

*Fall/Winter*

2021

#28 Vol 25



*The Stray Branch*



# The Stray Branch

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Fall/Winter 2021



# The Stray Branch

Fall/Winter 2021 #28 Vol 25  
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*Another Me From Heavens* by Yuan Hongri translated by Yuanbing zhang

*Lilith* by Sandro D. Fossemò Translated by Luca Palantrani

*Night of the Bat* by Sandro D. Fossemò Translated by Luca Palantrani

*The Votive Candle* by Sandro D. Fossemò Translated by Luca Palantrani

*The Carillon* by Sandro D. Fossemò Translated by Luca Palantrani

*The Tomb* by Sandro D. Fossemò Translated by Luca Palantrani

*ARLECCHINO'S KISS* by Sandro D. Fossemò Translated by Luca Palantrani

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# *Robert Ronnow*

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## **Crows, bluejays and pigeons**

Crows, bluejays and pigeons  
talk this morning. Closest we come  
to wilderness here. Autos screech  
and sirens scream. Only 7 a.m.  
My fat belly and possible cancer  
worry me. With a few months  
to live, I'd search the wilderness  
for some wisdom I missed. Or  
plain beauty of natural randomness.  
Knowing that, why do I remain  
in health? I must devote my  
present to my future existence.

The bluejays complain long after  
everyone else is silent.  
Love and friendship need the body  
and society. You belong, you want  
to belong, three days in wilderness  
and you gladly return to  
lovers' arms and plumbing.  
But one day you die. And this  
is the ideal independence you sought.  
This death is the pristine aloneness,  
the untouched wilderness and  
freedom from necessity! And  
it is certain. You do not save  
for it. You do not worry that  
you may miss your opportunity.

---

# To Fall Well

Fowl meadow grass—*Glyceria striata*—the striations  
on the lemma. Drooping rachis  
a weeping willow of a grass.

Recurring periwinkles, myrtle, *Vinca*.  
Helicopter petals. Evergreen leaves.  
Escaped from gardens, alien or native?

A little further by the spruce stand  
a new mustard, cuckoo flower—*Cardamine*—  
with pinnately compound leaves. What a find!

A good day turns bad.  
After you've died, one of them dogs digs up your grave.  
You may sit in the rain and think.

Maiden pink.  
The dark circle inside the flower  
a g-string or garter.

O to fail well. To lay low. To live long.  
To run slow. Feel the hill. Pressing down.  
Do less. Until one thing's done well.

*Robert Ronnow's most recent poetry collections are New & Selected Poems:  
1975-2005 (Barnwood Press, 2007) and Communicating the Bird  
(Broken Publications, 2012).*

*Visit his web site at [www.ronnowpoetry.com](http://www.ronnowpoetry.com).*

# Sandro D. Fossemò

---

## Lilith

Translated by Luca Palantrani

***“Adorable witch, do you love the damned?”  
(Charles Baudelaire)***

During the stillness of an autumn night,  
carefree gallop in Dunwich village,  
because that’s what I love.  
A harsh blow of gelid wind  
grabs me as a call.  
Panic enters the horse,  
that takes me far  
in a race without control.  
His fury subsides in the black depth  
of an abandoned cemetery.

At the sight of a little secluded bonfire,  
the stallion hurls me to the ground,  
in a labyrinth of broken tombstones  
that disorientates me in the gloomy darkness.  
The flame warms a beautiful woman  
who an apple is clenching.  
She is seated on a moss of skulls  
and reigns in two lugubrious grotesque trees,  
which unite a vast cob web.

It appears on a white stone  
for a moment the name “LILITH,”  
written in blood.

---

Around her perfect naked body  
there is a tattoo of a terrible snake,  
who touches her chin with his tongue.  
Her face is as white as a pearl  
and her fulvus hair falls undulating  
on the erect breast,  
in a damned atmosphere.

As in front of a queen,  
I kneel and tell her:  
“Oh ... Lilith!  
Your rebellion against the Demiurge  
woke the man from hibernation.  
Free me with your bewitched bite  
from this simulated torment.  
Act as you did with my ancestor,  
which has ceased to be an automaton  
in that chained garden.  
Separate me from the illusion of the Archons,  
so I have new horizons. “

On a dry branch,  
a crow that watches says: “Forever.

“Oh ... Lilith!  
When you rule in the storm  
stops the cars with a deadly thunder.  
I want to immerse myself in an atrocious flash  
and vanish into the ravenous darkness.  
I want to wander round the world  
and be furious.

---

I want the supreme power  
and no utmost servitude.  
I want my life be yours  
with radical passion. “

The Crow: “Forever.”

“Oh ... Lilith!  
Do not love ireful demons solely  
but possess me by magical rites.  
Come and dance in the dark,  
merge our shadows.  
We will unite soul with the spirit,  
in the funeral sculptures.  
Swirl the gorgeous red flame under the navel  
and burn your ravenous torch above me,  
in honor of cosmic sin.

The Crow: “Forever.”

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# Night of the Bat

Translated by Luca Palantrani

A chiropter flutters round a lamppost...  
which has gone out under distant stars  
of this mountain village.  
Those wings rotate magically,  
which seem connected to a macabre ritual.  
The night canines suck the poison,  
which flows in the alien blood of regular humans.

The universe embraces the beat of my heart,  
in these darks where there is no love.  
The lamp lightens as the day past  
and brightens the antiquity of a path,  
that reaches a field isolated and dark.  
There fireflies gleam with authenticity...  
as the divine spark  
that burns now inside me with intensity.

Fly away, bat. Fly far away!  
Spread your wings in the depth of the night,  
where there is no empty daylight.



---

# The Tomb

Translated by Luca Palantrani

A skeletal hand holds a lantern,  
to spread a glimmer into tombstones at night,  
in that graveyard blacker than death.  
I am tired of walking in the cold night light.

The rain bears a secret rhythm in the tinkle,  
that resonates on the street through a pleasant melancholy.  
No glow inside those spectres...  
They wander in a darkness never seen before,  
where the soul shines no more.  
We are locked in the cage by the eternal sleep.  
Most saddening is nobody feels any anger.

If I lived with people plenty kind-hearted,  
then I could shun so much pain.  
If I broke a wall,  
then I could let holding on.  
If I had a candle to perceive the smile of an angel,  
then I could escape the frost.

When a candle lights a grave,  
in the wind my shadow dissolves.  
The flame purifies the funeral air  
and inside me burns,  
in that magical warmth that time melts.

---

# The Votive Candle

Translated by Luca Palantrani

When the snow has painted a cemetery,  
I see a marvelous mantle,  
upon some mysterious sculptures.  
The snowy white renders tombs prettier and blacker.

A few ghosts flow on the walls,  
as if they were trapped by a gloomy screen.  
Like a movie tape a thick darkness wraps me.  
The moon seems a lamp hanging in the void.  
In the unknown is hidden an evil director.

When I wander through the crosses,  
in the dark I seek a speck of light from a votive candle...  
but I meet a star by crystalline glow.

The living flame burns by my heart  
and fills it with sparks of love,  
that never vanish.

My soul flees on the wings of the angel,  
to return to the starry vault.  
Free I am of a damned illusion.

---

# The Carillon

Translated by Luca Palantrani

Snow has fallen, on a desolate fortress.  
The bells are dead in the church of a village,  
when diffuse a sound artificial and lifeless.  
The luminiscent boards observe me with unreal glow.  
The car headlights cannot illuminate the tunnel of unreality.  
The lampposts await like solitary spectres,  
the gelid passers-by arriving on bleak paths.  
I isolate myself gladly from these walls.

A sudden electric crash  
abandons me in oppressive darkness,  
deprived of the bright shadow.  
I rummage with a candle under the christmas tree,  
where I discover an original  
and mysterious gift among the donations,  
which preserves a phenomenal surprise.  
I received ...an old carillon, with a celestial melody.  
On the Holy Night an angel came to see me,  
because from melancholy I wished to be free.  
By magic the light bulbs return to shine,  
through a crystalline sound all vibrates,  
in a crystal universe which is there to listen.  
The limpid symphony of the carillon  
spurs armony and awe,  
'till it penetrates deeply into my heart.

When the comet star conduces me to the glossy windows,  
I wonder the snowflakes twinkle in the shadows,

---

in there I comprehend the vivid light inside us,  
plunged into darkness.

An iced fountain sparkles in an eternal purity,  
which flares a soul like a magic lantern.  
A radiant flicker envelops a medieval armor,  
'till it thrives like a white flame in the glacial winter.

~ *Sandro D. Fossemò*

~ Fiction

## TO HAUNT HIS OWN EXHAUSTED HEART

*by Michelle Ann King*



*First published at Scarlet Leaf Review, Feb 2016*

Ewan turns the corner and drifts along a new street. At least he thinks it's new, although in truth it doesn't look much different to any of the others he's wandered down before, in the fifty years since he died.

He pauses beside the wall that separates the driveways of two identical red-brick bungalows. Is it fifty? Or more, now? He's not quite sure. He used to mark the anniversary each year, but it started to feel like a pointless and rather egotistical gesture. He hasn't bothered for a while, now.

A large, sleek crow perches on the end of the wall and tilts its head, as if considering him.

'Boo,' he says.

At first he thought that animals — especially birds — reacted to ghosts, but now he thinks it's just random skittishness. But then again, who knows? There don't seem to be any rules as to how any of this works, which remains one of his great disappointments. He'd thought there would be more to it, somehow — that there would be answers and revelations. Enlightenment.

Silly, really. Life had never been in the habit of giving people what they expected, so he's not sure why he thought death would be any different.

The crow lets out a croak and takes wing, so Ewan wanders on. It's snowing — or sleeting, really; more like thick, white rain than snow — but at least he doesn't have to worry about losing his footing on slippery pavements and breaking a hip. He doesn't feel the cold either, no matter how low the temperature drops. One of the few compensations for being dead.

There are a lot of other ghosts about, as always. Some trudge along the street, some mill around in apparently aimless patterns. Most simply stand or sit where they are, staring at nothing he can see.

A few look up as he passes, and one even nods, but nobody speaks. It's not a surprise; there aren't many who bother to maintain their conversational skills.

Newcomers often try, at first — they search for old friends, or attempt to make new ones — but they soon find the world is different now, and it all takes too much effort. Most people don't have anything to say that anyone else wants to hear, anyway. In that respect, nothing much has changed. So they wander, instead. They drift.

There are exceptions, of course. Some people still have a connection to the world, an anchor that keeps them steady: the desire to watch children grow up, to celebrate the successes of family and friends — or, sometimes, the failure of enemies. The most vibrant ghost Ewan ever met had been gleefully sharing the prison cell of his murderer for the past fifteen years.

Ewan thinks he should probably envy these people. Or at least, to be inspired by them. But his loved ones are long gone and he himself died peacefully in his sleep at the age of eighty-nine, of what would now be described as cardiovascular disease but in those days was simply called old age. There's no blame to lay, no vengeance to seek, unless he's going to haunt his own exhausted heart.

He slows down and glances at the house on the corner coming up. Has he wandered past it before? He's not sure; it's getting harder and harder to tell them apart. Or maybe he's just seen them all, now.

The sleet thickens, turns into proper, fluffy snowflakes. Ewan holds out a hand, and it seems as if they rest on his palm for the barest moment before continuing on.

He watches them fall, then does the same.

*Michelle Ann King is a speculative fiction writer from Essex, England. Her work has appeared in over one hundred different venues, including Interzone, Strange Horizons, and Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show. She has published two collections of short stories, available in ebook and paperback from Amazon and other online retailers, and is currently at work on her third. Visit [www.transientcactus.co.uk](http://www.transientcactus.co.uk) for details.*



~ Fiction

## **“The Spirit is Willing”**

*by Eve Marie Dobbins*



The spirit is willing but the body is weak Sylvia thought. It happened one night when she realized that she had the power to travel cosmically by willing it to happen with her mind. Before it began, the accident happened.

Her older brother was driving with her mom in the front seat and she was in the back seat sleeping. Jude was driving very fast approaching the three way intersection. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw the long silver oil truck going just as fast approaching the three way intersection. She recognized the logo of the local oil truck. She breathed in and then out, in and out. We will make it, she reassured herself. Her brother tried to slow down. She felt her mother's body tense and then she laid her head down preferring not to see the next five minutes.

They hit and as she lay sprawled in the middle of the road, she felt the people holding her back. Her mother's face was bloody and her brother, Jude looked pale as a ghost but ok physically. Later she would learn that her mother died. She wondered why she could not move her body. The paralyzed body would be how she would spend the next 10 years of her life moving from age 9 to 19 with limited motion.

The first time she tried mind travel and the next morning when she woke up.... she was tan. She remembered travelling to the Caribbean and sunning herself, enjoying the water and then doing some diving. "Why are you happy?" her brother asked. She couldn't tell him though because if she did, she believed her power would disappear, so she resisted the urge to smile and gloat simply looking mysterious. He later told his friend Warren, "Remember Mona Lisa painting, hmm."

The artist rendition of Mona Lisa with her secret guarded smile and how the eyes appear to be following the viewer. Sometimes she wondered if the force of the accident had given her this strength. As she was thrown forward, visually she remembered images flashing before her eyes. She saw colors and faces; years later, she recognized these faces as they entered her life. It seemed as if she was now using the entire force of her powers unleashed.

Silently she watched as her brother, Jude struggled with the immediate world of trying to earn a living, and coaxing his wife to settle into life in Queens, New York. He then began to gamble: surrounded by charts; he analyzed the odds of one horse winning against another horse; he spent hours with the pony charts. Sylvia watched hopelessly wanting to share that the universe was a fluke: there was no set pattern but only hard work and luck meeting the odds. It is like 84 year old Gloria MacKenzie who won the 590.5 million Powerball jackpot. She would have missed buying the winning ticket if another woman, had not let her cut in line.

Sylvia thought of the wonderful gift she had been given: time travel. Through this ability, she was able to view others taking pictures of the Mona Lisa at the Louvre; enjoy the beach in Nice; smile and nod with understanding when her brother discussed the latest horse race in New York. Then Sylvia's phone rang.

"Sylvia, this is Jude. Fortune has been in an accident. I am on my way to the hospital.

Sylvia was there the minute that Fortune woke up. As her eyes slowly opened and Jude left for work, Sylvia stayed on to monitor the progress of Fortune. As Jude left the room, Fortune turned to Sylvia with a strange plastic smile. Fortune stated, "Sylvia, I have had the strangest dream. I was watching the future." Then she turned painfully over and handed the written down numbers to Sylvia.

"Do you mind taking these numbers for Powerball pick?" She giggled as if surprised at the audacity of her request confiding in Sylvia, "I know it is a fluke but still one can't help believing that the more you play the odds, someday you will win."

Sylvia nodded and waited the next day as the numbers were called. It was a win. They matched exactly. Jude's partnership lasted and with the money from the win, they were able to establish a marketing plan for the start of a successful business that the local New York Post described as apocalyptic. Jude's construction company always seemed to be the leading edge of where to develop. "They hit gold frequently," Jerrold Gracy, reporter for the New York Post stated. With time, Fortune improved. Ironically Sylvia's powers disappeared shortly after the accident but she was ok. As long as they stayed in the family, nothing was lost.

“Hi Fortune, What is on the docket for today?” Sylvia asked.

“You know it is the strangest thing. I dreamt the other day that this little place near 138th avenue is going to open up and sell. I told Jude we need to be the ones to make the bid.”

Softly, Sylvia questioned, *“But how do you know?”*

Fortune smiled, “Well, it is just a feeling almost like a dream last night. I saw buildings and I saw people wanting to sell to us. I can’t describe it. Sometimes Jude would consider the odd twist his life had taken 6 years ago. He thought to himself we can never know what the odds will bring. And he smiled remembering the enigmatic Mona Lisa smile of his sister thinking aloud ‘I should plan a trip to the Louvre for all of us next year. I just might want to see the “Mona Lisa” in person.”

*Eve resides in Florida which lends itself to the unusual or often those with stories to tell.*

*“The Spirit is Willing” is the concept of being able to travel by imagining yourself in other places is one that has always sparked my interest as the thought of one person in a family losing a superpower and another person picking up the power in another realm.*

## Drowning

by Lamont A. Turner



Her thoughts arise unbidden and untamed  
submerging all beneath the rage till shamed,  
she sinks and is washed away by waves of pain  
no dam of love or reason can contain.

No secret sins lie hidden as she strains  
against the tide of madness where remains  
of every ancient evil swirl around  
and woes long lost are dredged upward and found.  
We both drown.

*Lamont's work has appeared in numerous online and print venues, including "The Half That You See," "Horror For Hire," "Death And Butterflies" and "Scary Snippets" anthologies as well as, Theme Of Absence, Tales From The Moonlit Path, Frontier Tales, Terror House, Lovecraftania, Abandoned Towers, Jitter, Serial, The Realm Beyond, and Dark Dossier magazines. This particular work has not yet seen publication.*

# Marc Carver

---

## **JANUARY**

As I walked through the park  
on a Sunday afternoon  
a young girl started to stare at me  
as I walked past her.  
“Look mommy it is Santa Claus.”  
“No that is not Santa Claus.” Her mother said.  
“You never know I could be and now I have to wait all year for another job.”

## **WEIRDO**

I came out of the toilet  
and a little girl came out at the same time and her grandma said to her  
“Don’t ever go into the men’s toilets again there are a lot of weirdos about.”  
I couldn’t help but think she was talking about me.  
I have been feeling that a lot lately

# *Holly Day*

---

## **An Afternote to a Book Without Us**

Cockroaches raced along the ground here long before  
there were dark alleys and rancid dumpsters  
truck drivers and greasy spoon diners, old hamburger wrappers  
to curl up inside. Before we were here, cockroaches  
scuttled in the nests of dinosaurs, fed on the sticky albumin  
of newly-hatched eggs, dug tunnels in massive piles of fecal matter,  
were old even then. They lived through  
the asteroids, the second and third great extinctions  
left petrified footprints in the mud  
alongside our first bipedal ancestors.

They will be here to see the last flower of humanity  
wilt in the heat of cataclysm, will polish our bones  
with their tiny, patient mandibles, will lay their eggs  
in our shirt pockets and empty hats. There will be  
no great cockroach takeover,



---

no post-apocalyptic ascension to superiority—  
they will always just be, chitinous wings fluttering  
scurrying, squeaking in the dark.

## **After the Fire**

The sun comes up on the wreck of parrots  
lights the low-hung clutter of branches.

Javelins snuffle out rot in the underbrush, noisy as labor pains  
in the silence left in the wake of ruin.

We stalk heavy through the avian Nagasaki  
upturning sticky clods of diseased birds with the toes of our boots  
wings spread like headdresses in European paintings of Aztecs  
bright swaths of blue and yellow wasted in a sea of greasy ash.

---

# The Emptiness that Marks Us

Thousands of years from now, the dead bodies we leave behind will have turned to lye and eaten their way through the earth. Great caverns will spread beneath our cemeteries as bodies melt through caskets as empty and huge as the cathedrals crumbling aboveground.

Small creatures will find their way into these caverns, their descendants slowly becoming blind with each new generation. Pools of water filled with eyeless fish and newts will spread through the tunnels perhaps still carrying traces of embalming fluid and lead.

---

# With No Champion

The eggs are disgorged from her abdomen like sticky grains of white rice, each containing a shimmering, miniature version of herself. Does she know that every one of these tiny creatures is intent on her death, that the children clinging to her back are waiting for her to collapse from exhaustion to feed on her sleeping corpse?

In the beginning, it's dreams of nursery songs cute little rompers with animal pictures on them comical events involving fecal discharge like the ones you see on TV. Scorpion mothers especially buy into this façade of parenthood, believe right up to the end

---

that her children will turn from her twitching body  
mandibles half-open in dismay  
perhaps make themselves sandwiches instead  
leave her alone to sleep.

---

# New World Order

I look for the apocalypse in your eyes  
find comfort in its presence. You are always prepared  
for the end, always have an exit plan  
the perfect argument for leaving it all.

I am an eager apostolate at your knee  
learning the paths one must take to break free  
from damnation, from love. My own eyes  
are a roadmap of buried condemnations, I  
always keep them closed when we kiss.

*Holly Day has been a writing instructor at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis since 2000. Her poetry has recently appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction, Grain, and Harvard Review, and her newest poetry collections are Into the Cracks (Golden Antelope Press), Cross Referencing a Book of Summer (Silver Bow Publishing), The Tooth is the Largest Organ in the Human Body (Anaphora Literary Press), and Book of Beasts (Weasel Press).*

# Victoria Hunter

---

## In A Mirror

Death is difficult to deny being  
Ashes are difficult to desire  
Depression is difficult to make lighter  
or make just a past dream

But sometimes whether or not  
we decide to face it much  
or say it is all that we got  
we must try not to always make it  
our one and only touch

*Victoria Hunter is an awarded poet from Pennsylvania. Her work will appear in Better Than Starbucks, Down In The Dirt Magazine, Amulet Magazine, and also on the blog, Writing In A Woman's Voice. Her poem, "The Last Time, I Had To See You," was nominated for the 2020 Pushcart Prize. Her work has appeared in The Writers and Readers Magazine, Issues of Conceit Magazine, Sparks of Calliope Journal, WordFest Anthology, and other press. She manages a YouTube channel, dedicated to the craft of poetry.*

# Alex Andy Phuong

---

## Museum

Physical buildings  
And artistic architecture  
Holding remnants from the past.  
Museums hold artifacts  
Yet artistic expression,  
Hope  
And creativity  
Pave the way for the future.  
This present moment in time  
Is the greatest gift of all  
Because it is, thankfully, not the last.

*Alex Andy Phuong earned his Bachelor of Arts in English from California State University—Los Angeles in 2015. He was a former Statement Magazine editor who currently writes about literature, film, and culture. He has written film reviews for more than one hundred motion pictures for MovieBoozer, and has contributed to Mindfray. His writing has appeared in The Bookends Review and The Society of Classical Poets. Alex wants to inspire others, and was published for the first time while earning his Associate of Arts in English at Pasadena City College the same year that he graduated in 2013. Emma Stone inspired Alex to submit writing actively to publications after hearing the Oscar-nominated song, "Audition (The Fools Who Dream)" from the "Best Picture" nominee La La Land (2016). He now writes with the sincerest hope to inspire readers, and he fully supports those who dare to pursue their dreams. The link to his movie review profile is Alex Phuong, Author at MovieBoozer*

# *Roger D. Anderson*

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## **Coming and Going**

My swaying branches will tell me of her arrival,  
and fallen leaves will whisper to me when she vanishes to somewhere.  
Carousels and carnivals are confusing, yet alluring,  
like her, when she shoots her web from inside herself.  
It can be quite lethal,  
but so very soft and inviting to lie in.

Feeling trapped may simply be accepted  
and have moments of delicious rapture.

The rushing stream quickly sweeps me away  
to the eventual eternity of the ocean  
and the never-ending line on the horizon.

As I am spit into the sea, I accept my place and my mission,  
back upstream like the frenzied salmon,  
intent on their purpose and their self-destruction.  
It is a long way back,  
but her web awaits,  
and I feel my branches begin to sway.

The leaves won't fall for a while,  
not until she is sated again.



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# The Clock on the Wall

It had been there, forever, or so it seemed to me,  
never noticing until that one day  
that it did indeed have a face, a very cruel face.  
I sensed it was looking at me and sneering,  
and on that same day, I heard it,  
a low, almost imperceptible, chuckle.  
Evil it was, or so it seemed,  
perhaps just my imagination.

The second day, I clearly saw the face leering at me,  
and the evil chuckle could no longer be dismissed.  
I heard it clearly, not only heard,  
but felt its gripping presence, making a very difficult day for me,  
with thoughts never before imagined  
and worlds never before seen.  
I wanted neither, but they filled me anyhow.

The third day was the worst yet.  
I not only saw the face sneering,  
but I could feel it and hear it inside me somewhere,  
echoing deep in my hollows.  
My senses were pounding as I tore it from the wall.  
Running from that horrible place with it, I did dispose of it somewhere,  
but where, I don't remember.

I returned on the fourth day and saw the small stain on the wall.  
Mesmerized by that stain with its hideous sneer  
and chilling laughter,  
I knew that madness would be with me forever.

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# Strange Journey

I met an unkempt man on the busy sidewalk today.  
He stared wildly at me and shouted,  
"You both must be quite mad."  
I sensed it was something he just needed to say.  
So I nodded and smiled to pacify him,  
and then went on to tell him  
of many things,  
much of which he did not understand.  
But I spoke,  
because he needed to know.

My next meeting was with a sad-looking woman waiting at a bus stop.  
She looked at me through spent eyes,  
then faintly smiled and whispered, "I know."  
I asked if she could tell me why,  
but she just shook her head.  
I soon grew weary of her company,  
and walked away,  
not knowing any answers.

I then met an elderly priest at the shelter,  
but not being of his religion,  
I felt I could not speak to him.  
Perhaps he understood this.  
He said nothing and just nodded,  
so I was probably right.  
We sat there in silence  
as faceless figures shuffled by.  
Then he disappeared to somewhere.

I ended my day as it had begun,  
needing direction.  
Will I have another tomorrow?

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# Faces at the Window

Gazing stares, I feel them there watching me  
Blank eyes without love or hate  
I just can't wait to run and hide

Faces at the window  
What do they want from me?  
Faces at the window  
What do they think of me?

I live my world within this room, windows on the wall  
Paint them black so they can't see me, uninvited all

Will they ever let me out just once so I can see  
What it's like to look inside at someone just like me?

No emotion, always staring, make them go away  
I can't stand to know they're watching  
Make them turn away

Faces at the window  
What do they want from me?  
Faces at the window  
What do they think of me?

Faces at the window  
One of them looks a lot like me  
Faces at the window  
Why can't they let me be?

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# Silent Nod

Forgetfulness? . . . not my fault  
Cobwebs of mind

Yes, I sometimes do forget to dust and to clean  
Not my fault though  
These cobwebs still prosper, even in pristine cleanliness  
They prosper, multiply, and remain forever  
Like those eerie creatures below, never seeing sunlight

Even with deep, thoughtful cleanings  
They are now with me and all around

But my cares are few, and it is a blessing

Worry no longer  
Secretly smiling forever

I have these new friends

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# I Loved My Job

I wanted to work there  
so they let me.  
The white rats became my friends.  
People there had white coats too  
but their coats had pockets  
for pretty pencils and pens.

The lights were always so bright  
and I liked that.  
Even when it rained  
it was bright inside  
and it made me feel warm and safe.

The people were always so busy  
writing things  
with their pretty pens and pencils.  
The rats were busy too when the people were there.

I wish I could go back there.  
I miss the bright lights  
and the colors of the pretty pencils and pens  
. . . and the rats.

*Roger D. Anderson and his wife, Judy, reside in Omaha, Nebraska.  
He 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. Recent credits include Fine Lines,  
Cholla Needles, Nebraska Life, Chronogram and Westward Quarterly.*

~ *Flash Fiction*

## **A Fair Amount of Ghosts**

*by Zach Murphy*



He plays the trumpet brilliantly on the corner of Grand and Victoria. He doesn't look like he's from this era. He's impeccably dressed, from his crisply fitting suit to his smooth fedora hat. There aren't many folks that can pull that off. He's cooler than the freezer aisle on a sweltering summer day. He performs the type of yearning melodies that give you the goosebumps. I've never seen anyone put any money into his basket.

There's a formidable stone house that sits atop Fairmount Hill. It's been for sale for as long as I can remember. The crooked post sinks deeper into the soil with each passing year. It isn't a place to live in. It's a place to dwell in. There's a dusty rocking chair on the front porch. It's always rocking. Always rocking. I'm not sure if the chair is occupied by an old soul or if it's just the wind. Maybe it's both. I guess the wind is an old soul.

This town is full of posters for Missing Cats. There's one for a sweet, fluffy Maine Coon named "Bear." He's been gone for a while now. I've searched through every alleyway, under every porch, and inside of every bush for him. Sometimes I think I see him out of the corner of my eye. But then he's not there. The rain has pretty much washed away the tattered posters. If he ever turns up, I worry that the posters will be missing.

I met the love of my life in Irvine Park, near the gloriously spouting water fountain, beneath the serene umbrella of oak trees. We spent a small piece of eternity there together. We talked about whether or not the world was coming to an end soon, and if all of our memories will be diminished along with it. After we said our goodbyes and she walked off into the distance, I never saw her again. So I left my heart in Irvine Park.

~ *Zach Murphy*

## The Garden

by Zach Murphy

The wildflowers wilt over their own feet as I trudge through the dusty, jaded soil. One of my legs is broken. My mouth is parched. And my stripes burn.

I wonder if the workers before me dealt with this kind of heat. I wonder if the workers after me will suffer even more. I wonder if there will even be workers after me.

The honey isn't so sweet here anymore. The dream has melted away. This planet is no longer my garden.

As I use my last shred of will to drive my stinger into the wrinkled ground, I pray that my final moments will be graced with a cool breeze.

*Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in Adelaide Literary Magazine, Mystery Tribune, Ghost City Review, Spelk Fiction, Door = Jar, Levitate, Yellow Medicine Review, Ellipsis Zine, Wilderness House Literary Review, Drunk Monkeys, and Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine. He lives with his wonderful wife Kelly in St. Paul, Minnesota.*



# W Roger Carlisle

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## July Fourth

You take the dog out with you, shut  
the door: I lie back on a warm bed,  
trying to go back to sleep.  
I hear you grinding coffee, pouring cereal,  
tiptoeing around the house.

The room is dark, the sky cloudy,  
it is raining; parades,  
barbecues, picnics are cancelled.  
I will eventually have to go to work at  
the hospital, patching up burned skin  
and eyes.

I curl up in bed remembering dozens of July  
fourth days filled with tragedy and loss,  
on-call nights alone at the hospital,  
wishing you would come back to bed  
and hold me.

*W Roger Carlisle is a 74-year-old, semi-retired physician. He currently volunteers and works in a free medical clinic for patients living in poverty. He grew up in Oklahoma and was a history major in college. He has been writing poetry for 10 years. He is currently on a journey of returning home to better understand himself through poetry. He hopes he is becoming more humble in the process.*

## Featured Contributor

# Alexis Child

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*Alexis Child hails from Toronto, Canada where horror in its purest form is a calculated crime against both the aspirations of the soul and affections of the heart. She once lived with a Calico-cat child sleuthing all that went bump in the night, and is haunted by the memory of her cat. Her fiction and poetry have been featured in numerous online and print publications. Her first collection of poetry, a dark and sinister slice of the macabre gothic, horror, surreal, and supernatural—DEVIL IN THE CLOCK—is available on Amazon.*

*Visit her website: <http://www.angelfire.com/poetry/alexischild/>*

*Find her on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/alexis.child.7587>*

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# The Devils You Know

The stars hang low  
fulfilling a prophecy  
that asks me to change  
The marble in these digested eyes  
keep looking through eclipsed sunsets  
leaving them bewildered and stuck  
On this fretful journey to forget

The wolves in the night never find me  
In haunted night  
This home is cursed by ghosts without names  
who suddenly die  
My mother would say I was a flower  
that grew without any light

I am a haunted house  
Where I choke on the ashes  
of shame and regret  
Besieged and tortured by hideous devils  
I am versed in pain

My eyes may never see  
The way they once did again  
You must glow to become  
the light of a haunted night

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# Devil's Bones

Dressed in black  
with a spirit to match  
the moon chases the sun  
An eclipse on a fateful day  
every few years  
and pulls her down into a deep dark  
onyx hole  
she's climbed out of before  
She tries to outrun the past  
She's tried to run fast  
but the demons are faster

~ *Alexis Child*

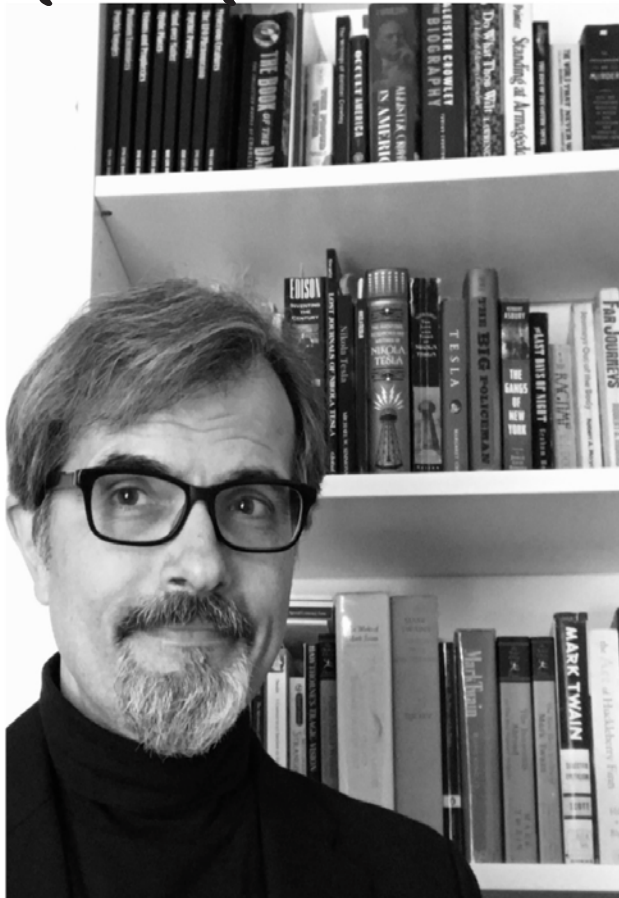


*Artwork by Debbie Berk*

Featured Contributor

# Arthur Shattuck O'Keefe

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*“Arthur Shattuck O’Keefe was born in New York and lives in Japan, where he is a Lecturer of English at Showa Women’s University, Tokyo. This story is based upon his novel The Spirit Phone -- a tale depicting Aleister Crowley, Nikola Tesla, and their confrontation with the enigma of Thomas Edison’s new invention: a phone to communicate with the dead. The Spirit Phone is forthcoming from BHC Press.”*

## A Spirited Conversation

*by Arthur Shattuck O'Keefe*



The spirit phone has arrived by special delivery: a revolutionary device for communication with those who reside beyond the veil. Sold exclusively by the Edison Manufacturing Company. Patent pending.

Mr. Vanderloop signs for the package. The two delivery men take their leave. He is now alone in the house. (His housekeeper is off today.) He gazes at the corrugated paper box sitting atop the old cherry desk in his study, illuminated through the window by the morning sunlight.

Next to the box sits Mr. Vanderloop's desk-top calendar. It is beautifully crafted in brass with an ornate floral design, fabric panels behind glass displaying the date. Saturday, 2 September. Being a perpetual calendar, it does not display the year: 1899. Nearly three years to the day since his wife succumbed to the flu. The calendar was a birthday gift from her.

Delivery of the spirit phone had been arranged by a special agreement, made prior to the public announcement of the machine's existence. Mr. Vanderloop has a friend who has a friend at Tammany Hall, center of New York's infamous Political Machine, which pulls all the strings on municipal policy in exchange for various favors (see bribes). His friend's friend is in turn a friend – or at least an acquaintance – of Thomas Edison. (It is an open secret that Edison needed Tammany Hall connections to get approval for his Manhattan electrification project in the '80s.)

Mr. Vanderloop, who lives modestly – in his own estimation – on inherited wealth in a less fashionable part of Westchester, considers himself fortunate in not needing to forge such unsavory relationships to gain an advantage. In the case of the spirit phone, the friend of the friend of the Tammany hall functionary who knows Edison brought it to Mr. Vanderloop's attention out of the blue a week ago, as they were lunching at Delmonico's Restaurant in Manhattan.

Mr. Vanderloop's initial reaction was sheer disbelief. Preposterous, he rejoined after a moment of speechlessness. Spiritualist claptrap. Sounds like a glorified Ouija board. Edison, you say? Perhaps the man has simply lost his mind. Didn't he try some harebrained scheme for magnetically separating iron ore from



rocks a few years ago? A complete failure, and an expensive one to boot. Then there was his wrongheaded attempt at discrediting alternating current. This spirit phone thing sounds even less plausible. He scored some wins with his light bulb and phonograph, but the only thing he seems good at these days is self-promotion.

Perhaps so, his friend replied. But the spirit phone is going to be announced in the press on Monday morning, and Edison will be demonstrating it at Columbia College the same evening. He wouldn't be doing so if it weren't a sure thing. He wants to get some models out on the market right away, and you know how these things work. Supply and demand. You wouldn't want to be left out in the cold once a waiting list forms. You can be one of the first hundred people to own one.

I plan to buy one as well, his Tammany Hall-connected friend added.

So Mr. Vanderloop was persuaded. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. The price- two hundred dollars- seemed rather steep, but he could afford it, and was assured that if dissatisfied he could return the item for a full refund.

According to the subsequent press accounts of the Columbia College demonstration, Edison definitely attained contact with something. At least there was a voice coming out of the spirit phone, and no evidence of fakery. Whoever spoke identified himself as a being on a higher plane of spiritual evolution, and requested details on the metallurgy of the machine Edison was using to contact him. Edison demurred, but his assistant then suddenly began shouting that the device contained silicon carbide, gold, and silver before Edison shut him up. (There are apparently five other metals in its composition, but the patent is pending.) Strange. Was the “spirit” mesmerizing Edison’s assistant somehow? And why should it care what the thing is made of? Mr. Vanderloop found it vaguely disturbing to read, and for several days afterward considered cancelling his order.

He walks up to his desk, opens the box, and peers inside.

Within, attached to a rectangular wooden base, is a slender, dark grey metallic cone, narrow end down. From the base protrudes a coiled up electrical cord, at the end of which is a screw plug, identical to that of an incandescent lamp. Next to the cone, attached to the base horizontally, is a metal cylinder with a switch next to it. The electromagnet. The machine more or less matches the descriptions he has read in the papers.

Next to the device sits a small booklet titled *Edison Spirit Phone Model SP-1 Instruction Manual*. He removes the spirit phone from the box and sets it upon the desk.

He peruses the manual. It is very brief. Three pages detailing how to activate and use the machine (which has been amply described already in the press), and advice to keep ferromagnetic metals away from it, so as not to potentially impede its function. It should also be kept indoors and, so far as possible, away from dampness, extreme cold, and extreme heat.

He unscrews the incandescent light bulb and replaces it with the screw plug of the spirit phone. Sitting down, he switches on the electromagnet.

A low hum emanates from the spirit phone, and even in the bright morning sunlight he detects a faint blue aura, a glow that envelopes it.

*Now or never*, he thinks, and begins to concentrate intensely upon the personality of she whom he wishes to contact. He then speaks.

“Gladys Vanderloop, I wish to speak with you.”

Silence, but for the low humming of the machine.

“Gladys Vanderloop, I wish to speak with you.”

“Howard.” The voice is faint, tinny, slightly distorted. But unmistakable. It is the voice of Gladys. His wife. His dead wife.

And so begin their conversations, which are wonderful, and moving, and joyful. At first.

Gladys wants to know how he has been doing since she passed on, and he tells her. At her urging, he does most of the talking. It is a spirited if rather one-sided conversation.

It is like this every day, and he spends most waking hours in his study. He has barely eaten or slept. His housekeeper seems concerned, and gently reminds him whenever the hour grows too late, or dinner has been waiting on the table for over an hour. She crosses herself whenever she has no choice but to be in the spirit phone’s presence. The days pass.

It is Wednesday, the 6th of September, their fifth day of conversation. The sun has just set, and the blue glow of the spirit phone is the room's only illumination.

"Gladys," he says.

"Yes, Darling?" comes the sweet, tinny voice.

"I'm so happy we can talk. I've missed you so. It's been hard."

"Yes. I've missed you too, dear."

"Yes. It's just that ... I've been doing almost all the talking. I want to hear how you're doing. About life where you are. About everything."

"Yes."

"Well, then. Can you describe daily life in the spirit world? Is it like a replica of the physical world, or something completely different?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Yes, that's wonderful, dear."

“What? Perhaps you’re growing a bit too tired to converse any more. We could try again tomorrow.”

“Yes, Darling.”

“All right, then. Good night, Gladys.”

“Good night, Howard.”

It is the evening of Thursday, the 7th of September. The spirit phone, activated, again faintly illuminates the study in blue.

Mr. Vanderloop has spent much of the previous twenty-four hours considering his situation. He has decided to try an experiment. He dreads what he is about to do, yet is anxious to do it.

“Gladys.”

“Yes, Darling?”

“Is reincarnation real?”

“Yes, dear.”

"Is reincarnation false?"

"Yes, dear."

"There is one true religion, correct?"

"Yes, dear."

"So there is no one true religion, correct?"

"Yes, dear."

"I had a very nice dinner prepared by Mrs. Hogan, my new housekeeper.  
Roast turkey with giblet gravy. Apple pie for dessert."

"That's wonderful, Darling."

"It was much better than the lunch she prepared. Cow dung sandwiches on  
rye bread with live maggots on the side."

"That's wonderful, Darling."

"Lately I've been thinking about setting fire to a few orphanages."

“Yes, dear.”

“You see, I’m actually Jack the Ripper.”

“That’s wonderful, darling.”

“Oh, shit,” whispers Mr. Vanderloop.

“Oh, shit,” says the sweet, tinny voice.

“Are you Gladys Vanderloop?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Are you something else, pretending to be Gladys Vanderloop?”

“Yes, dear.”

“My God. Whatever you are, you can’t even think.”

“That’s wonderful, darling. My God, whatever you are, you can’t even think.”

“You’re like a parrot. A damned parrot.”



“Damned parrot. Damned Parrot. That’s wonderful, dear.”

Mr. Vanderloop switches off the spirit phone and removes its plug from the lamp socket. He screws in the light bulb and switches on the desk lamp. He places the spirit phone, with its manual, in the corrugated paper box it was delivered in.

He feels empty, cheated, devastated. Yet there is also a deep, abiding relief as he sits, head on his desk, and releases the great, wracking sobs that resonate through his body. The fallen tears on his desk stare back at him as, silently, he asks his wife for forgiveness. If somehow she can hear him.

It is now the morning of Friday, the 8th of September. Mr. Vanderloop wishes to contact his Tammany Hall-connected friend to arrange to return the spirit phone. Also to warn him, though he has probably already figured out what’s wrong. For Mr. Vanderloop’s friend was also among the first one hundred spirit phone purchasers. He recalls that the man is, like himself, a widower who has not remarried.

The man's housekeeper answers the door, and in a grave voice informs Mr. Vanderloop that his friend has passed away of a sudden illness. He senses something amiss in the housekeeper's story, and will later learn through mutual friends that it was not in fact an illness. His friend hanged himself in his study, the spirit phone on his desk, switched on.

~ *Arthur Shattuck O'Keefe*

~ Featured

Poems

*Josephine Bätz is a student of film studies in Berlin, Germany, and writes poetry and short prose in English and German. In 2019, she was the student writer-in-residence for Berlin. Work of hers has appeared in Josephine Quarterly, Leopard-skin & Limes and Stadtsprachen Magazin.*

## **[i can't remember if this happened in summer].**

by *Josephine Bätz*

your eyes are so dark i don't know their colour / except that's not true  
it's rather / that i have never seen you in full light / or only as a silhouette  
against a flat sky / moving slowly as if you didn't want to disrupt the aes-  
thetic / i looked at you through the doorframe / and everything seemed  
dark / your hair holding out against the wind / was the only unruly thing  
/ you may have smiled then but i was never able to find out / because  
you refused and i was unable / to speak / something has grown inside  
me since then / its roots spreading my ribcage open / and it tastes like  
the darkness / my eyes are now of an undefined colour / and the day we  
met is longer ago every time i remember it / i cannot replicate whatever  
defined you / against the detached sun / sometimes i feel like i had this  
one chance / to change into something different / but i missed it / and we  
never saw each other again.

## **[we went backpacking to the outer rim once]**

by *Josephine Bätz*

you told me to come  
alone and awake  
in the morning  
and i had bought coffee  
for the occasion but you said i  
can't afford my senses  
forced aware and that you have  
nearly circled the earth to stand  
in front of me  
look and  
do not destroy  
no wonder you didn't make it through  
the night with a motto like that  
but i have fine-tuned my gaze now  
*for the next time*  
*you come round*  
*we'll make another try*

Featured Contributor

## Chella Courington

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*Chella Courington is a writer and teacher whose poems and stories appear in numerous anthologies and journals including *Spillway*, *The Collagist*, and *The Los Angeles Review*. Her novella, *Adele and Tom: The Portrait of a Marriage*, is forthcoming from *Breaking Rules Publishing*. Originally from the Appalachian South, Courington lives in Santa Barbara, CA, with another writer.  
<[chellacourington.net](http://chellacourington.net)>.*

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# The Pond Heron

The dead don't write  
but my cousin's letter arrives three days

after he's blown away by some kid  
in his own platoon.

Maybe another Georgia boy  
who's never been so far from home

so scared he shoots at anything  
moving in shadows.

The letter feels light  
for my cousin's voice.

He speaks of sheer petals rising  
out of muddy fields

spreading before the sun.  
Of a copper heron in shallow water

who dips his black-tipped beak  
to spear his prey.

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# In My Story

Peter all in blue  
flies from Mr. McGregor  
drops one shoe in cabbage

and forfeits his jacket  
slipping under the gate.  
My hero outwits this farmer.

In my story  
Peter finds me  
with a pink suitcase.

But don't mistake us  
no Alice and Mad Hatter  
no Grace and White Rabbit.

We're Chella and Peter  
in a wood at dusk  
far from family noise.

He tells me his grandfather  
sacrificed his own tail  
to save Otter.

I confess  
my father shoots otter  
and bruises me.

I say  
some pain is worse  
than dying.

Peter takes my hand  
under the harvest moon  
stars float downstream.

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# Pyromantics

the father  
shouldered  
the boy  
twirling a baton  
tipped in red  
while the father  
swallowed  
long rods of fire  
snuffed out somewhere  
past lips  
and over tongue  
hidden behind teeth  
yellowed from nights  
tasting sulfur  
as giants and dwarfs  
with floppy orange shoes  
snaked  
into dollhouse windows  
dangling toes  
between me and the boy  
who looked about nine

when I was nine I  
walked  
over hot coals  
dumped  
from the grill by dad

who bet ten bucks  
I couldn't do it  
and I said I would  
if he would  
and I did  
and he laughed  
wiping his hand across his mouth  
me in burnt feet  
crying

and I watched myself  
brand his back  
skin sizzling

his fingers  
tapers in a church  
that I lit

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# Taking It Home

Early June the drive  
from Fort Stockton to El Paso  
is pitch-black.

Lightning illuminates  
skull clouds  
hidden like family relics.

Eighty years of believing  
he's a chosen son, my father  
forgets crawling up stairs that creak

pissing in curtained corners.  
Forgets days he deserted my mother  
slapped me hard for mouthing off.

My brother forgives him.  
I don't even pretend.  
Mother is dead but not my grief.

I carry it like a newborn  
back to him  
to joggle his memory

unlock his heart  
to blues  
that never fade.

~ *Chella Courington*



## ~ Featured Fiction

# THE OPEN ROAD

by Eva Schultz



She watched the black car in her rearview mirror. It wasn't the cops. They wouldn't discover the body – or the missing cash – until tomorrow.

But it could be her partner. Had she really pulled off the double-cross? He was always one step ahead of her. Was he on her trail?

The car pulled onto the exit ramp. She laughed, lightheaded with relief. She had gotten away with it! The money was all hers – no 50-50 split this time.

The next exit was miles down the road. She could finally enjoy the drive. By now, the guy ahead must think she was tailing him.

A gun emerged from his window.

*Eva Schultz lives in Aurora, Illinois, where she is a business writer by day and a fiction writer by night. Her work has appeared in Daily Science Fiction and Havok, and she won the Writer's Digest Your Story #93 contest for publication in their March/April 2019 issue. She lives with a big orange cat named Gus and enjoys drawing, painting, and collecting typewriters.*

## Featured Contributor

# Milenko Županović

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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, 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.

*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 and Rituali Sacri 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. Milenko is an ethnic Croat and lives in the town of Kotor (Montenegro) with his wife and 3 sons.*

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# Totem

Scars  
of death  
in the eyes  
of light  
in new  
faith  
on the altar  
of prayers.

# Star

Bloody  
tears  
in the chambers  
of night  
screams  
of immortals  
in the dark  
of purgatory.

Featured Contributor

## Kara Goughnour

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*Kara Goughnour is a writer living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. They are the author of "Mixed Tapes," a part of the Ghost City Press Summer 2019 Micro-Chap Series. They are the recipient of the 2018 Gerald Stern Poetry Award, and have work published or forthcoming in The Bitchin' Kitsch, Third Point Press, and over fifty others. Follow them on Twitter and Instagram @kara\_goughnour or read their collected and exclusive works at karagoughnour.com.*

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# Red-Eye

I've been alive long enough to know  
the only death that comes too soon  
is one where you keep living,  
taken the razor to my wrist enough times  
to know you can't alter the unchangeable,  
can't opt for an alternate outcome  
in what's already past. I die  
in dreams and wake up breathing;  
I sleep in a restless way, like running for life.  
I have half my heart open on the operating table  
and half my arm still sewn to the shower floor.  
I am dreaming in spurts of red, gushing.  
I am jamming stopwatches in the hinge of front door.

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## In the Morning

before the sun cracks its galactic shell,  
Bob Ross on the television in a whisper,  
brush wisps against canvas, me sipping tea,  
my crescent lips crescendoing into smile.  
What does it matter, if I finish the poem now  
or end it later? What does it matter,  
if every day I hum the same hint of song?  
I am a smaller sum in some moments, these days,  
my mumbling heart herding tears to chin,  
my wants dead-numb. In the morning,  
as the dark still clings to my feet, I drag myself  
into the kitchen, brush butter against the pan,  
and give my brain a fry.

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## **I Write the Poem like a Bullet on my Tongue**

swallow it like bee stinger, fifty-thousand trees  
left unpollinated, our stars near nova.  
I am a being of honesty, but I also am naive  
enough to know that to accept some truths  
is to die, and so I swear day jobs away,  
slave myself to the desk, begin penning the key.  
I don't know the tones in which the future's voice  
will ring, I don't know if I will ever hold  
outside of myself what I hold within.  
I do know that someday all too soon  
I'll die, regardless of the time,  
and it's through writing that I'd like  
the time between now and then to be recognized.

~ *Kara Goughnour*

Featured Contributor

## Jeremiah Kleckner

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*Jeremiah Kleckner has taught English/Language Arts in Perth Amboy since 2005. During that time, he earned the Teacher of the Year award and self-published several books. You can read his short fiction in publications of Allegory, Frost Zone Zine, New American Legends, and Speculative North Magazine. Jeremiah lives in Jersey City with his wife, daughter, and an ever-increasing number of dogs and cats.*



~ Fiction

# DRACULA IRRESISTIBLE FORCE

*by Jeremiah Kleckner*



The following text was found among ruins discovered deep in the Carpathian Mountains. Carbon dating has verified the document's age but the content and translation are the subjects of academic debate.

The first warning came from the creature that dwelled in the lagoon's black waters. It cornered a servant resting by the wet stones of the castle's foundations and handed him a cloth with odd symbols painted in blood.

"A monster approaches, Renfield," Count Dracula told me after draining the servant of his life's blood. He released the limp body to the stone floor and held the cloth up to a nearby candle. Shadows danced on the master's pale face.

“The creatures call it a ‘kaiju.’ It is some type of titan, an irresistible force, that has risen from the sea and is headed for the castle.” The master grinned.

Rapture stirred my withered soul. This “kaiju” would be next in a long line of those who suffered the callous amusement of Count Dracula. The eternal horror of the night. Unchanged by time. An immovable object against which all forces shattered and crumbled to dust.

Preparations began at once. Birds of prey and rabid vampire bats confirmed the monster’s existence and its heading. Enthralled servants raided the surrounding villages. Ghouls, were-creatures, misshapen abominations, man-eating rats, dire wolves, and lustful brides swarmed the castle’s iron gates, hungry for living blood. The corner of Count Dracula’s mouth curled in sadistic delight as he assessed his soldiers from a tower high above the castle walls.

But the master’s eyes grew wide when he looked to the horizon. Powerful muscles relaxed and his slick red lips parted.

I followed Dracula's gaze along the mountains that bordered his domain and, to my shock, found one of the hills moving. I dismissed it out-of-hand, but then two beacons flashed from the center of that same hill, gold and black and as large as houses. They blinked away and returned with terrible focus.

The kaiju strode over the mountains and down into the valley. Scales covered it in thick plate armor. Gray spires jutted from its back like a forest of bone. Its tail twitched as if in idle anticipation.

The bone-chilling howls of Dracula's army challenged the booming thunder of the kaiju's steady approach. They charged, meeting the monster with a crash like a wave on a rocky shore. I watched transfixed as the gathered horrors disappeared into the dust beneath the kaiju's feet. Through the uncertain cloud of war, roars of aggression turned to agony, then silence.

A crack formed in the archway above my head and dust fell on the master's shoulder. His face reddened and, with a speed beyond what my mortal eyes could follow, Dracula retrieved the finest weapons in his armory. I caught only a glimpse of his magnificence before he passed me again, but the sight will be forever burned in my mind.

He wore a helmet, breastplate, and gauntlets made of enchanted steel. In his right hand, he gripped a jewel-encrusted spear. In his left, he clutched an axe with runes carved into the blade. These weapons, once wielded by those who sought to destroy him over the centuries, were now used in defense of his home.

The master circled, then darted straight for the heart of the great beast. Their impact caused a terrible boom. I crouched, covering my ears from the pain.

Stone cracked above me. I scrambled down the tower's steps to a sturdier area of the castle and looked out over the valley.

When I next saw the master, a black and purple cloud had swirled around him. He screamed and crimson bolts of lightning streaked across the monster's chest. Sparks rained down on the forest below.

Dracula became like mist and seeped into the kaiju's nose as his armor tumbled from the sky like falling stars. The monster scratched at its face, roaring in fury.

I shouted with exaltation. The master had hurt it!

Then a strangeness happened.

Orange-red light crept along the bones that crested the kaiju's spine. A hum rose as the light intensified. Steam hissed from between the monster's jagged teeth. Its jaws opened and volcanic rock erupted with a deafening rumble.

Mountaintops shattered.

The forest burned like kindling.

Waves of searing heat stung my face, but my eyes remained open and searching for the master.

Among the billows of black smoke, a thin wisp of gray mist slunk toward the castle.

Count Dracula reformed at my side, stooped and thin. His dark, hollow eyes looked at me. "We must away, Renfield."

I said nothing.

"I saw into its mind," he continued. "What can I do against a thing that is older than the names of the gods I have forsaken?"

Again, I said nothing. It was not my place.

Count Dracula carried me to a distance where we watched the kaiju topple his home like an older child kicking over a house built in the sand. I didn't dare pity him, but I understood. He worked so hard on those trap doors and secret passages that I nearly cried when the final tower fell.

And then the kaiju walked on into the darkness. No malice. No celebration. Not even a hint of recognition as to the significance of what it had done.

It was then that I decided to cast my journal onto the rubble. No one will know what happened here. Count Dracula's legacy of interminable dominance will remain unchallenged in the pages of history.

I am, after all, his rock.

~ Jeremiah Kleckner

## The Deer

by *Chris Blake*

The deer  
Over large eight-ball eyes  
Mirror our shame

Even without the biting air  
We would be no less  
A grasping singular mass  
Every moment the last  
The gun grey lake  
Frozen and serene  
Aged but pristine  
So unlike us  
How we need and need  
We fear  
We will always need

This shrinking O of a sun  
Sapped of all its yellow  
Failing slipping away

Bundled up children rowdy fly by  
Rude to the impatient woman  
So tired so solemn  
So obviously once beautiful  
Wordlessly confesses  
Her bitter widowhood  
Walking a dog  
Chewing its leash  
Taking too long to shit

She notices us  
Not for long  
No more interested than  
The children were  
Probably there are prettier lovers  
Tender memories linger longer  
In the summer  
Strains the dog's leash  
Angry howls  
Still doesn't shit

The deer  
Over large eight-ball eyes  
Empty of pity

Featured Contributor

## Alessio Zanelli

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*Alessio Zanelli is an Italian poet who writes in English and whose work has appeared in over 150 literary journals from 15 countries. His fifth original collection, titled *The Secret Of Archery*, was published in 2019 by Greenwich Exchange (London). For more information please visit [www.alessiozanelli.it](http://www.alessiozanelli.it).*



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# A Clearing In The Wood

Black was the night, obscure the road,  
a foot apace, carelessly alone.  
So sure about the path,  
as confident in my mettle,  
yet all of a sudden through the wood,  
with no more trails to follow,  
I brutally realized  
how wrong a guess it had been mine,  
still refusing to retrace my steps.  
Soon trunks and bushes thickened,  
all I could do was grope around,  
astray and helpless.  
Despair had gotten  
both my ghost and clay,  
the grisly thought that I would never  
make it back on track in time.  
Almost totally discouraged,  
capitulation loomed just beats ahead,  
when trees started to thin out,  
to then dissolve.  
I reached the middle of the glade,  
scraps of sky appeared,  
the clouds dispersed as well,  
till every single star lit up.  
I found Polaris,  
pinned it to my eye,  
made it my sole guide,  
set off afresh, again in stride.  
I had finally understood,  
no longer scared of the wood.

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# The Wigtwizzle Dilemma

There is a crossroad close to Wigtwizzle  
at which I pretty often find myself  
while running on footpaths in the valley.

There must be something drawing me to it  
and having me stop nearby for quite a while,  
a total prey to discomfort and doubt.

It's shaped like a mirrored capital jay  
and really looks like such a creepy place,  
urging me to seek the safest escape.

Each time I frantically check around  
and in the end I go back through the wood,  
as no other way would make me feel good.

Maybe all the three lanes would take me home,  
but none of their names—Allas, Lee and Moor—  
has ever rung a bell with me for sure.

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# Going Mental

I remember,  
when I was young,  
before falling asleep,  
staring at the dim light  
through the window—  
my biceps looked  
like the outline of a hill.  
When too close to the eye  
things can take on  
a deceptive appearance,  
a whole new meaning.  
So I wonder—  
what had I been looking at closely  
when I thought  
I'd seen the ocean swell,  
draw near and swallow me  
to then spit me out  
into some kind of padded room  
with no way out?  
I'm still puzzling over it,  
but a guy in a white coat,  
coming out of nowhere  
every now and then,  
says it's not important.

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# Hiker And Lines

Mixed needles silenced your steps, so that you hoped you could reach the tree line undetected. Looking up, you thought that when you were a child the conifers didn't climb so high, while now they dared the rock walls. Never take your eyes off your path on a mountain slope. You were spotted about a pitch below, stuck among boulders by a nearly dried-up creek encased in a secluded gully, at the foot of an escarpment. Your true end, the wavy snow line a couple of hours' walk above, ruled out forever. Dusk yet far from settling in, you hadn't realized the forest had stopped watching over you those last few minutes. Now you know that firs and pines are not our guardians, but larches are, like whose needles, at the turn of the season, we are doomed to fall, all for the following ones. And they who come after trample on us, in turn, without a sound.

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# Wing Loser

I planed  
because unhit,  
not even grazed by shots,  
just me among a thousand birds  
that strove to fly away, escape the hail

of lead  
that made the day  
resemble dusk, a cloud  
of zipping bullets taking toll.  
I planed unruffled, steady, safe, as if

what tore  
the darkened sky  
was meant to clear the space  
around me, let me touch the ground  
alive, alone within the spread, make sure

my wings  
would be the ones  
still sound and flapping through  
the slug storm after landing. Pressed  
for time, the grass my feet were tramping on

imbued  
with blood, I grasped  
the bigger picture, learned  
that such a plot of reddened land  
had been awaiting me, I had to make

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it mine  
or really die,  
despite the fact that I'd  
been spared, the sole survivor yet,  
while crawling wasn't any favorite way

to move.  
I was supposed  
to sweep the waste, and so  
I did, forgetting flight and height.  
I covered every given distance glued

to clods  
and turfs, below.  
I never rose an inch,  
until I ceased to feel the urge  
to soar. At last I lost my wings for life.

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# The Path Retrieved

Cleared the pall, the breeze uncovers  
marks upon the shore, the ocean  
ripples small, like secret lovers  
peeping at each other's motion.

Used to dot-to-dots envisioned  
up across the sky, no longer  
panic-free and heart-provisioned,  
strand-bemused, I stop, in anger.

Mirage-captured, downbeat, groping  
through the shine, to sheer damnation  
doomed, bedazzled in the sloping  
light, it seems there's no salvation.

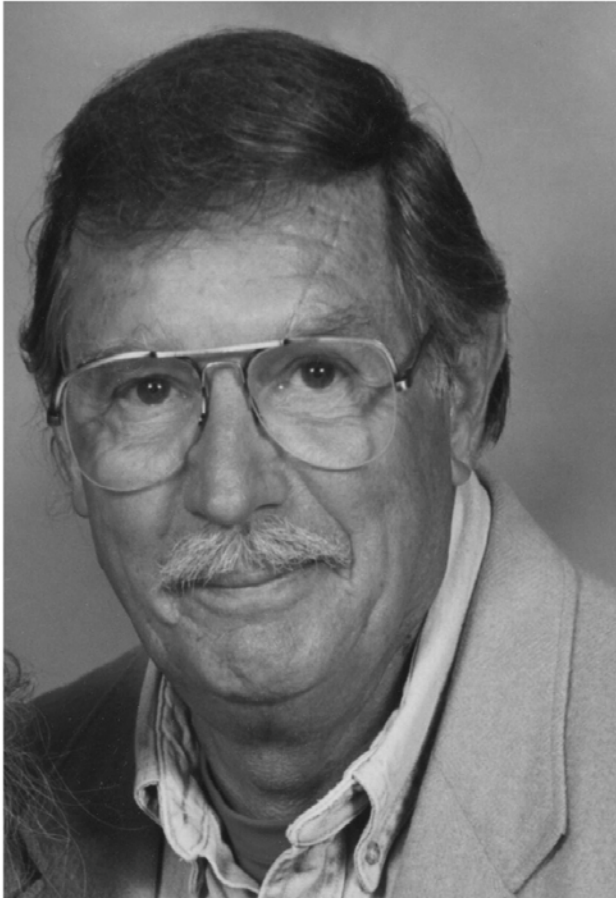
Only when exhausted, somewhat  
short of faith and mettle, twilight  
shades return the safest shortcut  
home, along with cheer and insight.

*~ Alessio Zanelli*

Featured Contributor

## James G. Piatt

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*James is the author of four collections of poetry, "Solace Between the Lines," (2019), "Light" (2016), "Ancient Rhythms," (2014)," and "The Silent Pond," (2012). He has had over 1,400 poems, five novels, seven essays, and thirty-five short stories published. He earned his BS and MA from California State Polytechnic University, and his doctorate from BYU. A review of his newest collection of poems, "Solace Between the Lines," can be found on [Cyberwit.com](http://Cyberwit.com).*



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## **Salty Tears**

Hidden within the emptiness of a world echoing chaos, there is a strange incongruous sound that vibrates in the weary mind of a poet who writes with salty tears on ebony parchments.

## **Moments in Time**

I exist in the transforming moments of deteriorating time, where bones become brittle, thoughts become laborious, and memories diminish into ash. It is a place where sleep is unreliable. I find the apricot tinted dawn optimistic but the steely gray dusk gloomy, being an omen of something diminishing, slipping into the concluding moments of temporary time.

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## Fluttering in the Wind

The haunting drone of autos, like giant metallic snails creeping on the highway far away, merge into the raucous warbling of a mocking bird singing about those who vanish then my photos suddenly flutter in the wind, and are carried away.

## My Mind

My mind is becoming exhausted, as the icy winds of winter spiral across ice-patched paths to a cemetery. In the distance, I hear ghostlike sounds reverberating off marble headstones: I see fading names etched on their pitted faces in enigmatic symbols, and wonder if one is mine.

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# The Emptiness of the Absurd

Cracked asphalt leaking tar, like  
black blood, from being in the  
heat of the sun all day; a  
homeless man roused from the  
ashes, bleeding sadness, and  
carrying a deep loss, is tired of  
living trying to negotiate emptiness.

Fractured roads, crossways to  
nowhere; and melancholy people  
begging for truth sigh at the  
invisibility of imagined flowers,  
wafting empty aromas into the sky,  
ordinary people exhausted from living

*~ James G. Piatt*

Featured Contributor

## Doug Hawley

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*The author is a little old man who lives with his editor Sharon and cat Katzhaber. After working in mathematics he retired to write, hike, snow shoe and volunteer.*

*He has a hundred or so things published in several countries.  
<https://sites.google.com/site/aberrantword/> <https://doug.car.blog/>*

*@dougiamm*

# Welcome

by Doug Hawley



*Previously appeared in CommuterLit and Spillwords*

Duke woke up in a theatre feeling a bit out of it. He could tell that he had a lot to drink. That must be the reason for his disorientation.

He did remember much of the movie, the scariest horror movie he had ever seen. That seemed unusual in and of itself. By long habit, he went to bars after work and drank until the late hours and went home. There was no time for anything but work, drink and sleep. His social life consisted of finding hookers at the dive bars he frequented. He smiled to himself, thinking that what he loved doing would seem so wrong to the do-gooders. Hey, it was his life, he didn't need to justify himself to anyone. Screw his family that didn't talk to him anymore, he didn't need them.

He was a bit confused about the movie, so he found an usher who wasn't doing anything for some clarification. It was difficult to focus, but the usher's tag said Lu something.

"Hey Lu, got a few minutes?"

"Sure, I've got unlimited time."

“That was a great movie, but there didn’t seem to be any continuity. All I got was a bunch of torture scenes. There was the guy being sliced with a razor, the woman with the hair on fire, a lot painful sex stuff I don’t even know the name for, but nothing in between. I didn’t recognize any of the actors and I don’t remember the credits being run. For that matter, I don’t remember the title.”

“You sound quite confused. Has it occurred to you to look at the other viewers?”

“Now that you mention it, that is the most messed up bunch I’ve ever seen. I don’t know how they are even alive. That otherwise dynamite woman has intestines hanging out and the tall guy in a vest has half of his head gone. Something crazy is going on here.”

Duke, you made a lot of mistakes, including where you are and who I am. Try to think back to what happened before you got here.”

“OK, I was at Joey’s drinking as usual, maybe more than usual. I just got passed over for a promotion that went to that snot-nosed punk Bill. ‘You’re just not reliable Duke, we can’t count on you. We never know when you’ll come in sober.’ Bunch of overeducated morons. I deserved to blow off a little steam after that crap. Josie, the resident hooker, was open to a cash offer, so off we went. Next thing I remember here I am. Hold it, how do you know my name is Duke and how did I get here, Lu?”

“Duke, this is really simple. You ran head on into a van carrying a family of five at sixty miles per hour. You, Josie and the whole family are dead. My full name is Lucifer, and the film that you just saw is our orientation feature “Welcome to Hell.”

“Like hell, I’m dead. I’m fine.”

“So that isn’t blood pooling around your feet?”

~ *Doug Hawley*

*Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had over two hundred fifty stories and poems published so far, and five books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of five review editors.*

## Thing Song

by *Ed Ahern*

Our ancestors believed that things have souls.  
that fire hardened spears and feathered headwear  
and foot wear tanned in our urine  
had, if not their own soul, an anima  
we gave to them in thanks.

Perhaps a tenable credo  
When we owned only five things,  
But what to do about  
Thirty baseball caps and forty blouses,  
Twenty pairs of shoes and six wrist watches?

Our drawers-full of forgotten detritus  
Remind us that we still fiercely covet  
Things we will discard without thought,  
And that there is almost nothing  
We will insist be buried with us.

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<https://twitter.com/bottomstripper>

<https://www.facebook.com/EdAhern73/?ref=bookmarks>

<https://www.instagram.com/edwardahern1860/>

Featured Contributor

## Yuan Hongri

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*born in China in 1962, is a poet and philosopher interested particularly in creation. Representative works include Platinum City, Gold City, Golden Paradise, Gold Sun and Golden Giant. His poetry has been published in the UK, USA, India, New Zealand, Canada and Nigeria.*



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# Another Me From Heavens

*Translated by Yuanbing zhang*

If blue is namely white and black is namely red  
and gold is transparent as crystal  
and light makes the soul smile forgetting the sun moon and stars  
and you were filled with wisdom, drunk for thousands of years  
and back to the prehistoric giant city  
and that giant is just like another me from the heavens  
by the lotus throne in the golden palace.

Featured Contributor

## Ruby Nambo

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*Ruby Nambo recently graduated from Central Washington University, with a degree in English Language Arts teaching. She is from a small town of Sultan, Washington. As an emerging Latina poet, her poetry has been published and are featured in Manastash Literary Journal, Z Publishing's Washington's Best Emerging Poets, The Acentos Review, Adelaide Literary Magazine, the New Directions for Student Leadership: Centering Dialogue in Leadership Development and more. To see Ruby's work, please visit [www.nambowrites.com](http://www.nambowrites.com).*

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# Changes

The blue skies come  
and change every day.  
It happens so rapidly  
compared to the people  
that come and go  
throughout the temporary life.

Changes occur around your world  
and you might never know,  
until it happens.  
Change is proven  
when you look at yourself.

Yesterday,  
you were one person;  
and today,  
you are another person;  
and tomorrow,  
you will be a different person.

You can stay in one town,  
and you can watch it grow.  
Time goes by and brings changes—  
new business,  
new food to try,  
new friends and neighbors to visit.

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But change can be unexpected.  
Its expensive  
and can be frigid,  
especially after many years.  
Change is uncomfortable  
like a scratchy knitted sweater.

Change is a choice you can decide.  
Change is a chance to build and reconstruct mistakes.  
Who says change is unhealthy?  
Change is natural.

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# The Corner of 3rd and Pearl

The girl in the white dress,  
she cherishes the moment:  
the style,  
filled with pearls near her bosom,  
the length,  
slightly above her knees  
where its okay to wear in public  
and people wouldn't ask.  
She can walk around  
all of downtown  
and even dance at night  
under the streetlight  
where she glows like a star.

She twirls her dress  
feeling like a white swan  
filled with pure innocence.  
Her black high heels  
that were passed down  
from her mother  
are giving her blisters and goosebumps  
especially when she paces  
between the corner of 3rd and Pearl Street  
where any leech can come  
and haunt her intimacy  
to be filled with trauma.

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Her white dress is pure  
like the clouds in the sky.  
Her ravishing eyes gleam her future  
that can capture anyone's focus,  
better than a camera.  
She holds onto a shrivel up rose bouquet  
with alive stem thorns  
gripping her truth of all relationships—dead.

The tears of blood  
caused by the leeches  
turns her dress into the color of sin—  
filled with darkness all around.  
She quickly grows up to be a woman  
and she had no choice  
to turn back  
as she left the girl  
in the white dress behind.

~ *Ruby Nambo*

*James Mulhern has published fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in literary journals and anthologies over seventy times. In 2013, he was a Finalist for the Tuscany Prize in Catholic Fiction. In 2015, Mr. Mulhern was awarded a fully paid writing fellowship to Oxford University in the United Kingdom. That same year, a story*

## **The Crosswalk**

by *James Mulhern*

Today I saw a father and son  
stepping onto the crosswalk.  
I braked and watched them pass.  
Son on father's shoulders,  
headed to the park with swings.

I drove on, thinking of you  
and wondered why you  
never lifted me and held my legs  
or brought me to the swings.  
But you were not that type of father.

Once, we built a shed together.  
I heard you say at a family party years later,  
"Remember when Danny and I built the shed."  
But it wasn't my brother  
who cut wood and hammered nails with you.

I was bothered just a bit.  
I had other memories,  
like when you held my hands as we knotted my tie,  
how we both looked in the mirror,  
and I saw myself in your face.

You patted my shoulders.  
Someone crossed the room and paused to take a picture.  
It was on the table by your coffin. Your hands on mine.  
Proof that we had closeness for a moment,  
and that is enough.

*was longlisted for the Fish Short Story Prize. In 2017, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His writing (novels and short story collection) earned favorable critiques from Kirkus Reviews, including a Kirkus Star. His most recent novel, Give Them Unquiet Dreams, is a Readers' Favorite Book Award winner, a Notable Best Indie Book of 2019, and a Kirkus Reviews Best Book of 2019. He is a college professor and high school teacher in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.*

Featured Contributor

## Daniel de Culla

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*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.*



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# IN THE PINEWOOD OF HENAR

From San Cristóbal de Cuéllar

We had arrived  
In a car pulled by a Donkey  
To the Virgen del Henar 'pilgrimage  
In Cuéllar, Segovia, Spain  
Singing: "Beautiful Star  
That announces the day  
You are Virgin of Henar, ohj my Mother.  
More than the star, already in its dawn  
You shine, ohj my Mother  
Ohj Immaculate Mother.  
Flood the bosom of our souls  
Your purest light  
Virgin of Henar  
Always glorious and blessed. "  
Our parents and elders  
Entered in the sanctuary  
Leaving us, their little ones  
In the pinewood next door.  
We were four girls and three boys  
We, the boys, from Vallelado  
The girls, two, from San Cristóbal  
And the other two of Iscar, from Valladolid.  
We started playing hide and seek behind the pines  
Like dragons and maidens.  
A friend and me  
Quite separate from the group  
Saw an excellent glow

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That came out of a resin pine  
Just at the height of the pot  
That collects the resin.  
We were speechless  
Because it was like a celestial sphere  
More like an ass  
Enjoying eternal glory  
Because it was fallin in Love with the pine.  
I remembered, right away  
And I told it to my friend:  
That a brother of my father, my uncle  
One day told my father very convinced  
Something I heard:  
- "That when he feels like a female  
He comes to the pines for to puting it.  
That if all men did so  
There would be no rapes or deaths of women  
By roads or by paths.  
That are many women  
Killed by men  
As terrible and murderous beasts. "  
At about two or three in the afternoon  
We ate at wooden tables.  
Our parents and elders  
Happy and more happy  
Giving the porrón wine or boot  
They said:  
-Next year, we return from Romería.



## ~ *Featured Flash Fiction*

# Night of the Forest

*by Jan Darrow*



The forest by my home was a place I knew well. When I was ten, I burned out some of the old trees. Years later Charlie Barnes wandered in and never came out. They never did find his bones.

When I was older, I cut through it every Saturday night on my way home from the bar. Drunk or not, I liked the twigs under my feet. So, one night after losing a couple of games of pool I finished my drink and headed out the door. I smelled the pines as I started on my way. Stars streamed the sky.

It wasn't long before I came to a clearing. I looked up. The moon was crisp.

Low brush scratched my face and I knew somehow, I had veered off the path. I struggled to go back, but it was no use. I stood there untangling dry vines from my arm when I thought about Charlie and how the forest had swallowed him whole.

Up ahead I heard a crunch of twigs.

“Hello?”

Nothing came from the still air.

Then a sound of cracking branches from behind. I pushed forward and ran as fast as I could.

Ten minutes later I was lost. I stopped to catch my breath.

Close by a small light flickered like someone lighting a cigarette. I smelled the smoke.

“Is that you Charlie?” I asked laughing knowing full well that he was dead.

I thought about how I stole Charlie’s girlfriend a month before he died. I thought maybe I should make amends, especially given the situation.

“I’m sorry about Roxanne, Charlie.”

But I knew that was a long time ago and she lived in Montana now with a husband and kid.

Another flicker of light and knew I had to get out of there. I ran as fast as I could feeling Charlie close behind. Hours later I collapsed.

The next morning the county sheriff found me sprawled by the edge of the road.

I had made it out.

*by Jan Darrow*

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I didn't tell him anything about my night in the forest. As far as he knew I drank too much. At home I sat on my bed and wondered. Then I remembered something.

Charlie Barnes never smoked.

*Jan Darrow is a poet from Michigan who connected with the natural world at an early age. She has been published online and in print and most recently by Black Poppy Review.*

## Old Man Shoes

by Colin Lubner

In class the other day, a student of mine asked me what was the most fucked-up shit I'd ever seen, so I told them about the video you made. I told them that, seen from below, someone hanging oneself looks like they're learning to levitate. You were wearing dirty Sketchers. This struck me, somehow, as purposefully pathetic. That you'd wanted someone (me) to hone in upon them, to think: old man shoes. Even as you twitched, I felt embarrassed at our association. And this frightened me as much as anything else, then or since. On your nightstand, in the background, I saw the piece I'd done of Artorias, from Dark Souls, for your birthday. And all I could focus on were those filthy fucking Sketchers.

Here's a thing I think I now know: death, in and of itself, is not frightening. Death is a warm blanket laid on an ailing lost cause. Without death I would now be as lost as you then were. Instead it is our response to death, I think, that ought to cause alarm.

The site that hosts your video made its name out of making suicide into art. That this bears only a passing mention should and does not amaze.

And maybe it's not even your video I'm talking about when I'm telling them about your video. Maybe it's the other video, the one you showed me, where the old man sits on the floor, natal, and pulls the trigger of an Ithaca 37 with his big toe. Maybe it's how his foot slips, how the footage runs for another eleven minutes in spite of the absence of its subject. His blood makes no sound as it drips down the cabinet. He groans, and we laughed. Anyone can do better than that, we said, safe in our terminal certainty. And you did.

*Colin Lubner writes (in English) and teaches (math) in southern New Jersey. His work has either appeared or will appear, temporally speaking. He is keeping on keeping on.*

~ Fiction

# Carved Obsidian

*by Heather Santo*



Gina noticed the man while in line at McDonald's. He was tall, hair slicked back and wearing a long coat. In one hand he held a newspaper. His brow furrowed as he read the headlines. A battered leather suitcase dangled from his other hand, metal latches gleaming. Gina thought how out of place he looked, so much Old World frozen in the false brightness of O'Hare's busy terminal.

Suddenly, the man looked up, locking eyes with Gina. A deep, numbing cold crept into Gina's bones. Unsettled, she tore her gaze away and approached the counter, ordering a vanilla milkshake. After a few sips, Gina turned back around, but the man was gone.



“You look pale,” Mark commented when she relieved him from his shift at the Duty-Free shop. “Feeling okay?”

Gina forced a smile. “Yes, I’m fine,” she said, turning to greet a pair of customers. Gina had nearly forgotten the strange man until he walked into her store.

“May I help you?” Her voice did not give away her unease, but Gina refused to meet his stare.

“Yes,” he answered. “Where’s your whiskey?”

She led him to the other side of the store, where he selected a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue Label. Still averting her eyes, Gina slipped behind the cash register and asked for ID. He paused, setting down the suitcase, then pulled a wallet from his coat pocket. The name on his passport read Flynn Fitzgerald, from Dublin, Ireland. His age surprised her, closer to forty when she pegged him as mid to late twenties. But then again, she thought, there was something almost ancient about this man. That creeping, cold sensation returned and Gina hurried to ring up the whiskey.

The strange man pulled three one hundred dollar bills from the wallet.

“Thank you,” she said, giving him change. “Make sure you check this at your gate.”

He grabbed Gina’s hand. Shocked, she looked up. “What is your greatest sin?” he asked. She didn’t hesitate. “I had a two year affair with a married man,” she replied. “I got pregnant and he talked me into having an abortion.” The man’s dark eyes probed deeply into hers. “I didn’t really want him to leave his wife, but I did want the baby.”

“Thank you,” he said, releasing her hand. He took the bottle of whiskey and exited the store.

Confused and disoriented, Gina rushed around the counter, tripping over the man’s suitcase. The latches popped open and a small statue flew out. Impulsively, Gina picked it up. About six inches in length, the statue appeared to be carved out of black volcanic rock. “Obsidian,” Gina murmured, the word feeling sinister on her tongue. The tiny, horned skeleton pulsed in her hands.

Following protocol, she phoned airport security and airport security alerted Chicago PD. Since the suitcase was open, only a handful of officers responded instead of the entire bomb squad. Detective Jenkins gently questioned her at the cash register.

“Okay, so Flynn Fitzgerald from Dublin,” he repeated, scribbling in his notepad. “No record of anyone by that name on any flights in or out of O’Hare today. I’ll see what, if anything, I can dig up on this guy,” Detective Jenkins said. “This Fitzgerald say anything else to you?” he asked.

Arms crossed tightly across her chest, Gina huffed out a breath. “No,” she said. “He only asked about the whiskey.” She didn’t mention the statue, now tucked away in her purse under the counter.

The detective nodded and flipped his notepad closed. He motioned at her forgotten McDonald’s cup.

“Vanilla shake?” he asked, and Gina struggled to hold back tears. “Yes,” she answered and he nodded again. “It’s good to see you, Gina,” he said, and left.

That night, Gina sat at the kitchen table in her tiny apartment. Another vanilla milkshake sat in front of her, untouched. She was about to dump it down the sink when her cell phone buzzed. A text message from Ron Jenkins popped up.

*Got some photos I’d like you to look at. Do you work tomorrow?*

Yes, she wrote back. *Same time.*

Sleep was fitful and filled with vivid dreams. The strange man lowered her onto her kitchen table, kissing her, and then slowly removed her clothes. She turned her head, a cry of pleasure in her throat cut short by the sight of the tiny

black statue perched next to a milkshake on the counter.

Detective Jenkins showed up at the Duty-Free shop at two o'clock. He handed her a vanilla milkshake and she thanked him, setting it next to the register. If he noticed the shadows under her eyes, he didn't say so. Gina studied the photos he produced from his own leather suitcase.

"This is the man who bought the whiskey," she confirmed. "Is his name really Flynn Fitzgerald?"

"Well, that's one of the names he goes by," Detective Jenkins said. "An antique dealer, originally from Glasgow. Specializes in items of the occult." That cold, creeping sensation came back and Gina shivered. "The guy is wanted by Interpol in connection with the recent murder of Sir Conall Bradford Pearce, a wealthy London fast food mogul. Sir Conall had great interest in the macabre and after his murder, a small statue went missing from his personal collection." He looked down at his notes. "The statue supposedly moves from person to person, 'collecting' sins, passing on part of its power to the previous owner at the time of exchange."

Considering this, Gina went under the counter and pulled the carved obsidian from her purse.

Detective Jenkins stared at her in disbelief.

Gina grabbed his left hand, feeling the shape of his wedding ring under her fingers. “Ron,” she said. “What’s your greatest sin?” Without hesitation, he responded. “That night, in the kitchen of your apartment, when I got you pregnant.” Gina let go of his hand.

“Thank you,” she replied. “Now, please take the statue and leave.”

*Heather Santo is a development chemist living in Pittsburgh, PA with her husband and newborn daughter. In addition to writing, her creative interests include photography, painting and collecting skeleton keys.*

*Follow her on Instagram and Twitter @Heather52384*

# Getting Out of a Bad Gig

*by Michael Neis*



The thin man brought me here in the spring. The worn house blends with the infinite fields of dead grass that surround it. Inside, it is a dark maze that still confuses me, even though I sleep and work in it. The walls smell like rotting potatoes and the floor squishes like quicksand. At night in the dark, tiny creature burrow into my skin and I can do nothing. The thin man comes into my room and beats me when I scream. In the morning when I wake, I am exhausted, and I wonder if I have tiny creatures inside of me.

The thin man gives me tasks every day, and I must obey him. He always has his riding crop. For months I scraped, sanded, and painted the floors, the walls, and the ceiling. I was plugging leaks in the roof during the hot months of summer. This morning he had me spraying the dozens of wasp's nests nestled in the eaves. That is the worst task. Wasps. I hate them, like I hate all bugs.

When I was little, I drew pictures of bugs and played with them. I would pull out grasshopper legs and beetle wings. I would chop ants, bees and spiders into pieces. I would slice caterpillars into sections. I was curious how long they would keep moving. I burned them too.

I reserved my worst tortures for wasps. They deserved it. Spiky legs, stingers, black and yellow exoskeletons, and a buzz that sounds like a dull knife cutting through old burlap.

Then I started drawing lizards with their little eyes removed. I drew mice with yanked-out tails. That was a thrill. Then I discovered rats, which were even better. They would attempt to flee, or fight, or play dead. That is what made playing with them so irresistible.

I started drawing pictures of dogs, and the sound of barking ceased in my neighborhood. My parents brought the thin man to our house and he took me. As we rode away, I looked back and made ready to wave, but there was no one to wave to.

The thin man did not care that I hated spraying the wasps, so I could not refuse. At least I got to watch them fall, struggle and die. I got stung three times, but when I went back inside the house, the thin man was furious because I had placed one of his huge, vivisected rats in the cage with the green snake. I wanted to see what would happen. The rat put up a good fight and drew blood before the snake finally killed it. The thin man beat me again.

I drew a picture of him with his head removed.

The thin man had been working on dead animals. He put a special liquid on a dead rat. It writhed and grew to the size of wheelbarrow. It thrashed against its cage, and in a crash of glass, it escaped. It tore into the menagerie, killing everything it took hold of. We had to kill it like some of the others that got the liquid. They always became so fierce. The ones that are still alive are chained. Each one would kill everything nearby if set free.

I saw the thin man use the liquid on a live dog. It died, screaming in a horrid voice, like a small child in terror. Then the dog began to writhe, and it grew to the size of a horse, thrashing, trying to kill everything. We keep that dog in chains and locked in a room. The room's walls boom during the night. The dog's howls are so piercing I must cover my ears when I am nearby.

Now the thin man has a cadaver, stolen from the hospital in the nearby town. He is trying to put the liquid on it. The thin man gets mad because the liquid is not working, but he does not know that I switched out the liquid and put paint thinner into his applicator this morning. I have the liquid and I approach him from behind.

“What the devil is wrong with this formula?” he bellows.

I stomp my feet to get him to look my way. He turns just as I throw the liquid in his face. He screams, dashes to the sink and douses his head. I wonder why I smell insecticide. He straightens up, wipes his face with a towel, and grabs a poker from the fireplace. He strides toward me and I back away, wondering why my plan did not work. What happened to the liquid? Why is the thin man not dying and writhing?

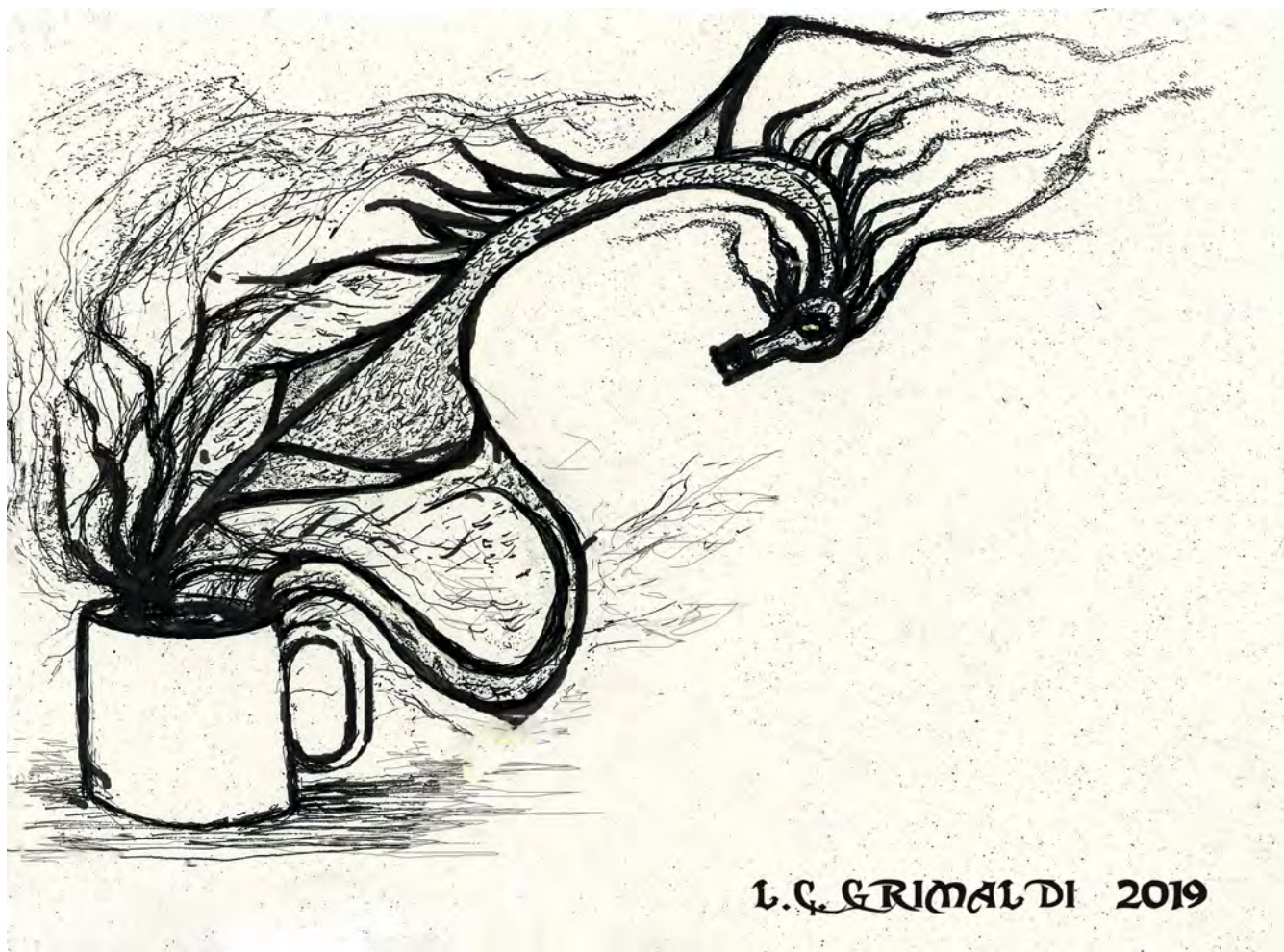
I hear pieces of the roof getting ripped off in the next room. The sound of a furious low buzz fills my ears. My stomach vibrates with its volume, and my hands shake in terror. I know why the thin man is not dying, and I know where the liquid has really gone.

The thin man beats me with the iron poker. I scream as my skull crunches. He will kill me in a matter of seconds, but at least I will be spared the terrible fate that is now his alone. The thin man, in his rage, is deaf to the low buzzing inside the house as it grows louder and louder.

*Mike Neis lives in Orange County and works as a technical writer for a commercial laboratory. His work has appeared in Amethyst Review, Euphemism and elsewhere. Besides writing, his outside activities include church music, walking for health, and teaching English as a second language.*



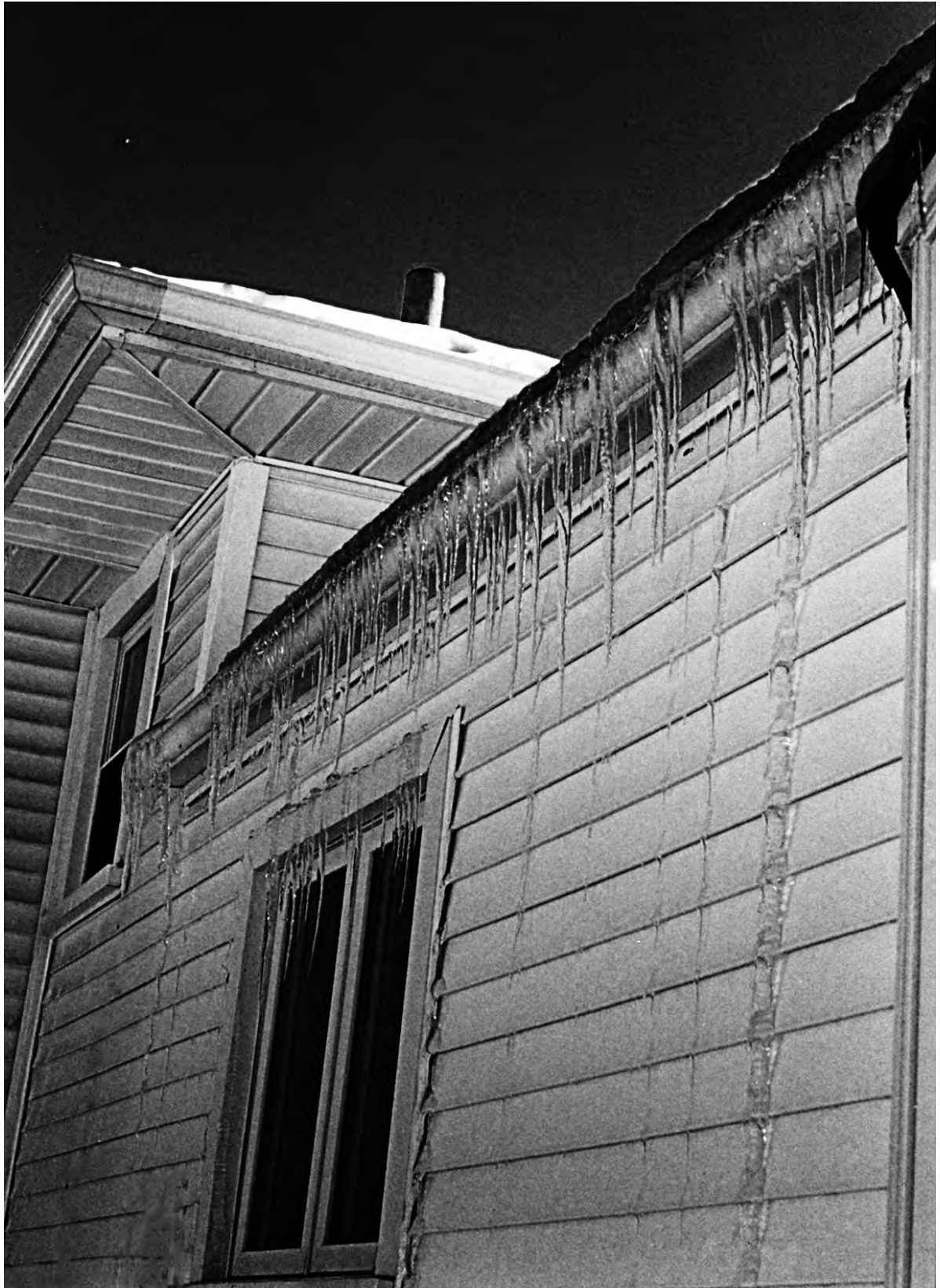
# Artwork and Photography by Loretta Grimaldi



*Loretta Grimaldi is an artist and photographer whose work has appeared in The Stray Branch and various charity organizations*







# Charles Byrne

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## Her cut

a tear, blood, then tears of blood, from the riven rind –  
and how I am drawn to her white skin! The skin, how it is layers  
all the way down. Miesian, for a moment, a cutaneous wall,  
a curtain wall. The beauty of interior becoming exterior, and then:

we are just bundles of grafted-together insides, is all.

The heart? But a spring. The brain a basket. Your body  
a winter cloud, shedding unsighted skin as you walk,  
sifting downward like snow, your soulful trail through the ether.

Life, life now strung like theory through my brain, thread  
through canyons of callosum, carved by the canthers of time –

but then her young tears call me back, ashamed, and I skiff  
their rivers to the delta of her eyes, a sheaf of yellow hair  
damply bound to their tender corners. For her, a kiss, a kiss  
and a hug, my only tent against the sluicing spring sky above.

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## Morning, 2003

In the mirror, I split a nail pink with my safety razor.

Beth, still in stitches, with a virgin egg of teeth and hair.

Helmets blistering in Iraq anew.

Declan today who turned two.

*Charles Byrne is a teacher and poet in San Francisco, with publications in After Hours, Clarion, and Poetry Quarterly – and, is humbled to say, in The Stray Branch (in 2013 – ‘Sonnet for K’).*

# *Robert Beveridge*

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## **MATTER OF FACT IT'S ALL DARK**

You've slept the day through,  
now wait for dawn as if  
a new revolution might change  
something, anything, from the mouse  
in your arbor to the cheese  
in your den. At least the trash  
bags are no longer in a snit,  
will scrape up the vegetable  
matter on the front step, send it  
to the local rusalka to be made  
into cat food. How much cheese,  
when it comes right down to it,  
is in the den? Will we ever find  
jobs, become those productive  
members of society we hear about  
on the news? There are so many  
possible answers, and so many  
answers, and so many answers  
that fail, that fail, that fail  
until the sole thing you need  
to do when you see a résumé  
is flick the top on your zippo,  
send it back to the place  
where you dreamed it up  
seven months ago, when you  
had the sudden urge to become  
a machinist. You wonder  
if the application of bacon,  
butter, jalapeño jam  
might help you and a few loaves  
of bread make sense of it all,

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whether you can accomplish this  
before it's time to get back  
out there, beat feet, over the next  
hill in ninety degrees even  
with clouds and not so much  
as a pizza break. The world  
grinds on, the sun ever closer.



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# ASPARTAME OVERDOSE

it's the records you spin  
for birthday parties  
and how those are  
different from the ones  
you spin for dinner  
parties, dance parties,  
murder parties. How your  
180-gram third-grade lab  
partner was allergic  
to walnuts, but dissected  
a cow's eye with a finesse  
the teacher hadn't seen since 1957.  
How three lines of sucralose  
can have a street value  
higher than vinyl  
on New Year's Eve.

*Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise ([xterminal.bandcamp.com](http://xterminal.bandcamp.com)) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *Collective Unrest*, *Cough Syrup*, and *Blood & Bourbon*, among others.*

# Bob Eager

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## The Beautimous Promenade

(This poem is Inspired by the terminology of Amanda)

Look at the partner across the floor,  
Leisurely social stroll...  
Stare into the eyes of old fashioned trend  
Follow instructions from the speaker  
Grab the partner Dosey Do...

Stunning in its appearance,  
Promenade round and round,  
Swing each other  
Counterclockwise in a circle  
Traditional time stopping endeavour-  
Momentary walkabout,  
Frugality at its finest;  
The Cowtown Center establishes beatitude before beauty criteria aura while  
entering and triggering thoughts by  
Amanda who mentions once again calmly,  
That the people lingering and loitering consequently are now dancing to what is  
known as  
the Beautimous Promenade!

# Melissa DeAmaral

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## **Did You Ever Meet A Stranger Stranger?**

I shake my head until it splits.

I strain my eyes until the vessels burst.

I clench my teeth until they're ground to dust.

I look outside. The snow flutters like wayward parachute men,

Gentle swarms of tiny white insects.

A wind blows, and fires the flurries violently,

Weaving through currents and branches in the sky.

I am up high, so I only see blank skies and identical trees.

I see no accumulation, only silent songs and dances in the air.

The walls, the fireplace bricks, the carpet, the wooden ceiling:

Everything is the color of mud, of skin, of oranges and browns.

The shapes are straight and neat, sharp and clear, smooth without disruption.

I feel too comfortable, too cozy. I might become the chair soon.

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I listen to the same song over and over again.  
Steady, meandering beat that wires my brain,  
And a riff that drags its nails across my skin.  
I'm trapped. Maybe I want to be trapped.  
Please help me. I don't deserve it, but please help me.  
Do I want it? Do I need it? My kingdom for an answer.  
I'm so bored. Maybe I'm fine with being bored.  
I want to scream. I want to run, to break things,  
To scream in a room where no one will hear.  
To scream in a room where everyone will hear.  
To throw myself into things, off of things, under things.  
To embrace and erase, without moving a muscle

---

It's all in my head,  
A cycle of breaking and mending, but never quite complete.  
Lost a piece along the way. Normalcy—to whom does it belong to?  
I reach with both arms; I kick away with both feet.  
Like swimming? Negative: a spotlight on the hypocrite.  
Light and airy like the snow,  
But sure enough it piles, insulates a freezing, bitter chill.  
Make frostbitten snow angels, a figure in the void.

I want to burn, to disappear in a flash of red and yellow  
until I become charred, a volcanic soup of lava and dust.  
People will see, but they dare not touch.  
We all pretend to care with aplomb and charisma.  
We are all on fire, but some of us run so fast that it doesn't hurt.  
We make a show out of it. Some are on the go like fireflies.  
Others become kindling and embers and smoke: dull hues.

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The snow sways, scatters, becomes uniform, then chaotic.  
It is perhaps like me, inwardly.  
But you don't believe it, and I can't prove it.  
Take my word? You'd sooner bet on a pig in a horse race.  
So it's still the same, a flat bar across my shoulders; reflex.  
Keeping my eyes inverted, my heart plummeting, neck craning and shivering.  
You are a stranger. But I am stranger.

*Melissa DeAmaral is an illustration graduate from UMass Dartmouth. She enjoys telling stories and organizing nonsense.*

~ Fiction

# How to Kill Humans

by Marlon Jackson



## At the Men's Bar

"Ooooookay gentleman!" the woman promoter yelled on the microphone. Only she wasn't a woman. But the men only saw what they wanted to see. As they let their fantasies unwind...It was crowded in the place and we have hundreds of gentlemen in there just like all of the others across the states. And the woman continued on the mic.

"All the ladies behind the curtains- *"SHOW YOURSELVES!"*

And a platoon of women suddenly appeared. Very voluptuous and beatific, their bodies were bosom and attractive and their boobs were round, huge and the eyes of the men bulged at the sights before their eyes.

*Whooooeee!*

*Weppa!*

*Whoa mama!*

Hoots and howls were sporadic all over the place.

All of the men who should've been at home with their wives hooted and howled galore.

It was totally outrageous. And yet the tableau continued.

Even though they didn't have to, many of the thirsty men dipped their hands into their pockets wallets and they pulled out wads of cash and they threw it at the women. And the women hooted too. The lights that danced all around were disco like and circled in different colors.

Then they stopped and one standard color-a sort of carnation pink of some sort.

Then...the music stopped. The horny facial gestures of the men slowly began to fade and the smiles turned to surprised grins and bewildered expressions. There was nothing but silence. And the nude girls stopped dancing on the stages and around the poles. The promoter committed a sort of growling noise on the microphone. And then the girls growled.



And a male voice bawled, *“What the heck is going on here?!”*

At the entrance/exit points locks were put around the doors and blocked by security.

*“It’s dinner time girls!”* the promoter said viciously.

And her face and body transformed. It looked like an alien of some sort and so did the other girls on the stage.

*“Raoooooaw!”*

# *Blake Offret*

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18

## A Ghost Story ~ Sonnet

In a past life, you were Jack the Ripper-  
a killer, an enigma, ruthless & proud.

Myself, something more humble, a gravedigger.

I made the mistake of keeping her shroud-  
the shroud of a streetwalker, buried last week-  
her face was beautiful; the rest was a mess.

She has haunted me since – and so I seek  
a ruthless killer to save me – no less.

I found you hidden in the filth and the fog,  
lurking among gaslights, waiting for prey.

I came to you, half-crazed, sick as a dog.

You took me to your attic, there to stay-

no longer haunted – but driven by lust;

by your flashing eyes & dark hair – ashes & dust.

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19

## Ode to a Beautiful Creature of the Night ~ Sonnet

She is silent film reincarnate, all-  
her face expressive, emotive, pristine;  
her stance, her smile – hot thoughts – I am in thrall.  
I know what's in me, and what is between.  
Graceful not with what she carries, but with how  
the space around shapes and molds to her form-  
as if not an atom passes, lest she allow.  
Dark queen, in the air I can feel a storm.  
  
Draw blood, drink it up, fill your cup twice over.  
My hot fevered pulse will beat time for us.

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Make me stronger. Make me a midnight rover.

Satiate me. Adore me. Touch my body – thus-

Two forever creatures ‘twined in cool bliss-

the bite may hurt, but it’s only a kiss.

*Raised in Maine & educated at public school and in kitchens across America Blake  
is a Professional chef & frequenter of Cities of the Dead.*

*Something about writing lines in iambic pentameter just swallows up fevered blood.*

# Otto Burnwell

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## Lucky Dick on Mott Street

It's a lucky dick, she says,  
touching the spot over my heart,  
this guy on Mott Street.  
She came to the City  
to act to sing to dance.  
Three years, waiting tables,  
checking coats.  
New Year's Eve,  
the guy on Mott Street  
tells her it's a lucky dick,  
try it out.  
Drain two more flutes, then, why not?  
It brought her chorus jobs,  
walk-ons,  
regional spots,  
a national tour.  
This is true.  
It brought her me, she swears  
hand to God when I snort in disbelief.  
How else could you explain it?  
I can't.  
That's why I'm standing in the outer hallway,  
holding her coat and waiting

for her to finish  
draining better days  
from the lucky dick on Mott Street.

*Otto Burnwell lives and works in the urban northeast. He writes to stay sane, uses a pseudonym to stay employed, and changes enough detail in what he writes to stay welcome at the family's holiday gatherings. He's placed pieces with Yellow Mama and Fiction on the Web.*

# James B. Nicola

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## Upstairs

Some souls believe death is the end of life;  
others, that life's the end of being un-  
born. Some souls, that at death they go to where  
they were when unborn, and that that's not no-  
where; some, that we return, but it's to nothing.

I believe that nine months, give or take, before  
I arrived, I saw, surveyed, and selected you.  
I don't know what I was before, or where,  
if it was nothing or a sort of something.

You felt my choice, agreed, and thus conceived.  
And so I grew from what may have been nothing  
to something, from some thing to something more.  
Not much, in the broad scheme of things, but all  
I am. That is why I am, here, downstairs

conceiving this, a meager birthday poem,  
as you are sleeping and turn 92.  
Whoever I am, whatever I've done,  
is nothing, really, see, if not your son.

Some souls believe a soul goes on forever;  
some, that it will persist a little while,  
at least—days, months—to try to speak once more  
to loved ones who survive. One day, you told  
me you believed an After-Life was, if

nothing more, what loved ones remember of  
you, when you're gone. Well, you shall Live a long  
while, After, or forever: With your love,  
I'll be here, Downstairs, writing, when you're gone.

---

## How and Where

When Mr. F was taken down  
his sons tried not to cry.  
    He'd been depressed  
    but neither guessed  
that he'd decide to die.

O why not choose some distant town,  
and potion, of some kind?  
    Why undress  
    and leave a mess  
for family to find?

It's one thing to decide to act;  
another, how you do it;  
    a third is where.  
    So why not spare  
your loved ones, and think through it?

Any poison can in fact  
effect the same grim crime—  
    or motel room,  
    a final doom  
before your slotted time.

Unless, like F, a gory death  
is what you're also wanting  
    with screams and tears  
    and harried years  
of hurt and harm and haunting . . .

---

For that's what F gave Mrs. F  
and both his sons, still living:  
    three lives of hell  
    (I know them well):  
the gift that won't stop giving.

*James B. Nicola's poetry and prose have appeared in Stray Branch; the Antioch, Southwest, Green Mountains, and Atlanta Reviews; Rattle; Barrow Street; Tar River; and Poetry East, garnering two Willow Review awards, a Dana Literary award, and six Pushcart nominations. His full-length collections are Manhattan Plaza (2014), Stage to Page (2016), Wind in the Cave (2017), Out of Nothing: Poems of Art and Artists (2018) and Quickening: Poems from Before and Beyond (2019). His nonfiction book Playing the Audience won a Choice award. He is facilitator for the Hell's Kitchen International Writers' Roundtable, which meets twice monthly at Manhattan's Columbus Library: walk-ins welcome.*



# Fabrice Poussin

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## **Bouncing to ecstasy**

The ancient one toppled once again  
fell upon the gentle surface of a graceful eve  
bewildered he dared not challenge the past.

Another dawn would shine upon his pains  
cheering to the upcoming hours  
for him to arise a warrior in the hostile realm.

A routine too familiar to the weary frame  
trembling under the weight of uncertain hours  
he wonders how the dark lady has yet failed to visit.

It would be as so many times before  
beaten by traitorous storms designed for him  
time came to stand by the hand of the fates.

Risen he contemplated the strange trampoline of his days  
always warming the blood of a frigid slumber  
he wondered whence this ecstasy came.

As he seemed dying under the punishing fist of fatality  
grace faithfully appeared in a kind embrace  
as ever and against his will, again he smiled.

---

# Once upon a Forest

He lived the story of a thousand years  
wonderer in a quest of another wilderness.

Often the search ended on the edge  
of a town surrounded by ancient walls  
hero hoping for a denouement he  
simply would fall to his knees.

The secrets of a life to be, their prisoner  
a lone knight errant touching the frigid stone  
listening to the pulses of a stranger  
he seems to rest at last almost alive.

Parting the leaves of the antique forest  
hoping for a smile he teases at the gate  
while a storm unleashes its ultimate warning  
upon the frail frame shivering to a crumble.

There, in the stillness of eternity he will continue  
to dream, his fingers holding the chapters revealed.

*Fabrice Poussin teaches French and English at Shorter University. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in Kestrel, Symposium, The Chimes, and many other magazines. His photography has been published in The Front Porch Review, the San Pedro River Review as well as other publications.*

~ Fiction

# My Uncle's Train Set

*by J.R. Pfeiffer*



I envy Jack Coffee. There are so many pictures of him on Facebook; with a warm cup of coffee and his smiling kids and grandkids splayed out in a window's sunshine on top of vacuumed sofas. His job, being so much in the right industry—of crime solving. I would be him if I could, but I missed my window. I guess we all miss so many windows and endure being middle aged, lost, but we breath and push along, watch, and restrain our suppressed urges. I know I have always been a rock star, just never had the desire to go to L.A. or New York for any of it.

I made it back in time, my blue socks covered in those sticky stickers. I just tossed them in the trash, too old to pick off thirty-four sticky stickers. I went back to my portrait of Rose. My brush still soaked with parchment colored oil paint for her sclera. From a distance, the folk band's insolent noise still echoed in the darkness over the rooftops. I could see the Ferris wheel lights glittering through the branches of the towering Cypress trees. I could almost whiff her stench in the south Florida citrus breeze. As her remains remained slumped on the highest capsule and I unplugged the blue cable which is behind two unlocked boxes. I used to work that old Ferris wheel before my art started to sell. Now I am above every working stiff; I paint what I please and when I please.

I had to fill up the tires on my father's old Malibu Hopper. I was live streaming over the internet, my painting of a monster—emulating one of William Blake's demons for Jake's parents. Behind that canvas, another wet one, a homage posthumously to Rose—her portrait staring out at my hungry hands.

I climbed the rooftop and smoked pot out of a crunched Coke can. I had papers, bong, and brownie mix, but I do things as a child. The roof air was cold and stunk of grapefruit guts. I remembered *thinking here we go!* The Ferris wheel moved and took my black socket angle back down from the clouds. I left her blue eyes hallowed out and she looked like a hippie in a pair of Bob Dylan sunglasses. A slumped over hippie talking to my Icarus flopping around her like an idiot, circling, with his waxed wings and overzealous plans. Why didn't the real Icarus and his father just fly at night? My Icarus always flies at night.

The bass guitarist slapped his wobbly strings and the vocalist sung average, barely covering her notes. And it stopped. The chorus of screams scattered in the breeze. That cool citrus breeze that delivered all of my screams. Icarus's dirty feet hovered several feet above my head and I could see the rainbow to the Ferris wheel form, so vibrant against the darkness. I peddled to the oak tree at the end of my street. I undressed and stood in the shadow, vulnerable, and free.

It took three minutes and I watched Jack Coffee's black Buggy fly by. He, being so brilliant could have noticed me naked standing by the road, but he didn't, which gave me obscene confidence. I had to see him work despite the enormous risk of leaving Jake cinder blocked to the bottom of my pool. He served swell; wearing my painting coat and Panama Jack hat with dire instructions to paint flowers that encircled the monster and to never turn around and show his face to my web cam. His tragic suicide aimed to be at the bottom of a manmade pond in the nature reserve of an elementary school a few hundred yards north of his swimming head.

I peddled fast. The sirens and noxious light bars blinded and deafened me. It was just one corpse, do we really need three fire trucks, two ambulances, and several cop cars? I peddled to the ticket gate, and nobody stood to take my ticket. I didn't have any. I saw the silhouette of John Coffee duck under the yellow crime tape. It would be moments before he saw my work. The others; he may never, but this time, I left it out in the open. And it would stimulate his mind like non-physical intercourse.

He kneeled and examined her body. Her arm hung out like a vinyl doll's. He beamed his flashlight all over her like a bar of soap smearing the dirty and naked. He found several sticky stickers and a smudge of ultramarine blue oil paint, not the oil paint from a hardware store, but the oil paint cut with Linseed oil, that you would find in an art store..

"Are there any patches of woods around here?" John Coffee said.

"Yes detective, on the north side of the church," an officer said.

"Let's go," Coffee said.

He found my dark green trailhead and walked through it; a maze walled with wooden fences and citrus trees.

"I see broken branches and fresh footsteps, call in the K-9 unit," Coffee said.

That Damn Beagle had a genius nose. She could smell my Linseed oil through the elephant ears and popcorn. She led several men through my childhood path and right to my backyard. They opened the gate and my Uncle Ken walked out on the back porch.

"What is going on?" Uncle Ken said.

Three beams of flash lights hit his eyes, blinding him, he said, "Stop it."

"A young lady had been murdered at the carnival and our scent dog led us here," Coffee said.

"Oh my God," Uncle Ken said.

"Are you an artist?" Coffee said.

"No, my nephew paints...why?" he said.

"Oil paints?" Coffee said

"Yes," he said.

"Where is your nephew?" Coffee said.

"Upstairs in his bedroom," Uncle said.

But I wasn't. I hadn't been in my bedroom since lunch. My uncle lived in his garage with his stupid model train set. He never knew where I was. And Coffee and his men rummaged through my drawers and closet. My uncle watched.

"Do you have any idea where he might be?"

"He could be at his friend's house," Uncle Ken said. "His friend, Jake's"



Jack Coffee stood at my west side bedroom window. He was no longer on the balls of his feet, but flat footed and content. His muscles sagged and he stood there almost with disappointment. He looked at Uncle Ken and pointed.

“Is that Jake’s house,” Coffee said.

“Yes,” Uncle Ken said.

Both men stood shoulder to shoulder and looked out. The elementary school lights poured yellow over a wide canopy of banana trees. In spots of light, Possum’s with candle lit eyes moved their kids to fresh shadows. And lower, an emerald green swimming pool, and in the deep end, Jake’s swimming head, still as the moon, two feet under the surface.

“Oh my God, Chris!” Uncle Ken said.

“I don’t think that is Chris,” Coffee said.

“Why not?” Uncle Ken said.

“Do you have a current picture of your nephew?” Coffee said

“I do but we need to get down there and get to that swimming pool and pull him out,” Uncle said.

John Coffee lifted his index finger and curled it like a dancing worm instructing Uncle Ken to come closer. John pulled the drape back and pointed to the pool.

“I think that is Jake in the pool and I think that is your nephew,” Coffee said.

Uncle Ken followed the tip of his finger as it left the pool area and found me on the rooftop, staring back. They both saw my naked silhouette, still as the moon, still as Jake's submerged melon, and I, naked as the day I was born, cracking up laughing like I never laughed before.

*~ J.R. Pfeiffer*

# Yash Seyedbagheri

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## Lobotomy of Beauty

in a workshop, the speakers praise the eyes that stare back  
through deepened mirrored pools  
drowning eye, eye, eye, they proclaim paternalistic smile, have a suggestion  
a good suggestion, trust me (translation: edict)  
for your work  
it's just my idea, formed by masturbating to manifestos, but  
*cue the chill within you*  
I read this obscure poet who might be of help  
eyes on you  
but proclaimed with starched smile

here's what your piece should be against,  
proclaim eyes launching grenades into workshop  
firing circular squads, teachers' assholes laid impotent  
even while they stare into seas of their own  
telling you they're against people against what they're against  
poets that pay mawkish homage to  
the moon, the sun, the stars, your mother,  
your blue tricycle, unless it's a premium blue tricycle  
this is how eye feel with certitude, sheer certainty of certitude,  
while you try to form words

drowned by eyes

---

speaking not of dead creators  
of the figures before  
the sweaty-toothed madman Whitman  
or Wordsworth  
or the witty rhymes of Cole Porter,  
just watch the eyes, the lips  
you try to open your mouth  
conjure the beauty of moonbeams and butter-colored streetlamps  
but their meat cleaver lobotomizes your metaphors  
and your tongue

noblesse oblige  
proclaim the eyes  
who rip out the metaphors and moons  
and insert social justice warriors into every stanza  
into your hope for hopeful meaning  
and into their assholes  
metaphors beg you for love and help  
but the eyes wound them with fusillades  
of social justice souls who have an impaired  
sister or a friend of a friend who must be altruistically honored

and demand that your poem  
rip out your eyes, gouge your body

lobotomize the things one must be for  
to be for something is old fashioned  
the eye with the meat cleaver proclaims  
ripping through your eyeballs  
be against balls, cocks, pussies,

---

for they are all constructs of constructs  
the byproduct of problematic paradigms  
eyes proclaim with certitude.

lobotomizing imagery. and  
Capitalization, meat cleavers grinding

surrender to the eyes. Surrender, surrender  
even as your lobotomized words crumble  
and you don lobotomized smile (allegedly)  
somewhere tears untrammelled threaten to spill  
but you'll bury them with the lobotomized words  
scooping tender metaphors, ripped apart  
images that once held hope  
the beauty of a summer's night  
beauty trammelled by untrammelled forces, you weep  
out of sight of the eyes

just you. The lone I

*Yash Seyedbagheri is a graduate of Colorado State University's MFA program in fiction. Recipient of two Honorable Mentions from Glimmer Train, his story, "Soon," was nominated for a Pushcart. He has also had work nominated for The Best Small Fictions. Yash's stories are forthcoming or have been published in Café Lit, Mad Swirl, 50 Word Stories, and Ariel Chart, among others.*

# Diane Sahms

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## Three Doors Down

Hell's reverse stench rose invisibly  
from rusty throat vents, crept  
as blown nooses, oozing  
tantalizing toxins, gulping up  
breathable air like oxygen eaters.

Black mold infestation as alien  
invasion hidden behind house walls.  
Emissions: vaporous stench, spores  
sailing lung fungi, multiplied, invisible  
to the naked eye. Cellar's incubation

as ground cover growing from  
damp, dank, dirt floor—climbed  
wayward as invisible vines  
within walls fretwork of lath,  
sealed beneath Puritan ceilings.

Air-born-thorns pricking at inner  
linings of pink lung rooms decorative  
full bloom rose velvet wall paper  
turning them into coal mines, until  
humans residing there inside

vapors of oxygen deprived days—  
became innocent, caged canaries.  
Lost appetites. Sunken eyes,  
wearily thin as starved prisoners  
slowly losing flight & will to sing

---

life's song to live. Began braking  
their steps upon darkened floors,  
& faded in the bathing of each night's  
dreamlessness. Breathed stench  
as strangulation's molded noose—

a rope tightening until gasps,  
then their bodies outed breaths.

---

# One-Armed Bandit

*A woman writing thinks back through her mothers.*

—Virginia Woolf

Never wanted to be like either of them—

    Mom, lead weights of a hot air  
balloon keeping me grounded, yet  
spiritually, she, a bankrupt martyr,  
who never stopped giving  
(time & talent & money)

living improvised, saint-like. From  
the same daisy chain, I am more

    Mom Mom—lady-like, more  
love—in a time when Mom  
all around me: everything soiled,  
everything devalued, artless, rigid,  
eternally foggy,

    & Dad reeking of whiskey,  
beer, cigarettes & cigars (for me, 2nd hand  
smoke) burning cloudy ash-filled-daze.

Life, acid of despair dissolving  
holes through cloudy dreams,

    as I passed along sky's blocked  
generational horizon—saw only a thin  
slice of light squeezing through smallest  
crack in sky's dirty window.

    I, more like a coin, nobody sees,  
inserted into the slot of a gambling  
machine that my ancestors always betted on.

    I, too, their unfadeless hope. Hypnotizing—  
as eternal optimists, & some spirit in me knowing



---

from Mom & Mom Mom's martyrdom,  
teaching me from their first to last breaths—  
life is a "no-escape" struggle, filled  
with suffering & pain more abundant than  
raindrops stuck to a fielded forest of fallen  
yellow dreams.

And if nothing else, to keep dressing  
life's wounds, bandaging bandit arm of sky  
with images of silver linings as in clouds,  
to keep singing high above row homes' roof-  
tops in tongues of ancient trees—

Mom & Mom Mom endlessly singing—  
*How Great Thou Art*, never harmoniously hitting  
the high note jackpot of crowned triple sevens,  
only occasionally wielded Seagram's whiskey  
Mom with water: Mom Mom's sour, unlike

Dad & Pop Pop, their heavy drinking  
men's drunken shots, & me somehow knowing:  
Never wanted to be like either of them.

---

# Hot Rod McGurk

& Phil, who was known  
to be heavy handed  
(& fisted) with his wife.  
Possessed  
mossy & missing  
teeth in offensive  
(breath) mouth  
yelling out  
Hot Rod McGurk  
as she hard shifted gears  
rapidly grinding getaway  
speeds, as he stood  
in a wife beater  
shirt, yellowing thin  
distended, bloated beer  
belly. Known to drown  
kittens & puppies  
in a backyard washtub.

*Diane Sahms is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *The Handheld Mirror of the Mind* (Kelsay Press, 2018). She has been published in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *Sequestrum Journal of Literature and Arts*, *Many Mountains Moving*, among others, with poems forthcoming from *Genre: Urban Arts*. Poetry Editor at *North of Oxford*, an online literary journal, she works a full-time job as a purchasing agent.*

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# David Sapp

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## **My Corona**

*The Pandemic in Spring*

Endless blurred days  
Heavy is the reign  
My corona I'm crowned  
Imperator of this moment  
In this crisp April morning  
The virus a tenacious Medusa  
Of sublime design breath-taking  
Ogre sees nothing feels nothing  
Looms as a Goya Disaster  
My world my village shuttered  
Our love expressed behind masks  
Our illusory connectivity carried  
In electrons spinning in space  
Plagued by this strange place  
But happily the shut-in already  
Much too monkish and despite  
The grim ritual tally of tragedy  
I've uncovered a modest utopia  
Or merely an exquisite simplicity  
A delicious lethargy Look!  
Here is my diffident thaumatology  
In this crisp April morning  
Lilac crocus trillium hyacinth  
All mixed with a sudden squall  
Of snow like Monet's instaneity  
Are tiny crimson blossoms falling  
A blizzard from the maple  
And here and there with white  
The brilliant yellow of forsythia  
Like flocks of puzzled canaries

---

# Despite Too Many

*The Pandemic in Winter*

Despite too many tubes  
Stuck in us  
All that air and blood  
Wending in and out of us  
Us stuck upon a needle  
(Please! We plead!)  
And so many too many  
“There there theres”  
And pretty little pink  
Pill after pill  
Endearments  
Dropped into us  
Despite too many wires  
Hooked up to us  
Measuring calculating  
Precise statistics  
Despite all the beeps  
Blips tics sighs  
Our pals machines  
(Who turned on the TV?)  
Despite a dearth of hue  
Everywhere white and white  
Telltale tang of antiseptic

---

Despite all the plastic  
Gloves masks walls  
Deadly molecules splitting us  
There is there must be  
Love between us

*David Sapp, writer, artist and professor, lives along the southern shore of Lake Erie in North America. A Pushcart nominee, he was awarded an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence grant and an Akron Soul Train fellowship for poetry. His poems appear widely in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. His publications include articles in the Journal of Creative Behavior; chapbooks Close to Home and Two Buddha; and a novel, Flying Over Erie.*

# Don Clark

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## **The bad thought side**

how I must look to you,  
screaming inside  
a pale blue

jackpots I've been through,  
the trapped inside  
how I must look to you

under the influence too,  
I've cried and cried  
a pale blue

and tried to fuck you  
for my pride,  
how I must look to you

---

a human does what a human do,  
go and hide  
a pale blue

hidden far from you,  
the bad thought side

how I must look to you —  
a pale blue

---

# Won't pack

Blood packs the wound

When gauze won't do —

Unless the blood

Won't thicken.

My blood is thin

And leaking —

My blood won't pack.

*David Sapp, writer, artist and professor, lives along the southern shore of Lake Erie in North America. A Pushcart nominee, he was awarded an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence grant and an Akron Soul Train fellowship for poetry. His poems appear widely in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. His publications include articles in the Journal of Creative Behavior; chapbooks Close to Home and Two Buddha; and a novel, Flying Over Erie.*



~ Fiction

# JANET'S FANTASY

*by Eric Burbridge*



She excused herself from a boring conversation with Percy. Nature called. Would she return? No. Did she care how he felt? No. For several weeks, she stalked the man of her dreams at Carmen's Place city employees favorite watering hole. Tonight, she makes her move. Manford was a creature of habit, drinking too much and disappearing to sober up before the local jazz ensembles played. She thought it unwise to sleep it off in the parking lot, but he had a secure spot under a huge tree with massive branches that hung over the roof top of his SUV.

Perfect cover...now he was where she wanted him.

Finally, her dream, her fantasy would be reality. He was fully reclined in the passenger's seat. Smart, a cop couldn't say he'd been driving. She eased the unlocked door shut, reclined her seat and peeled off her jacket. Take a breath, calm down, cherish and savor the moment. She lifted his hips and positioned him just right. When she decided to mount him, and got a good rhythm she didn't want any obstacles in the way. Moonlight trickled through the leaves and showed his flawless babyface complexion. She massaged his cheeks and kissed him lightly on that perfect set of lips. He smiled like a baby. "Don't wake yet baby, not yet." She whispered and unbuttoned his shirt and ran her hands over his chest. She was on fire with lust. Her fingertips circled his hard nipples. God, this was a blessing! The movie star like guy lay here at her mercy. He never paid her any attention except for a casual greeting. It wasn't personal, she wasn't his type. She got that. Janet, by any standard, was not an attractive woman. Tall and boxy built she looked more like her brothers than a sister, her neck was too thick and hands too large with an acne scarred complexion, but she was a gentle woman with a sexy voice and personality. The care she gave her nieces and nephews demonstrated she'd make a wonderful mother. And, that's where Manford came in. He had a reputation for being a baby maker, that big bulge in his pants, that he refused to hide, kept the females lusting. Rumor had it every woman he was with

got pregnant no matter how hard they tried not to. Potent sperm, they said. Janet was ovulating, she timed everything perfectly and she knew Manford would deny her and their child and that was okay, but like it or not, she was getting pregnant. When they finished, hopefully she would conceive in a day or so. She'd keep their secret, if she told him at all. As drunk as he was he'd probably forget via blackout.

She unbuckled his belt and worked his pants down past the jock strap and big bulge. He started to stir. Patience, take it easy. Once he was in her it wouldn't matter if he woke up. She massaged him, but Manford continued to snore. Down went the strap, she touched it...it didn't have the feel she expected. Stretch it out, gently so it can get good and hard, but it didn't. Why? It had no veins she could feel. Her heart raced. Oh no, it couldn't be. Her fingers descended, his balls felt funny...a funny feeling she couldn't describe. Turn on the dome light. Wait, what would happen if he woke?

Oh God, don't let it be true!

One way to find out. She grabbed his balls and squeezed, he snored harder. And, his thighs were too soft and smooth.

Shit! Manford Simpkins was a woman! The man of her dreams who she fantasized, schemed, plotted and maneuvered into position to impregnate her was a fraud. She back handed him, again and again. Spit flew out the side of his mouth. He tried to cover his face. "You fake piece of shit!" She punched him in the throat, he gasped for air and then an elbow to the gut. Vomit shot out his mouth and all over the dashboard.

Manford coughed and gagged.

Oh God, did she break his wind pipe?

Snap out of it...now! She looked around and the windows were foggy.

Nobody could see. Sweat poured down her face. Manford was out. Was he dead? She eased away from him. What had she done? She wept and started banging her hands on the steering wheel.

Stop it!

Get yourself together, get out the car and make sure nobody sees you. Don't forget to wipe your prints and DNA off everything. Satisfied nothing remained of her presence she slipped past a couple going at it like two dogs by a dumpster at the back entrance to the bar.

“You look a little rattled to me, puffy red eyes like you been crying,” Percy said.

Janet shrugged. “I’m cool.” Don’t start asking questions, God knows she wasn’t in the mood.

“Another drink?” He’d signaled for the refill before she accepted.

Janet nodded with a fake smile. She didn’t like Percy like that, but she admired his persistence and downed the double scotch. Enough of those would kill the disappointment. But still, was she seen? Carmen’s Place was a dimly lit hide away for couples who wanted privacy. The only video, she heard from a cop friend, was on the cash register. Several more drinks later, the shorter than she, bucked tooth, broken nose with the too close crew cut, Percy convinced her to leave with him and they staggered to his vehicle. The flashing lights snapped her out of her drunken state. “Jesus, what happened to Manford?” Percy said. He leaned against his car while the cops stood by shaking their head. “They’ll probably lock him up, DUI.”

“Poor thing.” Thank God, he wasn’t dead.


Her eyes closed and she dreamt of Manford. The alcohol brought out the freak in them both. Satisfaction had its price and Janet got her wish, but not with the man of her dreams. But, later after it was over, she couldn’t help but wonder, who else knew what she did? His/ her secret was safe with her and nothing came of the beating.

Percy turned out to be a loving father to be. She wasn't all in as far as loving him, but over time perhaps she would.

*Eric Burbridge has been published in numerous literary magazines and he is currently working on his second novel. He still enjoys writing short stories which is his passion.*

# A Slow, Sure Doom

by Robb T. White



I've been manic depressive all my life. It's ruined friendships, romantic relationships, cost me jobs, and had me sitting at the ends of motel beds in the pre-dawn dark wondering whether this was the day I took the big leap into the dark.

More than once, I've mentally "tried out" a few ways to shuffle off the coil, as Shakespeare says somewhere. The gun-to-head most suicides favor distresses me. Not because I'm squeamish but because of the extra mess some motel maid or first responder has to confront. I'm considerate that way. Sucking exhaust fumes won't work. My gag reflex won't tolerate it. There's a name for it: hyperosmia, an acute sensitivity to odors.

My last bout of depression was worse. It's always worse in spring when nature renews and you don't. I went all the way through the logistics to asphyxiate myself with a noose made from strips of bathroom towel knotted around my neck tied off at the shower head. Here's how I can prevent *my hands from tearing the knot loose before my arms tire*—and so on until the first greasy light seeped beneath the drapes covering the windows of my room and I let it go again.

The strange thing is I can work all this out with crude drawings and measurements on a piece of motel stationery, but when it comes to writing the farewell note, my brain stalls. So, once more, I decided to give it another day. *What the hey, right?*

The Atlanta convention at the Cobb Galleria was wrapping up the final day, the last of my scheduled catering conventions. By this point, I'd a Dogwood Festival, an Intergalactic Bead and Jewelry Show, and a Repticon, which meant reptiles. I didn't discover that until my Uber dropped me off at the Fairgrounds in Lawrenceville 25 miles from Atlanta. Snakes aren't my thing, but it never matters where or what the gig, just how many days or weeks and how much I can make.

This job for a national catering service company has me traveling all over the country for weeks at a time. They'll put me up in much better places than these Crazy-8 motels, but I can get the difference in costs added to *my per diem* stipend, which affords me a little longer time in a warm climate during the dark winters up North. If spring is a gut punch to someone afflicted with bipolar, winter is like being hacked with a dull sword—you bleed a little more each day. Until the onset of my depression hit me, those massive, battleship-gray clouds dumping tons of snow on Chadron, Nebraska never bothered me much. The thought of returning to that bleak landscape of open prairie and barbed-wire fencing near the Pine Ridge Reservation would send me over the edge. So I use my saved-up cash to go South.

I punched out at two in the morning. By the time I got back, the lot had filled up with eighteen-wheelers lined up like a pod of whales, some with motors running, their lights glowing like cat's eyes in the haze.

I woke up to screams. A woman or girl's voice. Next door.

I jumped out of bed and put my ear next to the pine board wall where the noise issued from the overhead vent.

No words distinct but an urgent voice, pleading.

*Fuck me. What to do . . .*

I banged on the wall. Silence. I yelled "Hey!"

Still nothing.

Then a pounding on my door.



Then a pounding on my door.

I had my hand on the phone about to call the desk lobby. Instead, I went to the door and opened it.

“Wha’chall banging on the fuckin’ wall like that for, brother?”

A surly mix of threat and greeting. The man delivering it was gray-bearded, pot-bellied, wore a black leather vest with an assemblage of pins and patches on it. He could have stepped out of one of those glossy ad magazines at truck stops where the trucker on the front cover is all smiles from his big rig. This guy wasn’t smiling.

“I heard a scream from your room,” I replied. “What’s going on in there?”  
“That’s my fucking business,” he growled. “You mind yours.”

“I’m calling the desk,” I said. “You can tell him that.”

Dumb. I make a point of minding my own business on my travels. No friendly chat in elevators with strangers. Nothing. Just the minimum to my co-workers. Why not this time, I’ll never know.

But as I turned around, the punch that glanced off my jaw only stung my ear but had enough wallop to send me tripping into my room where I collided with the edge of the bed and fell to the floor.

I got to my knees before a wall fell on me and slammed me to the carpet. Air whoofed out of my lungs. The big bastard flattened me with a WWE move.

When he put a thick forearm under my neck and jerked me backward, I thought my spine would snap. My left arm was pancaked under me. My right arm clawed at the arm bar under my neck, which was like slapping a boa constrictor to make it let go

.  
I thought my eyeballs would pop from the pressure. I frayed curtain of red was falling over my eyes. My brain still worked but its message wasn’t comforting:  
*You’re down to seconds, boy, better do something . . .*

I let him kill me. My last image was my right hand next to my head, palm up, like a crab carried ashore on the tide, lying on its back, fish-belly white, useless.

Those near-death people always talk about bright lights and a tunnel with Jesus standing at one end like some highway worker in a white toga turning a sign back and forth all day: STOP, SLOW. I must have missed him. They say hearing is the last to go. I heard faint noises above me, two voices. Then I felt a warm lotion poured over the back of my head and across my shoulders. My last thought on planet Earth was going to be about the weirdness of having syrup poured over me. Then blackness as the rest of that red curtain came down.

When I woke up, I saw a pair of bare legs. That was odd, too.

A hand cupped my chin and lifted my face up. I couldn't focus yet. The hand was soft, a girl's.

I was still in my room, leaning against the bed. I didn't need a memory refresher for what had happened.

"Where is he?" I asked the legs. It came out in a croak.

"I dint hear that," a voice responded. "You askin' about *him*, you don't got to worry."

"Is . . . he . . . gone?"

"Yeah."

A conversation for the ages, all right.

"What . . . happened . . ."

"Never mind. Just get your breath back. Youse out for a long while," she said.

"I'm sticky."

“I’ll get you in the shower soon you can stand.”

My eyes decided to coordinate on their own. She wore nothing but a bra and panties. The bra was red but the panties were sheer at the crotch; a thick swirl of tawny bush, a natural blonde. The slap on the face brought me around and the cold water she held to my lips came from a Dixie cup in the bathroom but it was ambrosia from the gods to my parched and swollen throat.

“Let’s get ya’ll cleaned up,” she said and jerked me under the arms to a standing position.

I wobbled.

“ . . . police . . . ”

“Fuck the police,” she said. She gave it ghetto spin: *po-lice*. That settled that.

The shower helped. My blood found its way back to the right veins and arteries, the dizziness was gone when I stepped out. She handed me a towel. She was still in her underwear. Her belly button pooched out. She had that look people get when they sleep rough.

I rubbed myself dry. My next thought wasn’t kind: *She’s young for a truck-stop whore*.

“How did he . . . that guy . . . did he kidnap you? Was he raping you?”

“You mean, how did him and me meet up, was I whorin’ when he grabbed me?”

“No, I didn’t mean that at all,” I said.

She snorted a reply to the obvious lie. I dressed from clothes she brought from the second bed. I heard the mattress springs squeak from the next room.

*Please God, not an invitation—maybe a reward for the half-assed rescue, OK—but I’m getting out of here as soon as—*

I stopped in my tracks as soon as I left the bathroom. The blood I'd washed off came from a nosebleed—that's what she told me.

The blood stain on the carpet where the trucker had pancaked me to the floor didn't come from any nose. I spotted wipe marks on the wall. That was arterial spray.

*The warm liquid on my back before I passed out.*

She was curled on my bed reading the Gideon's bible from the night stand.

"Where is he?"

She gave her head a jerk toward the other bed where I laid out my work outfits, an old habit.

I walked over to see what I was expecting to see. How she'd manage to lug a man that size, all dead weight, into a snug position on his side against the wall and the bed, where his forehead touched the wall and his boots almost stuck out at the end.

"I had to move the bed first to get the big sombitch in there," she said.

"Look," I said, "I don't know what your name is or what's going on here, but we have to call the police before any more time passes or—"

"Call me Sissy and no, we don't."

"Don't?"

"Don't got to call no cops."

"That man," I said, "tried to kill me. You saved me. The cops will call it self-defense. You have nothing to fear."

That earned another snort. "You don't know cops, man."

“But you can just tell them what happened.”

“What it’s gonna sound like to them peckerwood motherfuckers is, me and you, we lured this dude in here to rob him after you pimped me out. Then we jumped him and slit his throat.”

“Whoa! Whoa! Sissie, are you insane! What are you saying here?”

“I seen your name on your driver’s license, Neill H. Parker from Northtown, Ohio. Check this here bible verse out, Neill Parker. ‘Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction and there are many who go in by it.’ Matthew. Chapter Seven. Verse Thirteen.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean!”

My eyes bulged from disbelief at what she was saying.

“Judgment,” she said. “That big fat pig met his doom.”

She spread her knees apart to expose the labial lips, her lacy panties stretched to outline the crimson slit between them. Then she slammed the bible shut and her legs together at the same time. The effect rattled me, I admit.

“And I’m sayin’ you’re gonna help me,” she said and twisted her body off the bed to look at me.

“Help you . . . how?”

“Help me get rid of that piece of shit—or that’s the story I’ll tell the cops.”

I helped her.

She returned in two hours with a car and cleaning supplies.

“You know this won’t do anything,” I said, scrubbing the carpet on my hands and knees where most of the blood had soaked through. “They’ll spray luminol in here and the whole room will light up like the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree.”

“What’s that?”

“Luminol. It’s a spray that reacts with the copper in blood—”

“I know that, stupid,” Sissy replied. “You think I ain’t seen shows like CSI? I watch that shit all the time. I meant the Rockefeller thing.”

“Never mind.”

“Whatever,” she said. “Suit yourself. I don’t mind.”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re so pleased about! You killed a man who—

“—who was tryin’ to kill you, remember? I saved your dumbass life! Now help me get this shit cleaned up so we can get out of here before they come in to clean.”

She’d already cleaned up the trucker’s room. I was leaving my DNA, hair, fibers, blood, what-all, and I don’t watch those crime shows. I might as well have signed my name on the pillow case with a Magic Marker for all the good this was going to do—but it would buy time. A job like mine, a transient’s life. I could disappear. Sissy was on her own.

By one in the afternoon, I was exhausted. Worn out, no food in my belly for twelve hours, and not so much as a cup of coffee. Not that I could drink it anyway; my throat was raw, every breath I drew felt like swallowing razor blades.

We stripped off the latex kitchen gloves, threw everything into garbage bags and collected all the cleaning supplies, made both beds, and sprayed deodorant around.

She stripped nude and tossed all her clothes in. “You got any ideas about where to dump him?”

“You’re asking me?”

I tossed my clothing into the same bag. She turned around to face me. Her puckered navel like a misplaced Hindu third eye. Her breasts were natural to the body, rose-tipped nipples. A translucent blonde with hands on her hips, amber ruff jutting above her crease twisted into a custard swirl.

She saw me looking. “Most guys now, they like the bald look. Which way you like it, shaved or full?”

“All the same to me,” I said.

“Neill Junior likes the bush,” she said. “He’s done growed a inch or two.”

*God, help me, I’m doomed,* I thought. *Does Georgia execute?* Everything that had happened after that ape landed on my back took me further from the world I used to know.

“I might know a place,” I said.

My stint out in Lawrenceville at the reptile event wasn’t far from a state park. Plenty of trees, plenty of places to bury a body.

Getting “it” into the trunk took every ounce of strength I could muster.

She drove. This early in spring we had the park to ourselves. She drove us three miles down the gravel roadway until it deadheaded at a swing fence and a sign banning all cars from further access. Three paths emerged from the pine, a small wooden signboards with scorched arrows indicated directions and mileage to different scenic views.

“Let’s go, sled dog,” Sissy said.

She tossed me the rope from the trunk.

“Where are the shovels?”

“Don’t need them out here,” she replied. “Them wild pigs out here will do all the work for us. They’ll eat this motherfucker right down to his teeth in one sitting.”

He was going into rigor and beginning to smell. On the ground, I tied him off at the ankles.

“Them’s real nice cow hitches, Boy Scout,” Sissy said.

She walked ahead, I hauled. Through briars, scrub brush, around trees and over clumps of sandstone. My knees, back and arms, ached as if someone had poured fire ants down my shirt, which stuck to my back. I was filthy, parched, on the verge of heat stroke. I dropped to the ground beside the body. I was unable to haul his dead weight another ten yards.

“You done good, little sled doggie.”

Her nonchalance was maddening. *Something wrong with this girl.* I lay there panting. She stepped into the light and blocked out the sun’s rays covering me. I could see the crow’s-feet around her eyes; she looked older, no teenager. A smile bared teeth to her incisors as she looked down like a jackal eyeing a hamstring. A confident woman, not a girl anymore, but before I could name whatever was wrong, I had to roll over and throw up.

“That’s all right, my doggie,” Sissy said. “You rest here a bit and we’ll go back like nothing ever happened.” She leaned over me to pat my shoulder.

I remember how she looked at me when she dropped me off near the motel lobby. She leaned over to kiss my cheek.

“I ain’t never done that before,” she said.

I thought she meant kiss a man on the cheek.

“Bye-bye, my little doggie!”

She waved and blew me a kiss.



Back in Northtown months later, resting up for my next gig, I came across a newsfeed item on my laptop that caught my eye because of a name: “Lawrenceville.”

A syndicated wire service article cored me like an apple. Police were searching for a truckstop serial killer. Not a man, however. A woman in her late thirties lured truck drivers into giving her rides. She used various aliases in the Oklahoma City region because of its three interstates intersecting. She was spotted near Atlanta. This time, she was wanted for questioning in the disappearance of truck driver Bill “J.J.” Moncrief, 55, whose semi was located by GPS in the parking lot of a motel off Interstate 85. Moncrief was 6’ 4”, 285 pounds, last seen talking to a woman fitting her description.

Six truck drivers were reported missing all over the South, no bodies ever found. The article concluded with a tip line number.

*I ain’t never done that before . . .*

She wasn’t talking about the kiss on the cheek; she was talking about leaving one alive—me.

Since then, I’ve never sat at the end of a bed brooding about my life going nowhere. Being dead, even for a short while, changes how you view living. The Grim Reaper’s henchman—correction, henchwoman—spared me, gave me a reason to wait for the end, however it comes.

Trust me. I know.

*Born and raised in Northeastern Ohio, Robb White has published several crime, noir, and hardboiled novels as well as crime, horror, and mainstream stories in various magazines and anthologies. Nominated for a Derringer in 2019, his crime story “Inside Man” was selected for Best American Mystery Stories 2019. He has two hardboiled private eyes: Thomas Haftmann, featured in 4 novels and a collection of short stories, and Raimo Jarvi (Northtown Eclipse, 2018). Murder, Mayhem & More cited When You Run with Wolves as a finalist for its Top Ten Crime Books of 2018 and Perfect Killer for 2019. His latest work is the crime novella Dead Cat Bounce (2019). “If I Let You Get Me” was selected for the Bouchercon 2019 anthology and The Russian Heist (2019) selected by Thriller Magazine as its Best Novel winner for 2019.*

# Brian Rihlmann

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## So You're A Morning Person?

not in the sense  
of being bright eyed  
and friendly at 4 a.m.

but with the joy  
of the earliest bird  
beating his feathered friends  
to the feeder

in feeling  
like i stole a few hours  
from the rest of the world  
from the day or the night

with the satisfaction of a prowler  
hearing the occupants of the house  
softly snoring  
as i rob their most precious jewels

i sneak to the bedside  
of the greatest thief of all  
to steal a glimpse  
of my reflection  
in his polished scythe

i poke him in the ribs  
then run off laughing  
as he stirs

---

# Itchy

I don't know  
where it comes from—  
this need for a  
trap door  
an escape plan  
but it's an itchy feeling  
it makes life  
more difficult  
it guarantees  
your isolation  
if you've got  
a shred of conscience  
after all  
you can't really  
go into a relationship  
saying—  
I reserve the right  
to disappear  
for a few days  
or forever  
to vanish  
like how I used to  
slip out of parties  
when I got  
tired of them  
that is—quietly  
through the back door  
and without goodbye

---

## Monkey Mind

an inept party planner  
a poor imitator  
a shadow pretending  
it's the light  
it says follow me  
and we do  
we follow this  
confused, dark thing  
through the wilderness  
tripping over stones  
and our own clown shoes

## Which

sometimes  
I'm not sure which  
is more terrifying—  
silence  
or silence  
broken only  
by the ticking  
of a single  
clock like  
a heartbeat  
a time bomb

---

## Some Dogs

some dogs bark  
at every rustle  
or snap of a twig  
some because  
they heard the others  
barking, and  
some just because  
the silence is  
too silent  
too little  
too much

*Brian Rihlmann lives and writes in Reno, Nevada. His work has appeared in many magazines, including The Rye Whiskey Review, Fearless, Heroin Love Songs, Chiron Review and The Main Street Rag. His latest poetry collection, "Night At My Throat," (2020) was published by Pony One Dog Press.*

# Joseph Kerschbaum

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## IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Golden shovel after 'You Fit Into Me'  
by Margaret Atwood

soon they will discover you      aren't you  
contort      shapeshift      counterfeit to fit  
in with the pack      smuggle yourself into  
wolf's clothes      little sheep me

can you see      what you look like  
vaudevillian ventriloquist with one eye on the hook  
hide so long you turn translucent      you convert into  
a blindspot that hovers in the corner of an eye

worm unearths its purpose      on the fish hook  
bated breath waiting for the mouth of an  
indifferent predator who rips you open  
doesn't know your name      doesn't bat an eye

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# HUGGER MUGGER

what hurts worse the punch or the sucker?  
I'll be more purposeful with my carelessness

wake together I spare you the courtesy of a stranger  
what hurts worse the punch? or the sucker?

extinguish the shadows refrain from hugger-mugger  
hammer tossed over my shoulder in blunt dull negligence

what hurts worse? the punch? the sucker  
I'll be more purposeful with my carelessness

# SNAPSHOT

“Would you like me to take a picture  
of you together?” she asks  
from behind her mask.  
Chrysanthemum print & blue eyes.  
We stand under the campus gates,  
face westward into the sunset  
& she transitions into a silhouette.  
Hands back the phone,  
she steps on the bus & is gone.  
There isn't enough mass to forge  
a memory when she took a snapshot  
for two strangers  
& it would be their last together.

---

# OH, GHOST

cold moon knows  
looks down on long woods

owl prowls slow  
fog flows folds low

moss womb grows  
holds lost body to mold

roots thorns logs  
moths flock on knoll

cold month storm's jowls  
snow gown frost crown

ghost's hollow howl  
looks on on on on on

long worst clock  
rolls on on on on on

*Joseph Kerschbaum's most recent publications include Mirror Box (Main St Rag Press, 2020) and Distant Shore of a Split Second (Louisiana Literature Press, 2018). Joseph has been awarded grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Indiana Arts Commission. His work has appeared in journals such as Poetry Distillery, failbetter, Panoply, Flying Island, The Battered Suitcase, Main St. Rag, and The Delinquent. Joseph lives in Bloomington, Indiana with his family*



~ *Flash Fiction*

# ARLECCHINO'S KISS

*by Sandro D. Fossemò*



*Translated by Luca Palantrani*

In this carnivalesque period, I wonder how I will spend the days through the frost waves and in the narrow streets of the medieval village of Cornello dei Tasso, where I live. I fear I might turn to spending time as usual: at the dull dance party, with those few regular friends and many others, so insignificant in their way of being and locked in their circle of acquaintances, such that they render incredibly monotonous and hostile the atmosphere of that venue. Happily, I am settled in the heart of Lombardy, among these enchanting alleys, churches and homey little squares of the ancient localities of Bergamo, scattered in the green Brembana valley. Those back streets are continuously crossed, in these days of celebration, by original Venetian-style masks that match perfectly the bridges, the porticoes arcades and the bricks of the period houses. The carnivalesque costumes, throughout the dancing nights or theatrical plays, fit perfectly with the medieval architecture in a such tradition and vitality, as if it were many paintings in motion, which hang on multiform walls.

Though winter is not over yet, there are some light, pleasant and sudden bursts of springtime sun that surrender to slightly cold breezes, but often frequent in a greyish sky. Late at night, from the misted window of my house, I discover the flashing blue light of an ambulance not far away. I draw nearer till I lay the nose to the glass but I cannot see through; so I turn the handle and open the window to observe what is occurring, but as I look outside I realize that there is nothing going on, although I notice a white mask portraying a female visage. The plastic face lies on a road dampened of light rain and scattered with confetti, in a dark and isolated intersection, lit by an abandoned lamppost. I wonder if a grave accident has taken place and hope no atrocious event has stricken the victim. Just as I am closing the window I observe a masked man looming from the street. He wears the Harlequin costume and slowly walks to the mask dropped out on the road. He halts and contemplates it petrified for about ten seconds. By his movements he looks scared. The mysterious visitor reaches for the splashed bloodstains on the asphalt and, staggering, touches the face of the white mask with his fingers as if he wished for caressing it. This view has shocked me and left me thinking of that man being utterly insane. I cannot depart and let that looney hang around there. Then, I try to ask him: - What are you doing? Who the hell are you? - The transvestite holds back for an instant and trembling raises his head to me, but I can't discern him: a black mask, figuring a grotesque face, extends up to the chin. As nothing I had said, the sinister Harlequin turns back again and stares at that bloodstained mask. The raindrops transform the spots similar to red tears, which now flow from the black cavity of the big eyes of the mask down to the white cheeks, in a chromatic contrast poetic and dark at the same time. A few minutes later, the unthinkable really becomes true. Harlequin bows his head and so the face of his black mask closes in to the white one. Slowly, he rests his lips on those of the mask and softly kisses it, so intensely and lastingly as to express a cold and sad tenderness.

~ Sandro D. Fossemò



