing there
alone on the sidewalk across the street
looking around, as if for someone
then his gaze entered my window
it froze me
through my partly tilted blinds
it entered without resistance
it penetrated my hollows
I glanced away for a moment, and when I looked back
he was gone

he returned several times that same week
wearing the same black suit and thin black tie
standing there all alone
staring through my window
and into me, penetrating me with unholy eyes
from across the street

he was there again when Jen stopped by
so I asked her about him
as she turned and looked out the window, I could see his blank stare
from over her shoulder
she said only three words, "What man, Annie?"

it all happened quite quickly after those words
men and women came through the door, rushing at me
holding me down as I screamed
they kept telling me that I would be just fine

people used to tell me I acted odd at times
and they would ask if anything was wrong
and I would always just say, "Nothing is wrong. I am quite fine, thank you."
it was my curtain

now I live in a small, simple room, by myself
there is a picture on one wall of some people that I don't know
and the men and women who come into my room
are all very nice to me
they just come in and talk to me, and ask me how I am feeling
and I tell them, "Nothing is wrong, I am quite fine, thank you."

I feel comfortable now that I am here
more comfortable than I have ever felt out there

when I look out my small window, I sometimes still expect to see that same man
standing outside, wearing that same black suit and thin black tie
but there is no man outside
I believe he has moved on to another sidewalk, on another street

I am quite fine now, thank you

About Old Poets

Roger D. Anderson

Yeats, Dickinson, Poe, Wilde, Eliot, others

I have read about them
and sensed that each had harbored unique thoughts.

Old photographs revealed,
or hid,
something within their eyes.

It was as though
they were searching for a secret,
or perhaps
they had already found it
and kept it only for themselves.

Each was distant in a world
that seemed not quite right
for them.

Possession

Roger D. Anderson

My jar is with me now,
and I have carried it
all my life

Glass it is, a very hard, thick glass,
not clear but dark, so dark
that I don't know the color

It has its uses,
and sometimes
I hate it

Butterflies go in there
and lots of other things,
some I won't even talk about

No lid of course,
else how could so many things
get in and out

There is a reason for all this,
must be,
but not clear, always opaque

Featured Poem ~ Guard Dog

by Glen Armstrong

The big dog's skull is haunted. No one wants to meet its ghost. Even the vandals turn away, taking alternative routes home.

It has bitten the heads from our garden gnomes and gnawed all the white from our picket fence. Its shoulders are broad, and its bark is as dense as a stone wall around that last Anglo-Saxon village to fall.

Glen Armstrong (he/him) holds an MFA in English from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and edits a poetry journal called Cruel Garters. He has three current books of poems: Invisible Histories, The New Vaudeville, and Midsummer. His work has appeared in Poetry Northwest, Conduit, and The Cream City Review.

Featured Contributor ~ Poetry



Milenko Županović

Milenko Županović was born in 1978 in Kotor (Montenegro). By profession he is a graduate marine engineer, but in his free time, he writes poetry and short stories. His poems and other work have been published in The Stray Branch, Mad Swirl, The Horror Zine, Antarctica journal, Mobius, Vox Poetica, Ascent Aspirations Magazine, The South Townsville micropoetry journal, Rio Negro Magazine, Axxon, Balkanski književni glasnik, Versewrights journal, Ariel Chart, Nova Fantasia, TreeHouse Arts, Emitter, Rusty Truck, Rasputin: A Poetry Thread, Every Day Poems, La Ira de Morfeo, Down in the Dirt, Edizioni Scudo, Tragovi, Full of Crow, Poets International, Kišobran, Osvit,

Robert Johnson

Milenko Županović

At the crossroads
of life
he made
a pact
with the devil
and became
the blues alchemist
with his music
opens the gates
of heaven.

Tesla

Milenko Županović

In love with a pigeon
without memory of his homeland
in a distant land
magic and physics
merges into the same thing.

Thunder Juggler
stolen and powerless
it leaves a huge mark on humanity.

And so in the dark
at the end of the tunnel
you can see the light
called Nikola Tesla.

Sign

Milenko Županović

Twelve

shapes

of the same

dance

in front

of the cathedral

has been

repeated

for centuries

mystical ritual

of dead sailors.

Bell

Milenko Županović

Tower

as a shield

silent

voice

it reaches

everyone

who

have will

to hear.

Bio Cont...

Revista miNatura, Eridan, SF Almanah Terra, Lupo della Steppa, Književni Kutak, Breves no tan breves, Illumen, and many magazines, blogs and websites, mostly in the Europe, U.S. and in Latin America. Many of his poems have been published in poetry collections and anthologies. He is listed in The Internet Speculative Fiction Database. In 2010 he wrote and published his first book, a collection of stories, and he also written and published few collections of poems (ebooks). In 2015 he wrote and published his second book , a collection of stories and poetry. In 2016 he wrote his third book , a mini collection of poetry Testament of Ancestors (published in USA, project Poems for all). His books Martiri , Simboli Segreti , Rituali Sacri and Collina di teschi were published in italian language by Edizioni Scudo. : His chapbook The Blood of Poets was published by Scars Publications. His ebook Ghost of prophets was published by The Argotist online. His brochure –collection of prose and devotional poems Dreams of Gods was published by Mount Abraxas Press. His chapbooks Immortal dreams and Psalms of last days are published by Dumpster fire press. Milenko is an ethnic Croat and lives in the town of Kotor (Montenegro) with his wife and 3 sons.

Featured Poem ~ *There Are No Stars In Deerfield*

by Lamont Turner

Beneath a shroud of soot and smoke,
at the foot of the towering mill,
I sit and dream of the sky
as another cold night limps by.

Cowering in the shadow of gigantic pillars
that belch the blackness heavenward
so that no faint speck can shine down,
I wait in hungry silence
in the heart of this hungry town.

I wait and I wait and I wait,
yet the heavens never clear,
and although the new sun rises
its glow is dimmest here,
so we wait and we wait and we wait
year after year after year.

There are no stars in Deerfield,
nor hope, nor joy, nor fear,
just emptiness and longing,
day after day after day,
year after year after year.

Lamont's work has appeared in Tales From The Moon Lit Path, Yellow Mama, and other venues. Lamont's short story collection, "Souls In A Blender" was released in 2021 by St. Rooster Books.

Featured Contributor ~ Poetry & Photography



Daniel de Culla

Daniel de Culla (1955) is a writer, poet, and photographer. He is also a member of the Spanish Writers Association, Earthly Writers International Caucus, Poets of the World, and others. Director of Gallo Tricolor Review, and Robespierre Review. He has participated in Festivals of Poetry, and Theater in Madrid, Burgos, Berlin, Minden, Hannover and Genève. He has exposed in many galleries from Madrid, Burgos, London, and Amsterdam. He is moving between North Hollywood, Madrid and Burgos, Spain. His address is in Burgos, just now. He has more than 70 published books.

AY, FROM FARMER!

Daniel de Culla



Daniel' Pic

Gelasio, Farmer and Dad
Sitting on the hat of that mountain
In Vallelado, Segovia
What looked like the front
Of a skull with nostalgia
Saw and felt the end of Time
After all the vicissitudes
And past adventures
When closing an ancient calendar
That looked like a book.
He, who boasted of a philosopher
Without the intelligence and knowledge
Needed to be
When contemplating a Phylloxera
Insect that attacks and destroys the vines
He got up marching home
Depreciating the vanities
That there are those who want them
And, with philosophical serenity
Was singing:
"Oh, the farmer!
The farmer
That takes little wheat
Sigh and cry
With his she farmer.
Oh, of the she farmer!

~ Featured Prose Poem ~

Ready to Burn

by R.P. Singletary

It itched bad like a fire you couldn't help to put out but with a big truck of men. Or maybe they'd started it, the fever. Her fingers itched, inflamed with red balls beneath, swollen and sore, but no blood, still just red, the color of Santa or Satan? Green, that was the scary color, her Granny always warned. She scratched something fierce. It grew somewhere else. By night, she was covered. Reddened, she went. Gray Granny played her role cast in shadows of simple black and white everything she'd ever seen before all like her old TV that shouted more scratches than colors compared to now here this girl troubled body the Granny did not know like she'd known all before. She'd prepared, whole lifetimes of harvesting, mixing, treating but never not seen any swole up bad like this one done presented, some new kinda new nature, she old but still never come up against something first time like this.

R. P. Singletary is a lifelong writer and a native of the southeastern United States. His work appears or is forthcoming in Bumble Jacket Miscellany, CafeLit, Ariel Chart, Syncopation Literary Journal, Last Leaves, Stone of Madness, The Journal, and elsewhere.

Repressed Memory

by Dawn DeBaal

My mother should have been here today, the day I became a woman. I didn't know about periods, other than girls whispering in the hallways. Mrs. Rehnquist, my teacher sent me home with a sweater wrapped around my waist. I live two blocks from school, she told me what to do.

I am embarrassed by my naivete, upset that my father never told me about women stuff. I am angry with him today and I miss my mother, she is heavy on my mind. Mom died nine years ago, a victim of a brutal homicide. I was home at the time, taking a nap. All I remember was coming out of my bedroom seeing blood everywhere and my mother laying on the floor.

Roger was cleared of her murder having been in Poughkeepsie, lodging in a motel on a business trip. There was no way he could be two places at once. Roger was my mother's third husband, adopting me two years before she died. My mother was a drunk. She smoked and flapped her hands when she talked, burning me with the cherry on her cigarette occasionally and one time started my dress on fire. "Oh Madeline, I'm so sorry," I remember her saying trying to put my dress out with her drink.

After she was murdered, Roger stepped up to the plate taking his legal obligation seriously. He was a kind man and took good care of me. I love him, but today, I am disappointed in him. Why wouldn't he tell me about menstruation? Why didn't he explain things to me?

I go into the house running cold water on my clothes like Mrs. Rehnquist told me to, putting them in the washing machine, then use the supplies Mrs. Rehnquist gave me. I need to have Roger pick me up some lady's products.

I am embarrassed to have ask him for them and picture myself going out to the garage to tell him what I need. I hope he doesn't ask me questions.

I walk out to the garage, self-conscious.

"Roger?" He is pounding on the roof of a bird house, and he doesn't hear me. The hammer goes up and down striking the nail into the wood.

A flashback.

A hammer going up and down. I scream. Roger's head jerks up.

"Madeline, what are you doing home?" He is caught off guard, I am crying, trying to tell him through my tears.

“I got my period. I need lady products,” Roger’s face reddens, embarrassed.

“I’ll pick them up.”

“Why, didn’t you tell me?” Roger’s mouth opens then closes; he shakes his head, confused.

“I have to go back to school.” I don’t go back to school, instead run to the cops.

Seeing Roger with that hammer pounding the birdhouse roof shook loose a memory so long ago trapped in my mind.

My mother is on the floor, Roger is standing over her with a bloody hammer, striking her repeatedly. Red is everywhere, I scream and hide.

Redial

by Quinn Crook

My grandfather was never a lover of technology. Still, as his prostate cancer progressed, he finally decided to toss out the old dial phone for a wireless home phone. He was firmly against the idea of having a cellphone, simply because he worried about not seeing the tiny buttons or pressing the wrong one with his big fingers. Even when I tried to tell him that he could change the settings, he refused, so it was a home phone.

He took that phone everywhere with him: to the barn that my grandfather used as his workshop, the bathroom, and when he went to sleep, he would set the phone cradle next to his side of the bed. Since he lived alone after my grandmother died, that phone was his world and lifeline. He would use it to call me and see how the master's degree was going or ask about my daughter or when the next time I could visit was. He would use it to curse out the poor driver who was 31 minutes late when he ordered a pizza; as I said, he was a man of his time.

My grandfather died in December during my last semester of my master's. I had always hoped he could be there to see me hooded and walk across the stage, but it was not to be. Prostate cancer has a funny way of causing the body to shut down, first causing them to slip into a coma before finally shutting down everything. The hospice nurse that stayed with him called me at three in the morning as snow drifted down outside my window. She said that his last words were as he got his medication, and in fashion, my grandfather said, "This stuff tastes like shit."

I couldn't remember much for the next five months. My body had more or less shifted into a state of autopilot. Somehow, call it an act of divine providence, I had passed all of my classes. The week before graduation, my parents called, telling me that they would be clearing out my grandfather's house for sale and that if I wanted anything from it, I should go and pick it up.

I took the day trip in my beat-up Honda and pulled into the small country house. It was strange. The lights were off, the furniture was lined with plastic, and the former constant buzzing from the giant refrigerator in the kitchen was now silent. The house was well and truly dead. That was when something caught my attention.

Rrrrring. Rrrrrring. Rrrrring.

The phone? The ringing sound of the phone that my grandfather had bought. I thought that the power was off, and nobody had paid the phone bill in five months. I must be hearing things. I continued looking through the house when again, Rrrring. Rrrrrring. Rrrrrring.

I walked into the bedroom. There it was, resting in the cradle next to where my grandfather's bed had once been. It continued with the sharp electronic ringing trill, and as I went to pick it up, that is when I saw the caller I.D. There was my grandfather's name. It wasn't possible; this was the only number registered in his name. I clicked the hangup button, and the phone went silent. I set it back in the cradle. I turned to leave the room when....Rrrrrring. Rrrrrring. Rrrrrring.

I picked up the phone and clicked the answer button. "Hello?"

There was nothing on the other line. No voice, no answer tone, no anything. Silence. Silence where there should have been something.

I wish I had taken a video, recorded the phone, or done something clever using modern technology. I wish that I had proof that my grandfather had called me from beyond the grave.

Quinn Crook is a nonbinary writer from Illinois. Their work has been published in Black Poppy Review, Bombfire Lit, Warp 10, and Celestine Poetry. When not writing they can be found haunting local coffee shops in the quest for the world's best latte.

I HAVE YOUR SHADOW

a curious passing
breeze is blessed
by her whispers

there's a reflection,
an uncovering,
a moment of being
elsewhere

she pauses,
releasing a modest
smile

they speak of dreams
and how ripples
in a still pond
eventually reach
their shorelines

he recognizes
the mercy of an
open hand

ONCE A SUMMER

Roger Singer

the song
of autumn
circles the
closing of
the cottage
as I remember
sun warmed shirts,
a soft morning foot
into a slipper,
misplaced towels,
pockets with sand
and night walks
into relaxed air
past sleeping birds
and owls speaking
of "who"
to a star
I know by name

PUSHING BACK

Roger Singer

I dislike
how night
welcomes me,
freeing my will
into the arms of
creeping shadows
just past
midnight
as the soul
pushes back
against
day and sun

ART ALIVE: CREATURES ON CANVAS

~ in the Pandemic 2021

The city's temperature is like a vice.
Orchids love this tropic Paradise.

Your sketches mirror strangely Goya's Count --
Paintings that appear about to speak.
Chiaroscuro helps this drama mount,
Embodying the hope through art we seek:

Maestro, art lets memory revive.
All the friends you paint remain alive.

Stillness

The eye of beauty opens wide for a moment --
the bright moon grows black a crouch of deer

rests beneath the trees gathered with no gesture --
as the earth light rises and rising dazzles our eyes.

For millions of years the birds are still here
talking into existence sounds we claim to own.

We are bound to a place cohabiting with them
prompts to memory. while light finds us now,

and burns on a crumbling leaf -- a wink from dead stars.

ZEN IN PARAPHRASE

Royal Rhodes

Rather than a legacy
of words you later mock,
I crafted a few early.
Now they let me die
perfectly in peace.

Why delay at the gate?
I carry a valid passport
from the merciful Buddha.

Poems on death are empty.

ERASURE

Royal Rhodes

A magazine had advertised
a contest on erasure poems ---
blacking out a host of words,
as if a censored document.

Like this my breath is soon erased
or words I might impatiently
forget -- the beauty I beheld
like stars will vanish, one by one.

Royal Rhodes is a retired professor of global religions. His poems have appeared in various journals, including The Montreal Review, Ariel Chart, and Plum Tree Tavern. He has done a number of Art/Poetry collaborations with The Catbird [on the Yadkin] Press.

THE ANTICHRIST

The sun is going down.

Sweat stains
the pages of books
as I read Trakl
and Nietzsche

and wish I, too,
had a sister.

Mutilated messiahs
littler the streets outside
some older than the burning sun
one thrown
from a tenement building down the street
last week

Howlin' Wolf's "Killing Floor"
on the box
broken by a good old-fashioned news flash:
Willie Dixon is dead.
Welcome to the war, brother.
Lucky you didn't go out too soon,
if there was a heaven
you'd be writing it a TV theme song,
ubiquitous and annoying as Cheers.

I can do nothing
but sit back and listen.
"I Ain't Superstitious", "You Need Love",
"Little Red Rooster",
"Wang Dang Doodle", all gone.

Night. Nothing
but books and music
to get through till morning.
Moonless night.
Seems like the walls are gone,
nothing but black and me
and this cold bed.

Turn the music up loud
hang the "No Trespassing" sign
on the door

open the new leather
cover of Nietzsche's Antichrist.

Some sort of absent fondling.
Grete Trakl would understand.
Hope it gets me,
all of us,
on till morning.

SOMETIMES THE DAY JUST GOES ON FOREVER

by Robert Beveridge

Slow drip of oil
on asphalt. The parking lot
stretches around the back
of the convenience store,
may go on forever. One car.
Old Torino: it leaks a rainbow.
There must be a road,
a driveway, around here somewhere.

*Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *ubu*, *WordCity*, and *The Erozone*, among others.*

The Dead Come at Christmas

by Maggie Nerz Iribarne

Polly was a pale girl with red hair who often thought about death. Her brother and sister and parents had died when she was very young. Her brother's body in his dark suit, the first she had ever seen, frightened and intrigued her. A few years later, Polly knelt beside her sister's casket, reached for her cool, soft hand. Polly tried to picture what it would feel like for her own warm, familiar body to be stiff, cold. The solid fact of death followed her through her young life. She read the obituaries each week with an obsessive interest, constantly walked the cemetery, studying the names on the headstones.

At 30, after she'd married Liam and had her children, she began seeing the dead people on Christmas Eve. There were hundreds of them, different ages and styles of dress, walking a candlelit road outside her house. That first time, Polly stood at the window trembling, mouth agape. Of course, she was interested, but she was also terrified. She screamed for her son, Jarvis.

“What do you see?” she asked him, pointing out the window.

“Just darkness, Mommy.”

From that point forward, she claimed that Christmas Eve made her sad, and everyone expected that Polly take to her bed for the holiday.

...

The years passed, Polly found herself to be an old woman with all of her family and friends dead. She did not know why she continued to live, why day after day her heart beat in her chest, her skin emanated warmth, her blood trickled through stiff veins.

Her 95th Christmas Eve, Polly got out of bed, moved to the window, and saw the dead marching their solemn march. She stared at their faces, wanting desperately to recognize one of them. Liam? Jarvis? Beatrice? Mama? Papa? Her hand spread out on the cold window, hoping one of the spirit's own hands would mirror hers on the other side.

Polly took her walker, hobbled outside in her robe and slippers, the icy air clawing up her legs. For the first time in 65 years she walked out among her dreaded dead. They swirled, danced, swept around her, but it was not scary. Astounded by the silence, the lack of sadness, the warmth, she wanted to stay with them, always.

“Mrs. Cantwell!” her nurse, Cynthia, appeared, interrupted Polly's reverie, pulled her inside.

“What am I going to do with you?” she scolded. “Am I going to have to send you to the home?” Cynthia said, directing Polly inside to bed.

“You better be good, Mrs. C. No trouble,” she touched Polly’s cheek, shut off the light, closed and locked the door.

Polly, her blanket pulled up to her chin, listened to all the sounds, the ticking clock, the creaks and groans of the house. Her eyes moved to the end of the bed, where a collection of spirits assembled. A cloud-like finger reached out, beckoned her forward. Polly smiled, the joy of Christmas, at last, overwhelming her.

The Storm

by Maggie Nerz Iribarne

We sat on the fence dividing our yards. We watched the clouds gather in the distance. We observed our neighbors going about their business, oblivious to what was about to hit.

Yesterday, we followed the instructions: two bites from an apple snatched from an orchard growing beside water, a yellow taper candle lit and burned down to its nub, the words, over and over, the incantation for a sudden, catastrophic storm.

Stella and I bonded over our shared hatred for parental authority. For me, the rigor of high expectations, for Stella, downright abuse.

In autumn, we discovered a book of spells inside a tree trunk in the woods behind our development. We spent the winter whispering the words we found on its pages. At first, nothing.

Then, Stella, after a particularly bad run-in with her father, spat out the spell, the one with the roses drawn in deep red up the side of its page, “A Spell to Bring on a Horrible Storm.” First, we snickered at the straightforwardness of the title. Then, Stella’s soft mutterings grew to shouts, “Bring the lashings, bring the rain, bring the destruction, bring the pain!” Lightning struck, peeled out of the sky, grounded itself beside us. Smoke rose, filled our nostrils with a burning incense. We had found our power. We would try again, try for more. We needed to plan.

So, there we were watching, waiting in summer’s humid air for a storm that would wipe everything away. A storm that would clear a path, set us free. As we intended, the winds kicked up, a lawn chair took off and slammed into the side of a house. A hose levitated like a snake, high in the sky, hissing with rage. We caught snatches of screams on the heightening winds, cries of terror. For the first time, fear and regret pooled in my chest.

Our plan was to leave together, take flight. We knew we could disappear with just the words, “Take us high, teach us to fly,” while holding a feather from the first robin seen in spring and the snapped shoelace from an enemy’s boot – ours taken from Stella’s father. We were ready for our final escape.

The storm intensified, I felt the desperation of Dorothy as she searched for Auntie Em during that famous Kansas tornado. I abandoned my friend, bolted from the fence, rain in my face, pushing against the wind. I ran to my house, banged on the locked door. My mother's teary eyes and open mouth appeared in the window, all I needed to see. I fell into her arms.

I turned to see Stella rising, rising.

Maggie Nerz Iribarne is 53, living her writing dream in a yellow house in Syracuse, New York. She writes about teenagers, witches, the very old, bats, cats, priests/nuns, cleaning ladies, runaways, struggling teachers, and neighborhood ghosts, among many other things. She keeps a portfolio of her published work at <https://www.maggienerziribarne.com>.

Winter Wait

I gathered fallen leaves in October,
pinned them to the walls
of my apartment in December,
hoping to stretch Autumn
a few weeks longer;
hoping to keep impatient Winter
waiting in the downstairs lobby,
pacing the mucky tile, biting fingernails,
flicking them to the floor like snow flurries.

But the nights fluttered and flew,
their serrated edges threatening to
draw icy blood from vulnerable veins.

Eventually, Winter wormed his way
into my insufficient sanctuary.

Upon Whose Brow Famine Had Written Fiend

by Lee Clark Zumpe

She shrank away into a corner
of the unfurnished apartment,
her shadow getting leaner
every day;
the darkness at night
bit into her flesh,
each morning she seemed
more pallid,
more feeble.

In her youth,
she had been a beauty –
of that, there was no doubt:
the boys would linger
on the front steps
waiting to light her cigarette
or smell her perfume;
she found she could live
off smiles and innocent kisses
for a while –
eventually, they wanted
more.

But the dark days
took all the boys away,
and the old men had
no spare change
for her;
one harsh winter
robbed her of all that beauty.

Now she sits
and waits for another
caller to appear on the steps.

When They Became Monsters

by Lee Clark Zumpe

the sound of children playing
dodge ball in the street,
faces flush with anticipation,
 replaced by mothers weeping,
 madmen raving to the callous moon;

the once unwelcome chatter
of mindless television,
candy apple red cartoon violence,
 replaced by gaunt newsmen
 reciting statistics mechanically;

the buzz of weekends in the park
beneath the shade of spreading oaks,
picnic basket sandwiches and lemonade,
 replaced by bulldozers shifting dirt,
 trucks ferrying bodies to mass graves;

their small hands ever searching
for balance and security,
tiny fingers squirming with need,
 replaced by talons, writhing tentacles,
 claws and cockroach appendages;

the innocence of juvenile obsessions,
hoarding playthings in closet caves
and toy box treasure chests,
 replaced by hideous fixations,
 bloodlust and a cache of bones;

the softly whispered prayers
on bent knees at the bedside,
framed by naïve smiles and giggles,
replaced by howls and curses,
gnashing teeth and cackles

the hush of households after dark
with children tucked in bed,
like angels without malice,
replaced by screams and slayings,
and wicked devils without mercy.

Lee Clark Zumpe, an entertainment columnist with Tampa Bay Newspapers, earned his bachelor's in English at the University of South Florida. He began writing poetry and fiction in the early 1990s. His work has regularly appeared in a variety of literary journals and genre magazines over the last two decades. Publication credits include Tiferet, Zillah, The Ugly Tree, Modern Drunkard Magazine, Red Owl, Jones Av., Main Street Rag, Space & Time, Mythic Delirium and Weird Tales.

Lee lives on the west coast of Florida with his wife and daughter. Visit www.leeclarkzumpe.com.

Make Room! Make Room!

Their field is wide
Enough for the soldiers
From every country in time.

Crowded, always crowded,
Not an inch to turn
Away from so much grief.
But still the god calls to them,
“Make room! Make room!”

And so they bunch closer
Together, a Roman soldier,
A Viet Cong boy in black,
Doughboys without faces,
Grudgingly make room
For the new war dead
Arriving unexpectedly
At all dark, bloody hours.

Death’s badges identify them
Victims of catapults, boiling oil,
I.E.D.s, napalm and gas,
Sticks and stones,
All the tools of the wars
That led them all here
Where there is no need
To speak, only to acknowledge
Tears and every once proud flag.

The Farmer's Wife

by Christopher Woods

Nights are her freedom.
After sunset the dreams stir
As she washes the dishes,
Puts the babies to bed.
When the last lights are out,
She climbs into bed beside him,
His rough hands, three day beard,
Her husband of six years,
Listens to his exhausted sleep.

Her magic show begins.
The old lovers come one by one,
Surround the bed, gesturing,
Begging her to return to them.
She welcomes each one,
None of them yet twenty,
Their touch, their taste, their glory
Still not faded in her mind
Most nights, the darkness swollen,
Pregnant with meaning,
Until she is spent, exhausted.

When daylight comes, she awakens
In a stale bed, a vacant life,
Every morning so much like the next.

Cigar Store Indian

by Christopher Woods

Late afternoon wind
gathers the scratch-off tickets
in the Quik-Stop parking lot
and makes tiny cyclones
around my headdress.
teenagers are barfing
cheap wine at my feet.
and yes, some people
do actually buy cigars here.

Don't ask me about before,
endless fields and streams,
wind blowing the high grasses
before the Iron Horse
and the cavalry arrived
with their diseases
and smallpox blankets
for trade.

Christopher Woods is a writer and photographer who lives in Chappell Hill, Texas. He has published a novel, THE DREAM PATCH, a prose collection, UNDER A RIVERBED SKY, and a book of stage monologues for actors, HEART SPEAK. His photographs can be seen in his galleries: <http://christopherwoods.zenfolio.com/>, <https://www.instagram.com/dreamwood77019/> His photography prompt book for writers, FROM VISION TO TEXT, is forthcoming from PROPERTIUS PRESS. His novella, HEARTS IN THE DARK, was recently published by RUNNING WILD PRESS. His poetry chapbook, WHAT COMES, WHAT GOES, was just published by KELSAY BOOKS (kelsaybooks.com). He has received residencies from The Ucross Foundation and the Edward Albee Foundation.

Black Birds and Butterflies

Part One ~ Between Darkness and Light

Let the rains fall down
let the suffering drown
quiet the world
while I hide, high
within the clouds
dreaming on the wings
of black birds
soothed by the darkness
as they consume
my sickness, sing my
sorrows to sleep
let me fly
far from this death
let there be rest
in sufferings nest
so that I might wake
from the cocoon
of this life,
a butterfly
in the next

Black Birds and Butterflies

by Debbie Berk

Part Two ~ The pretty and the scars

I am
black bird
and butterfly
dark nights
and blue skies
I am flower
and weed
haunted
and full
of dreams
I am
hopelessness
and hopeful seed
I live,
I die, I grow
and I grieve
Colorlessly
I wither,
decay
only to
bloom again
one day
Vibrantly

Shadow of Death

by Debbie Berk

We come of age
watching time
by the shadow
of the grave

grow into
the dying
blooms
and decaying
bones
that flesh out
our ghosts

feasting on
the lost hopes
falling into a
field of lonely
weeds fattening
well the worm

feeding until
the hunger
sleeps
and the seasons
no longer grieve
our passing

awaiting only
the fresh body
the blood of
new seed

to harvest, to
bloom, to
dream

for a time

briefly

distant
the shadow
of the grave

Photo/Art by
Debbie Berk



Here in the Gardens of Doom

by Debbie Berk



Nothing will ever grow here again, no longer a knowing of another promised Spring, only the darkness will bloom now, only the dying of seeds to bring as only the dead dare to blossom here, the bones of their buried dreams an offering to the barren earth, bless the weeds, the decay, the rot, the seasons we forgot... only the dead can remember the beauty that once bloomed here before the darkness grew, erasing every trace, save for the lonely footprints of the ghosts still following that lost path to nowhere but the shadows of hope, hiding from the eyes that see clearly the hopelessness of truth...

Digital Art by Debbie Berk

pretense

by Debbie Berk

pretend

“I am strong”

even as I
crumble
fall

and trip upon
the scattered
pieces

quietly
collecting
their grief

hold close
a hidden
darkness

as not to
expose
my wounds
and bleed
all over

the light of
“you”

forever keeping
the secrets of
ghosts

www.debbieberk.com

Finder's Keepers

by Eric Burbridge

Is that an ATM envelope on the curb? Lamar pushed his empty shopping cart quickly towards the Citibank ATM center outside Kroger. The closer he got, the harder his heart pounded. Could he be so lucky? He looked down...brand new twenty dollars bill fresh out the machine. He picked it up and counted discreetly...two hundred bucks. Somebody is sick, really sick. A car door slammed. "Mister, mister!" A female shouted. He rushed to the entrance, but she caught up and grabbed his arm and he spun around. A thirtyish looking woman with a pimply complexion, dingy blouse and dirty jeans blocked his entrance to the store.

"Excuse me, get your hands off me lady." He pulled away, "You in my way," and tried to go around.

"You picked up my envelope, that's mine." Her lips quivered and tears formed in her dirty eyes.

"What envelope...what money?" Where did this low-life come from? She was lying, but what if she wasn't? He didn't need the money. Newly retired he was in good financial shape. "Move over lady you blocking the way." Shoppers gave them strange looks as they squeezed by.

"I dropped it and didn't know until I got to my ride." She continued to sob.

Nice try. He did hear a door slam, but his gut said liar. He scanned the lot, next to the shopping cart storage area there was a banged-up car with a couple of guys in the back looking their way. Lamar smelled drugs and its companions; lie, cheat and steal. "You know lady," he sighed, "I hope you telling the truth..."

"I am!" She got in his face. "There's two hundred bucks in there and I need it all, I got kids to feed," tears rolled down her cheeks.

She was right about the amount. He ignored his gut, took out the envelope and handed it to her. She snatched it and gave him a nasty smirk, turned and hurried back out the entrance doors. A car pulled up. She hopped in laughing and they sped away. He stood there.

What just happened?

You got played, that's what happened.

He let a junkie con him. A second later a car pulled up with a senior couple. They crept by with their eyes glued to the ground. They were upset. It was their money. His heart went out to them. He pushed his cart to a bench by the service desk and sat. He felt like a fool; he knew better and did not listen.

*

The extreme high winds pushed the clouds out the way. His spirit needed the sunshine. He finished his errands and noticed the gas warning light was on. He headed home down 87th street instead of 95th. He did not want to see *that* Kroger for the rest of his life.

He was running out, the last thing he needed especially in this area. He spotted an Ultra-Gas station a couple of blocks ahead. Was it open? Yes, a car turned in at the light. He paused in the intersection to turn when the car started to sputter. He made the turn and turned off the engine not to run the remaining gas out of the injectors and coasted to an empty pump. Thank God. This place had seen better times; the main marquee needed replacing, not to mention the dangling numbers, wind damaged canopies covered the pumps and several obsolete public phones with no receivers lined a rusty chain link fence that separated the adjacent property. The card reader was broken; now he had to go in. The inside was a maze of narrow aisles lined with outdated can goods and junk food. He gave the clerk behind bullet-proof glass a twenty and waited for his change ahead of impatient, rowdy teens and old folks.

When he stepped outside a gust of wind caught his cane and caused him to stumble; a quick adjustment kept him from falling. Females hollering and screaming headed his way. A woman in a dirty blouse and shredded patches on her jeans ran past with three women in pursuit. She stumbled and fell; fists flew everywhere and two of them grabbed her hair, kicking and screaming obscenities as they bounced her head off the pavement like a ball. The other continuously kicked her in the lower torso. People across the street ran off their porches nearly surrounding the battling trio. Sirens in the background headed that way; the crowd dispersed except a heavy-set woman who shoved her hand in the motionless victim's pocket and ripped it open. The high wind scattered the contents, but she caught the money and ran across the street between two houses. Lamar was shocked at the lack of concern for the lady. The nurse in him

reacted, he hobbled over to check her out. “Leave that bitch alone old man or yo ass is next!!” Somebody across the street shouted. He froze in his tracks, but a closer look revealed it was the woman who conned him at the store. He saw red.

“Good for you!” He picked up a couple of lottery tickets that might have been the victim’s that nobody paid attention. Cop cars with flashing lights and sirens blaring came from all directions. He pumped his gas and squeezed through the cop cars and ambulance and drove away.

*

“Hey, how are you?” Lamar asked his wife as he headed for his usual gas station.

“Good and you?” Emily replied.

“Okay. I ran out of gas on 87th street, but I coasted in a station and got enough to get me to Kedzie. I’ll fill up here and boy do I have a story to tell you. I’ll be there in a few.” After witnessing poetic justice, he was not as embarrassed to tell his wife.

“Okay.”

He looked at the tickets he picked up at the other station. He could not help but wonder what happened to Ms. Slick. Did she survive that well deserved beating or what? He finished filling the tank and as usual went in to buy five dollars’ worth of scratch-off tickets. They were a buck a piece and sometimes he won a couple of bucks or a free ticket. He got back in the car and decided to check the free one from Ultra-Gas. The maximum prize 500 dollars. He started scratching; it looked like a winner so far. That final number came up. Bingo!! Five hundred bucks, that beat the hell out of the two hundred he lost earlier. Since he was still there, he might as well cash in. He slipped the

ticket in his shirt pocket and struggled against the strong gusts of wind to open the door. The ticket flew out of his pocket. "Oh shit!" He grabbed at it, but he watched in horror as it flew through the air and bounced off car after car in the station. He hobbled after it as fast as he could, but it blew into heavy traffic on Kedzie and landed across the street. Lamar saw a little old silver haired lady jogging at a slow pace, stop and adjust her pants. Don't look down lady, please don't! But she did. She picked it up, started smiling and stuffed it in her pants pocket. She saw him staring at her; it was obvious it was his. She took off running fast for a senior.

He could not believe it. Twice he lost money. He was almost in tears. Who would believe this? He decided to put it in his fish and UFO story file and forget it.

Eric Burbridge has been writing for years and has been published in several literary magazines. He is currently working on a novel.

Frog Father

by Benjamin DeHaan

Father is missing. My dumb neglectful father. I could have cared less, that was, until a bug-eyed man in a suit knocked on our door.

I pull away from the peep hole and open the door.

The man growls, “If your father doesn’t pay the ten years of back tax on his imports, we will have to take the house and you will be evicted!”

Mom shakes and falls to bended knee.

“Where is he?” His eyebrow rises and he looks around the kitchen where our pot of river pig stew boils in a hearth in the middle of the room. “Do not tell me he has run off?”

He rips off a piece of paper and hands it to mother.

“You have two days!”

The man leaves and I comfort mother.

I tell her I will leave and find that bastard, and she slaps me.

After two days in the Grata market, I finally get a clue that he has left to the main castle to find a new woman and that his intention is to disappear altogether!

I head there, thinking nasty thoughts, and wishing he would just throw himself off the side of the castle tower, hang himself, and die.

“You need to tell your father you love him,” mother would say. I laugh at the thoughts and then see the king in the back of the castle. And father?

Father is asking for a job at the castle. There is no girl.

Animals float in a moat below.

The king’s wand taps father’s shoulder and he turns into a frog. He kicks him into the moat and roars with laughter.

And without saying goodbye; my frog father floats into a tunnel where two giant glowing eyes and a forked tongue wait.

“Love you father!”

Ribbit!

Little Lady of Room 203

by Benjamin DeHaan

“You don’t have enough money!” Jennifer Joe says, and slams her hand on the reception desk. “Now if I have to ask you again Gregory...”

She reaches under the desk slowly as if to grab something and then just freezes.

“Ok,” I say, and put my hands up. “I’m out.”

I walk from the Buckleberry Saloon, lick my lips, and rub my empty stomach. My camera feels heavy on my neck. The street is empty save a few stray dogs, and I don’t have a pot to piss in money-wise.

I need to take the pictures in Room 203. If she is real, the lady of campfire stories, then Benson News Agency would be saved. I could go back to New York with the sweat-drenched return ticket in my pocket a hero. We would be famous, get rich, pay off the debt, pay the workers, and not have to worry about finding another job.

Finally, I get my break.

I tag along a bunch of sun-aged prospectors looking for gold. I tell them I’m only interested in taking photos. I tell them the pictures I take are my gold.

I lie.

They huddle together. One of them has supposedly found a fat nugget but it is no wider than a quarter.

That is when I put my quail egg-sized nugget into my camera bag.

I tell the boys I was skunked and go back to Buckleberry Saloon.

I slam my discovery on the desk.

“Have your pictures,” Jennifer Joe says and shakes her head.

I open the door of room 203, my throat is slit and I am pulled in. The door slams.

I get my pictures.

FLASH...again...FLASH.....again.....FLASH!

I will be gone, but famous no doubt.

I have captured the lady, Elizabeth, white silk waving in the....ni....

Benjamin DeHaan is a speculative fiction writer, road runner, and circular economy promoter. He was born and raised in southern Wisconsin and now lives and works in Japan. His fiction can be found in Novel Noctule Magazine, Lovecraftiana, Write Ahead The Future Looms, The Dark Corner Zine and other various venues. More info at his website benjamindehaan.net

