

WELCOME ISSUE 7

SEPTEMBER 2020

'Love words, agonize over sentences. And pay attention to the world.' Susan Sontag

I gotta be meme. Nick North

Welcome to Fleas on the Dog! We're a no frills brown bag online lit rag with only one focus: GOOD WRITING. Our style is 'HOTS!'—hands off the submissions! We publish every submission exactly as received, so there might be arbitrary spacing, pagination and files containing more than one font. What you won't find are pretty pictures and fancy layouts. We like this 'broadsheet' deconstructionist approach—the printed page as its own aesthetic—inspired by the 'Beat' presses and journals because it visually footprints the individual in a way a uniform format does not. We hope you like it too. (In some cases with poetry, Hezekiah's intro will be found at the bottom, not the top of the page.) The artistic voices, those of heart, mind and spirit, must never capitulate in the face of tyranny. Art is the instrument of conscience, the fellow of truth. Out of the mouth of the beast rises Sappho's song. Opening the spaces of mind, nourishing the body of compassion, only happen when we write about what matters and what *needs* to be written. To do this literature (and that includes CNF) must have the power to offend. If the dissenting voice is silenced the sediment in the bottle is artifice not art, materialism minus the atom, spirit minus the ghost. It is up to us to eschew the damnations of political correctness and its idiotic spin off, cultural appropriation. The right to question, the right to disagree, the right to risk is our call to arms. And for those of our fellow writers who can no longer protest without personal consequence—the torch has been passed: we must do it for them! This is what writing is all about. What real writing is all about. Writing is hard. Good writing is even harder.

Yeah, but she's a *woman* we all grumbled. What's going to happen to our Dude cave?

We'll have to put in another washroom! We don't use the washroom, remember? We use the kitty litter box like any disrespecting flea-bitten mongrel. Well, pondered Tom, it looks like the female of the species is out there. I guess it was God's plan to create two genders after all. I mean, you gotta admit the parts fit. Sure, if you're straight! Who said that? Besides, we don't believe in god, remember? Sorry, guys, I think she's here to stay. Knock, knock! Who's there? **JANET COLSON, Drama Editor.** Who??? **Let me fucken in!** Um...Charles, get the door. I'm not getting the door. Rob, you get the door...Rob? Oh, Rob...? Where's Richard? Richard, get the door! I can't. I'm on the kitty litter! WTF. Tom, *you* get the door. Okay, on THREE! One, two, THREE! **WELCOME!** (Later) Hey, this is a pretty impressive CV, Janet! And why not? A woman can do anything a man can do! (From the litter box) Oh yeah? Try holding up a hat with no hands! And I can do *that*, too! **HUUUUUHHH????**

Starting with this issue we are going to publish every 4 (that's FOUR) months instead of every 3 (*trois, tre, drei*). And we are limiting the number of published submissions to 100 max. Believe it or not, we all have lives outside of insects and canines.

A word about email. Questions like, "are you just one guy posing as six?" or "how come the email's from Charles when it's sent from Tom's url?" So, let us explain, *once and for all*. When FOTD was whelped, we each had a site email. *tom@fleasonthedog.com, richard@fleasonthedog.com...* Etc. But soon there were messages for Charles that really should have gone to Rob and Steve in the UK was getting crap meant for Richard. So it was decided (decreed?) that the solution was to have ONE email editors@fleasonthedog.com that comes from Tom's address. **The message the email contains is from the editor who signs it.** Period. Done. Oh, and yeah, we are separate people, (just check our STD files) and that's why we included our personal email links. *Capite?!*

We're just six crazy dudes and one cool fox who love the language and fall on our knees at the sound of beautiful words in all their glorious reach and transformative power. At FOTD we share that with each submission we publish, each different from the other, some miles and styles apart, but always burning. *Nisi optimum et clarissimum*. And now we give you Issue 7. Full of sound and fury, signifying *talent* that will keep you reading today *and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow*. And until we meet again in Issue 8, always spread the LOVE and STAY SAFE, or, as we say here in wonderful Canada, the true north strong and Flea, "Stay safe, *eh!*"
Tom, Charles, Hezekiah, Janet, Richard, Rob and Steve

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PART ONE
FICTION
AND
POETRY

FICTION

ANATOMY OF MELANCHOLIE

By Jonah Howell

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor LEVI PLATT writes:*

Howell's command of language and the beauty he's found in things both unsettling and derelict is just a delight to read. One cannot help but be enthralled by Meloncholie Mercer's enigmatic and foreboding presence; when she ruminates "It gets better once you lose yourself," you know there is menace behind it, but you're never quite certain --until it's too late-- why. On the face of it, what Howell accomplishes here is a deceptively great piece of horror that harkens to the era of the Southern Gothic, but like all great literature Anatomy of Melancholie is so much more than a simple homage or exercise in artifice and style. What lies at the heart of this piece, what truly leaves us coming back to his work--is its tragedy of Modernity

"I just don't speak the language here. Y'all ever feel like that, like they moved you to another country?"

When the ever out-of-place Jefferson utters his dilemma, Howell's gambit -- to yoke an almost otherworldly tale of horror with the very human, very devastating tale of the cost of Modernity-- comes into focus. When we are introduced to North Carolina's rapidly changing Raleigh/Durham area, Howell's expert writing lulls us into a sense of narrative familiarity--a simple, beautiful orientation of time and place. Yet, he is also deftly steering our focus towards the sense of growing isolation and resignation felt by those whose once solid foundations of home, culture, and belonging is taken away from them; we need only pay attention to Jefferson. It is Jefferson's (and ultimately our own) sense of powerlessness and resignation to the overwhelming force of change that keeps me coming to these pages. It's the devastation of "losing yourself" Howell has so thoughtfully captured on these pages that makes each read of Anatomy of Meloncholie better than the last.

(Spacing and font size are author's own.) Eds.

Anatomy of Melancholie

Her parents were not cruel, they were just from the country. They had never heard such a word, and when they named her, they thought they had assembled a new and otherwise meaningless string of syllables. Not that they were unintelligent: Her father, the fifth-most productive farmer in Veerstoff County, North Carolina, solved cube roots in his head as a hobby, and her mother was the county's best dowser. When you say her name straight across, stress on the first and third syllables, *Melancholie Mercer*, it does produce an inexplicable ring, as though layers of clouds, rubbing together just right in a high wind, had begun to rain chords in F# minor.

None of us realized what her parents had done until Veerstoff High finally closed in 1997. Back in '94, a new Interstate 85 bypass had rerouted all the truckers through the faraway metropole of Greensboro, and Veerstoff was left to subsist on corn and clandestine trickles of moonshine.

The high school held on for a few years, downsizing and restructuring until it resembled a nineteenth-century schoolhouse, with one teacher for the freshmen and sophomores and one for juniors and seniors. In late '97 the capitol sent an auditor, and the next summer we each—all one hundred twenty-four of us—received letters of admission to a public boarding school in Durham. North Carolina School of Science and Math, they called it. The buses would come and round us up at the end of the summer.

Melancholie, Jefferson, and I, going into our senior year, were assigned to the same bus on August eighth, and we waited together at the corner of Main and Lower Spring just after sunrise, sweating in the morning fog. Down Main we could barely see the ballpark, with its pennants from the '40s and its peeling hardwood bleachers. Lower Spring was nothing but dull reddish cedar stumps in both directions. Saplings bowed over between them, mourning.

Jefferson joked, "If the bus doesn't come, Mel can teach us."

She laughed. She had set out to read every book in the county library, in alphabetical order by author, when we were twelve. Soon after that, she had taken on such a darkly weighted demeanor that Jefferson and I had sworn off non-necessary reading forever. If I remember correctly, she had finished the last “O” book the previous night. Teachers generally resented her until, at sixteen, she figured out how to play-act her age.

Jefferson made another joke, but I refuse to write it. This was a long time ago now, and way out in the country.

The bus arrived around eight, headlights shrinking in the fog as it bumped toward us. The rest of our senior class, about fifteen of them, had already boarded. The bus took a tooth-rattling three-point U-turn over a cleared cedar lot, and Mel rambled to us about Ozzy Osbourne and Ozymandias, some kind of whittler, for the full hour-long ride into Durham. She seemed nervous, but we could not imagine why. Jefferson and I, we had reasons to worry. We were about to enter an academic environment with standards. But as far as we could figure, Mel should feel like she was going home.

The first day in our new English class, later that week, the teacher, Ms. Zercher, laughed. “Melancholie? I’m sure that’s a typo.”

“No, I’m here.” She sank in her seat.

Ms. Zercher stared at her for a buzzed moment, eyebrow cocked, then sped distractedly through the remaining names. I found out later, when I worked for the same school as a record-keeper, that Ms. Zercher had filed a complaint with the administration, thinking that, and I quote, “these hicks are playing jokes on me. Jefferson Davis? Really? And Melancholie?” The assistant principal called their families for confirmation, and we never heard any of it.

After two weeks in Durham, Jefferson started to take on Melancholie’s darkness. The three of us had, by some glorious stroke of luck, scored rooms on the same hall, and we spent most of our nights either playing poker together or else shooting the shit over moonshine scored from older friends back in Veerstoff.

Melancholie often showed up late. She always sped out when school ended at 3:30 to go and walk around Durham. Deprived of the Veerstoff Library, she had taken to reading the city, she said, and she was certainly happier for it. I had not seen her so *light* since we were little kids. One night, halfway down a jar of lemon moonshine, she admitted of her literary phase, “It felt like I was walking through ropes, thick gray ropes, and they wound around my shins as I walked, and they were so heavy that it felt like I couldn’t move anywhere.”

Although I intuited that such a thing could not be contagious, it seemed like Melancholie had overcome it only by passing it on to Jefferson. So on our second Saturday, several shots deep, I asked him, “Man, what is it, have you started reading?”

He gazed up at me—he had been staring at the imitation-wood floor of my room—, and I saw that his eyes had retreated deeper into his head. “No. I just don’t speak the language here. Y’all ever feel like that, like they moved you to another country?”

We had no idea what he was talking about, so he explained, “My family’s been in the country for centuries. There’s ways of talking that are good for corn and cattle, then there’s talk that’s good for offices and suits. Ditto for movements. Even my fingers are traitors, my hairs, my spleen.” He wiggled his fingers, and his thick silver class ring flashed in the fluorescence of my bedside lamp.

Melancholie nodded. “Now you see how I felt. It gets better once you lose yourself.”

The night after Halloween we found Jefferson in a pile of vomit, jars scattered around the room, with a letter and everything, and we called a hospital and cried until they swore not to tell the school. We called his parents, and they seemed to sense something we didn’t, and they called the principal and said there had been a sudden death in the family. Jefferson went home for a couple weeks and came back silent. While he was gone, Melancholie stayed in town almost all the time, and I hardly saw her.

Melancholie. She was tall, I remember that much. Her legs seemed like they reached up to my navel, and her neck always craned forward like she couldn’t hear Jefferson and I

talking. She kept her hands in her pockets, but I knew her fingers were always moving, playing with stray threads, balling lint, jangling keys.

Her face was somehow widened, somehow lengthened, like a deep sea creature that a biologist had pulled up from high pressure. There is a grand secret there, a parallel between depressurization and depression—that when you pull a person out of the kind of pressure they know, all the organs that once pushed against that outer pressure spill out, and they cannot move, or they cannot figure out where to move, and so they distend, or their mind overruns its boundaries. I imagine a blobfish which, under several thousand meters of water, is well-adapted and even beautiful, its sleek lines set off attractively by the darkness that surrounds it; but it cannot survive for long in the light, in a small tank. It overflows itself, it frowns by structure, it explodes on impact with our world.

Melancholie's feet always pointed straight ahead, but her knees caved inward, as though she were trying to hide herself. Usually she smiled, but usually she could not, but she forced it anyway. Once we arrived in Durham, her shoulders began to slump, their blades skewed outward like clipped and useless wings, and she started wearing a thin iron chain as a necklace. Slowly, her accent shifted, not toward that of Durham or away from her natural voice, but off in a different direction entirely, like a bumper that flies off the road after a head-on collision.

Her neck was long, and her hair was short and strawlike. She showered every couple weeks, and she did not shave her legs or her armpits, and so folks in Veerstoff thought she had lost sight of Christ, and folks in Durham thought she was from the North, which, in Jefferson's native language, would amount to the same thing, though he did not see her that way.

She walked slowly, looking mostly at the ground and at the rusty pine stumps, until we moved to Durham. Then she sped up, and she spoke of the great life of the city, which Jefferson and I dutifully avoided.

She introduced herself to everyone in Durham as Mel, but we knew her name, and she never asked us not to use it.

Jefferson returned the week before Thanksgiving. He said nothing in class, and none of the teachers pressed him, thinking—correctly—that he must be mourning. He still met

with Melancholie and me at night, but he lost every game of poker, and he barely drank, and we did not ask him about The Night or about its letter, thinking that he would explain things to us when he was ready.

The last Friday before Thanksgiving break, Melancholie waited for us after class. She had never done this before, and I chided her, “Finally realized the city is as depressing as the library?”

She grinned. “No. I want to take y’all there.”

Jefferson winced visibly, and she lowered her face and glared at him. “Especially you.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see.”

We walked with her out the school’s wrought-iron front gate. Jefferson trailed the two of us by a few feet, staring at the sidewalk. Just outside, an old green signpost pointed the way downtown, and she led us in the opposite direction.

“Isn’t Durham that way?” I asked.

“Eh, it’s everywhere. I’m bringing you to the better part.”

We walked on for about thirty minutes until dense-packed streets of ramshackle vinyl-sides gave way to pines and oaks. Though it was late November, the sun shone alone in a nearly clear sky, a few thin clouds strung along the treetops like eels’ ribs, and we sweat in the heat. She turned into the parking lot of a remote apartment building and pulled out a flashlight.

“The hell,” Jefferson said. “Thought you were taking us to Durham.”

“I am.” She led us through the back of the parking lot onto a narrow dirt path that curved away through the pines. Out in the needled underbrush a trio of armadillos chased each other around a dead brown bush. Up ahead through trees and holly shrubs I glimpsed the rectangular concrete opening to a storm drain, about six feet high by five wide.

Coming around the next curve, Jefferson ground his teeth, “Ain’t no way I’m going in there. What kind of shit are you trying to pull?”

“Do you trust me?”

He could not say, “no.” Even then I realized that Melancholie had played a dirty trick, trapping him in the same kind of no-exit language game the city kids used. I did not say anything but stared into the drain. I could see maybe twenty feet in, then nothing. Its gray walls streaked by leaking runs of orange mold, it looked like the rippling intestines of some undiscovered animal, more mineral than organic. Something echoed from within, loud and tinny, but then it echoed again several times, and I decided that it was only a drip, runoff from yesterday’s rain.

We stopped for a moment at the entrance, digging our shoes into the mud to keep from slipping back down the trail. Melancholie turned her flashlight on and shone it into the tunnel, illuminating nothing but the same gray with irregular orange streaks. She stepped out in front and stood for a while with one sneaker on the threshold, looking out into the moldy corridor, intensely silent. Then she gave a quick blip of laughter and we followed her in.

Jefferson fell behind by a couple steps, staring at the slime that slicked the floor, and Melancholie and I walked side by side in front until we came upon a sort of antechamber, a wide room, maybe fifteen feet, with quick slaps of graffiti up the walls and somehow, impossibly, an old candle chandelier hanging in the center.

I ran through a daydream that we might meet some tunnel person, like an anthropomorphic mole or a cave-bat, and we would be invited to join them, their society down there, in small chambers like this and tunnels that spanned the underside of Durham. This chandelier was old, certainly pre-electric, and I had thought several times, as we walked that first straight stretch, that I heard other footsteps, which I had dismissed as echoes.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jefferson shiver and turn away from the chandelier, and Melancholie asked, pointing to the twin tunnels that projected from the chamber’s far wall, “Left or right?”

“Don’t you already know?” Jefferson spoke softly.

“Of course. But I want you to choose.”

“Left.”

“You sure?” She asked, lowering her eyes.

He hesitated. “No. Right.”

We fell, after about thirty feet, into the same formation as before, Melancholie and I in front, Jefferson a couple paces behind. This tunnel was shorter and narrower than the last and round, and we splashed through the thin trickle of water that ran down its trough, not bothering to walk along the drier sides. The drain branched off to both sides at unpredictable intervals, sometimes into tunnels just as wide as ours, sometimes into tiny chutes not much wider than a house’s gutter pipe.

Passing the wider openings, I sometimes thought that I heard quick movements like those of some large animal hurrying out of sight, and that I saw shadows darting away from Melancholie’s light. Several times I heard Jefferson jump away from one of these openings as though he had seen more than I had, or he had seen as much but understood more, but he said nothing, and I did not dare ask, not while I saw the utter calm of Melancholie as she led us deeper into what I now recognized as a serious labyrinth. As I caught fleeting glances of the tunnels we passed, and I felt the weighty quiet that soaked the place, I nearly grasped what drew Melancholie there every day. After walking for so long, we must have been squarely beneath downtown Durham.

The ceiling of our main passage dropped to a tight two feet out in front, and Melancholie veered into a leftward branch, not quite so high as the hall we had left but tall enough that we could walk upright if we bowed our heads. A crusty iron pipe ran along the concrete to our left, leaking clear fluid into streaks of dull blue. Jefferson cleared his throat like he wanted to say something, but he kept quiet and slogged on.

Far behind us, something crashed into the water. I could no longer explain it away as our echo: It splashed loudly, then a slipping patter as it fled, careful not to be detected. I shot a questioning glare at Melancholie, and she chuckled. “Rats.”

For a confused, terrified moment, I thought she was lying. “Melancholie, what is this place?”

“Exactly what it looks like. Isn’t it beautiful?”

Jefferson gripped my sleeve, the one furthest from Melancholie, and we trod on around bends and over small, slick humps for an hour at least, and we heard nothing more

but the sounds of our footsteps and the dripping of that iron pipe into its blue smears. Jefferson's class ring bulged frigid against the back of my arm, and I shivered.

She led us down several more branches, each tighter than the last, so that we were almost on all-fours by the time we came to the second big chamber. This one bore no chandelier, and its walls were bare but for a pile of objects, arranged like a tiny shrine, in the far right corner: an empty photograph frame with damp cork backing, a full snakeskin, a pair of shoelaces. Melancholie made her way slowly around, fingering her necklace and humming an indistinct tune. It was no song I had heard, and it progressed in aggressive starts and stops, accelerations into silence, with no particular tonal arrangement but always seeming to rise, more similar to a quickening wind through the rusted walls of an iron shed than to any music I knew. Once she reached the shrine she crouched and inspected the snakeskin with focused curiosity, balancing her flashlight on its hind end so that it would light the whole room.

I had stopped right inside the threshold, and I found myself panting deeply. The room, its walls sparsely glittering in the dull light, smelled of mildew, not the gritty mildew of gym clothes, but a clear, piercing sourness that set my head spinning. I only noticed that Jefferson had stopped behind me when he pushed past, rushing into the room and squeezing himself into the corner opposite Melancholie.

He pressed his back into the slimed concrete and sank down, shaking his head. His shins seemed to grow several inches, and they jutted up on either side of his face, pointed knobs of knees angular through his jeans. Hands on either side of his head, he squeezed his hair in full fists and spoke in the same submerged tone as before.

"I know what you're doing, Mel."

"What do you mean?" She looked over her shoulder. I noticed her vertebrae, sharp and serpentine, protruding beneath her shirt.

"I saw it. I'm leaving."

She jumped up and sprang to the entrance beside me, barring his way. "I wouldn't do that."

"And why not?"

She hesitated. "You don't know which turns I took. You'd get lost."

“I’ll go up one of those ladders and out through a manhole.”

“No.” She said it too quickly, and she added, as though apologizing for some rudeness, “Even if you found one, they’re heavy. It would fall on you.”

He could not argue. He had never lifted a manhole cover before and could not know how heavy they were.

Jefferson buried his face between his thighs. “Why, Mel?”

“I love this place.” She left two Kennedy half-dollars beside the frame and walked toward the only tunnel onward.

Three branches later, after wading through knee-deep clear water and crawling through a thin chute, we emerged into a wider tunnel, just high enough to stand in. By this point, the orange streaks had disappeared, and the iron pipe had curved upward and away aboveground, and everything was perfectly grey in all directions, and I had seen no graffiti for at least an hour, no signs of human contact but one more mound of objects, at the end of the crawling chute—a stick crudely whittled into the shape of a shoelace and a few beads strung onto a thick leather cord.

Melancholie slowed her pace now, but still she maintained the same calm demeanor that had so relaxed me before. I had no idea what Jefferson was raving about, and I figured he had fallen into some dark paranoia. I wanted to say that we had known her since we were kids, that we had always trusted her, and that he was being crazy, but I did not see how it could help, and I did not want to become another one of the city kids that thought he was off his rocker, so I kept quiet and squeezed his fingers when, as we emerged from the thinnest chute, they reached back up to grip my sleeve.

Now and again I heard more crashes behind us, but I joked to myself that, if something was following us, it was terribly clumsy.

Coming to a new fork, Melancholie paused, looked down both passages with her flashlight, and took the rightward path. We followed, not knowing by what criteria she could have differentiated the two. Jefferson trembled. I felt it in my sleeve. But he walked on, silent. I felt his head turn each time we passed a ladder and each time something fell into the dark water behind him.

Far sooner than I expected, we came to another room, larger than the others and shallowly domed. At its center hung a bare, rusted chain, maybe five inches long. The rest lay bare—no graffiti, no shrine, nothing. The underside of the dome bore miniscule traces of having been painted, but nothing like an image remained. Melancholie went straight to the chain and ran her fingers along it several times, slow and methodical, stopping at particular links and rubbing their sides. After some time she resumed humming that same asymmetric tune, louder this time.

I walked along the sides of the wall as I had seen her do, looking for whatever it was that she saw in them. Atop the concrete was nothing but a faint, thin film, not quite mold but not quite simple dampness, something of a category I had never experienced. Melancholie was fully absorbed by the chain, running her long fingers up and down it with intense focus.

In a moment of confusion I noticed that there was no pressure on my sleeve. I whipped around and scanned the room several times for Jefferson as though, in spite of its emptiness, I could have missed him. I bolted to the entrance, and Melancholie indulgently beamed her flashlight down the empty tunnel. I darted my gaze back around the room and then ran, slipping in unnamable film, down the tunnel, finally stopping and screaming out, “Jefferson!”

I heard nothing but my own echo. Sprinting back into the room, I found Melancholie as calm as ever, still examining the chain.

“We need to go back and find him.” I felt ridiculous saying it. It should have been so obvious.

“I had to bring somebody.” She did not look away from the chain, but fondled its lowest hanging link, scrutinizing it closely, her eyes only an inch away.

“Huh?” I looked around the room and tried to remember when I had lost the feeling of him on my arm, but we had walked so far that I could not pinpoint the moment. I remembered him crouching in that second chamber.

She turned to me, and she ran her eyes along the nascent lines in my forehead, down the side of my jaw, and over my neck before shooting her gaze toward the ground. “It’s better that he isn’t here,” she said quietly. “Trust me.”

Suddenly gripping the chain with both hands, she added, “But he is probably lonely.”

I bolted back down the tunnel, groping blindly for a ladder. Behind me I heard the smooth, confident strides of something I could not reconcile with the careless splashes I had heard earlier, and I ran harder, slipping and nearly falling on the film that coated the underside of the passage.

My hand leapt off the wall into a wide indentation, and I slid to a stop as the rusted upright of a ladder scraped the side of my thumb. Loud, rapid splashes reverberated down the tunnel in both directions as I clambered up. Just when my face broke through a dense net of cobwebs, the crown of my head rattled against the manhole cover. Remembering from the brief flashes I had seen earlier that a concrete cylinder closed tight around the ladder at the top, I leaned back against the narrow walls and heaved with both arms.

The cover raised a couple inches, and I struggled up one more rung for better leverage as heavy footsteps scrambled to a stop beneath the ladder. A thin sliver of light illuminated the backs of my hands, and I fixated on it, willing it to widen, and the cover shuddered up as, below me, quick taps shook the ladder, tings of metal against metal.

With an upward surge I threw the cover over onto its back and scrambled up the last few rungs, hefting my shoulders over the reddish rim of the manhole. Long, frigid fingers wrapped around my ankle, and I kicked out wildly with both legs. My free foot made solid contact, and I pushed up onto a desolate parking lot. I saw a quick flash of livid grey skin as my pursuer fell back, but I heard it catch only a few feet down, so I braced my hands beneath the cover and, with a heavy grunt, swung it back into place just as the thing gripped the edge.

Its fingers writhed back and forth and scraped at the asphalt. A heavy ring on one of them clanged against the iron rim of the hole, and muted slapping sounds escaped from beneath the cover as it threw its back against the concrete walls, trying to find leverage to lift its fingers free.

I could not move but stared at its fingers, transfixed, confused, and I knew that I could not lift the cover from above, so I ran toward the street and out through downtown Durham, passed flashing lights and neon and darted through crowds of stumbling drunks,

waiting cabbies, and sororities in formation, accelerating relentlessly, though my knees ached for the first time, and every humid breath scalded my lungs, because if I ran fast enough, I thought in delirium, I would forget.

At Thanksgiving dinner my mom leaned over and whispered into my ear, “You seem different. Darker. I don’t mean to, you know. You’re not the kid I knew. The one I raised.”

I took another bite of mashed potatoes and nodded vacantly.

“God has his plan for you. I know it. His path is narrow, but He won’t let you stray.”

That night I took a jar of corn whiskey I had stashed under my bed and walked out to Lower Spring. The cedar stumps, normally a vital red, glowed colorless beneath the waning moon. I wove my way through them to an overlook, maybe a quarter-mile out, where a short hill dropped off into an endless valley out to the horizon. The stumps reached halfway down the slope now, and the nearest treetops leaned up toward me. I downed half the corn whiskey in one go and stared out into the valley until its jagged canopy blurred into the slate grey above. Taking another gulp, I vomited thick and heavy onto the nearest stump, and in a rush of exhilaration I swigged another mighty throatfull and unloaded. I heaved until I brought forth nothing but bile, and the bile came thick, and I tossed the jar and its remnants down the slope and turned and staggered back toward home.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *The FOTD editors’ comments on my story in Issue 5, “Amor Fati,” spawned this one: They wrote, “We’re pretty sure that if Howell had lived in the 17th century his name would be Robert Burton and he would’ve written The Anatomy of Melancholy.” And so, pulling styles from H.P. Lovecraft and M.R. James, I wrote melancholy into Melancholie, whose name and anatomy drive her into the very condition for which she is named. The tunnels in the story actually run beneath the old American Tobacco Campus in downtown Durham.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Jonah Howell lives in central Germany. You can find his recent work in Maudlin House, Half Mystic Journal (Issue 8), and the fifth issue of Fleas on the Dog.*

EDITOR'S BIO: Levi Platt. Utah Valley University. I am currently finishing up my undergrad in Creative Writing where I have taken a weird turn as a fiction writer originally and moved more towards the realm of creative nonfiction. I still am not sure why. Maybe it's a masturbatory thing. What do we make our homes in our time? Where do we find "home"? How do we find it, if at all? This is an essay is a piece of that meditation that I am hoping to turn into a set of essays on the subject. It is both a telling of a place where a ten-year-old me found "home" at a time when I really didn't have it amongst family and my attempt to weave a narrative together that tells the story of the development history and release of my favorite video game--based on various interviews, wiki/fan pages, and articles throughout the years that have followed Yu Suzuki since he made the game. To be clear, it isn't reportage, it's more like me trying to piecemeal a narrative that makes sense that could explain how a game made by a middle-aged Japanese man could have such a profound and ultimately artistic impact on a child. Or in short, trying to understand what the man intended to make, and what the boy found in his creation. His essay **Shenmue** appeared in Issue 6.

Hummingbird Fights

By Chris Cover

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor TURNER ODORIZZI writes:*

This story is a beautiful illustration of what it means to be left with an empty feeling. While telling the story, the narrators only give us sparse dialogue, short barbs that are quick, low-brow, and so emotionally evocative that they single-handedly construct the setting without ever doing the actual legwork of elaborating. The banter often comes in line-by-line form, with short, hyper-realistic sentiments. I often found myself transported back to the short and volatile fights and conversations I had with my own father. In addition to this story of family emptiness and legacy, there are ruminations on colors and identity. When describing the nature of rural America, the narrator places us between red and blue, reducing our personal and political aspirations to all the “purple” or in-between colors. I felt a sense of relief as I was reading this story, like someone was stripping away chipped paint on my psyche, leaving bare all of the fragility and mistakes I made, but giving them a clarity that you only get from a personal honesty I don’t know that I’ve ever had. Is it hard to tell such an Earth-shattering story without more than dialogue and a few vivid images? Obviously, this story proves that it knows how, and that this author may know more about inner turmoil than any of us ever could. After all, has a character almost weeping at not being as agile and beautiful as the hummingbird which he sees felt so prescient? Likely, nothing ever will. This story is beauty, frustration, and deep sadness captured by the short, working-class conversations of two brothers desperate for meaning in their lives.

Favorite Quote: Fields the same golden colors and trees with leaves of green and orange and red and people like they’ve always been and in different colors too. Who wants to fight?

5 Stars

(Spacing and font size are author's own.) Eds.

Hummingbird Fights

He said he wished our fathers or anyone else would have told us more than just it goes by faster than you think. What does that mean? he said.

I don't know, I said.

We could've figured that out on our own probably.

We keep talking about it.

But it wouldn't of mattered anyway.

I don't remember anyone else ever saying anything do you?

No, he said. But I suppose it's pretty common talk around puberty or somewhere in between the ages of twelve and seventeen wouldn't you think? And by eighteen you're either supposed to know it and if you don't life still goes on, it doesn't stop. We were what, sixteenish? Then it's never talked about again unless brought up like now.

Pretty much every chat.

Was it you or me this time?

I think it was me.

No, I said something like, Boy I wish I'd been told a lot more and you laughed.

I'm still laughing.

Advice for generations.

Heavy stuff.

Go and ask them old timers what they think about the time passing, Lenny said. They probably never even thought about it.

Didn't wear watches neither.

My grandpa never wore one. Grandma too.

I watched mine throw hers away.

And now it's all so calculated and so crunched the way we live, he said. But coming from the right mouth like your father's you always think twice about it. Too much. Maybe that's it. You listen because you want to listen. It's your fucking dad. I guess with some people like us the conversation never ends though. Makes you wonder if it all boils down to relevance or something like learning how to ride a bike. You just remember, you just know it. Do all people talk like this or is it just us? It's not only us, Shep, come on.

Would it have mattered? I said.

What? Hearing more from dad? Or mom even.

Yeah.

I don't know. Probably not. They were right.

What else could they have said?

This kind of talk coming through the telephone, the airwaves cellular, the dog huffing against my knee and her back warming in the sun. Walking. Huffing. Sweating. Two sides of the country. Coastal west and near east depending on who you ask. U S A. Red and blue make purple. A capital in the middle. It's the big cities which define them one way or the other and in between is either mixed or anti-government. Both. Free. Always

free. Intelligent and free. Ignorant and free. Indifferent and free. Fields the same golden colors and trees with leaves of green and orange and red and people like they've always been and in different colors too. Who wants to fight?

What about . . . Lenny said then was interrupted by his wife calling from the kitchen asking about dinner, distracting him. What about . . .

Cooking was happening. Sizzling sounding from a grill that I pictured smoking the house up inside and all the windows open. Not true. Hotter weather than here though. Humidity. A child screaming. Len strolling the yard around the curved edge of the pool talking with his hand up against his head. He said so. Said he was so close to falling in while balancing himself that he had to flail his arms and break the chain of communication for a few seconds. Check on dinner. What'd I say? Nothing. What'd I miss?

I've got to clean this damn thing, he said.

There were only a few minutes left to talk. Time differences. Sun out strong here and the world darkening there. Earth upside down. I could think of at least two or three other topics we could've covered but it always boiled down to the one because it was the silliest one between us. And yet he went on about the yard and the pool and we didn't talk about his job at all and that surprised me. Finances, money. I didn't comment about the pool. I don't work. He just went on and on. I'm a bum.

You know we're gettin old, he said.

I know it.

Where'd it all go?

What else did you want to know, Len?

Anything, he said. I can figure out the time all on my own.

Can you?

It goes by. I look at the clock. So what.

I can't, I said.

Why are we still talking about it then?

It's about regret isn't it.

I guess so.

What do you regret?

He said he had to maintain his yard regularly but didn't think of it as a regret. Having to do it. He was aware of his decision when he took on the responsibility and said so. Distracted he repeated that he had to clean the pool and didn't regret anything. He thinks. Something is kicked. A toy. He hates that pool. He loves it. An inflatable ball. I've been there only once a few years ago and it's bigger to me every time we talk about it on the phone and all I can smell is the chlorine. I imagine it now all the colors have changed. I wish I had a pool but it would turn green overnight. His sparkles blue. I maintain my own yard poorly and if he lived by me like he used to I would get an eye from him next door every time I get home with the dog. Like now. Trim the bushes, sweep the stoop. He's not there but only his voice. Then I'd be invited over for dinner and we would not talk about anything we were talking about on the phone because we'll be fifty in a year anyway and not on the phone. What would it matter? It would be changed. It would be different. I'd be closer. This way we can talk in distances whenever we want. The same. I was home and no one lived next door and I got hungry. Like from a bell ringing. Salivating.

I guess they could've included more, he said.

More of what?

More than just, Son it goes by faster than you think. What is that? Hey son you're gonna die and it's gonna be soon soon soon. Anyone can say that. I guess I need explanations. I guess I need to know why.

What more would you like to have known, Len?

Everything! he said almost losing the phone again and his voice. Everything. What's it mean for one.

He again mocked what his father had said to him long ago.

Like a daily lesson, I said.

Yes!

Lenny didn't have a father anymore.

Maybe he didn't know any better, I said. We still don't and we're older now than they were when they told us. You can't blame them.

Who then?

No one. God. No one ever figures it out. Life's not meant to be completely figured out. They've got special houses for people who try and all the others are just pretending.

He said: When I used to see him after school I'd get all excited to hear about what he had to say. About anything. About living, about life. Man stuff. And women stuff too of course. Lori O'Connolly. I was afraid I'd grow up to be a fag. So was he. I think. Maybe he was. We never talked about that. Speaking of women Maggie Mayfly.

Who was she?

Then there was working on the farm and him being whipped with a mouth and a whistle. I always used to joke that that whistle must've been a big one. And why didn't he just strangle the son of a bitch with the strap it was tied to, sneak up from behind. It must've been huge too.

I laughed.

Lessons and disciplines, he said. What he had to offer over spaghetti which he couldn't rid himself of because it tasted so much better than what he was used to being served in the can. Noodles crunching like bug exoskeletons. Ketchup. Brown basil. His work day, my school day. Our present conditions under examination. How was work, pop? Same as any other, son, how was school? Shit. Tomorrow too. On some days we talked more than others. Some days less. Some days worse. Even some days better, great. Hands folded over one another and a candle in between us on the table. Yeah right, there wasn't no damn candle, Shep. Nothing but his busted up hands clasped together resting with knuckles scarred and dry and breaking the skin and mine gripping the utensils scarfing, not yet scarred or scared to death of death. He ate too fast of course. Then we'd fight afterwards in the basement. To the bone. Wiping our mouths as we called it. We were always fighting but not always in the basement. No. Maybe that's what he was trying to teach me. Fighting. Taking it outside. And not with fists neither. Not fighting fighting but other kinds of fighting. Life fighting. Maggie Mayfly.

I remember now, I said.

All fighting is so mixed up anymore, Lenny said. Diluted. We used to spar in the garage and I'd tell mom it was from a wall I wasn't allowed to punch anymore because they can punch back when you're least looking, she'd said.

That's why you hate cleaning that pool.

Mom, he said.

Silence on the line.

The pool bites too, Shep.

No your hand I mean.

He wasn't listening and I did. Three topics back to one. Dinner, the pool, fighting.

Time doesn't change, he said.

I concurred.

Then it can't be that. It can't be the time. It's us, Shep, it's us.

What's us?

Don't you feel like dying?

No. I don't.

I'm gonna give myself a heart attack.

You're nuts.

Not on purpose. Time will.

What's for dinner?

A punch in the mouth.

Look out!

We laughed.

How's Liz? he said.

Gone.

Really?

Really.

You let her.

I did.

What. She just walked out the door?

Yep.

Gravy.

I guess.

A long pause of silence. Wind catching the mouthpiece.

I'm a bum, I said, remember?

I don't want to get into politics, he said, but that's one example. Politics. Fuck. And your being a bum. Har har. You remember Cindy?

I did.

Friends, fuck, what happened to them? Pets, children, what to fucking eat, what to fucking fuck. Work. School. Taking the kid. Every. Damn. Day. Catching the bus. A cab. Running down the street a damned fool. Yelling and screaming your damn head off. Or riding a bike but then you end up sweating your ass off and tired. Not like that. No bikes. A straight line skewed. Time warps along. Destroys a fence, creates landslides, creates avalanches, tidal waves, floods, divorce, you name it. Earthquakes, Shep, fires. Swirling doom. Nooses. And we always see it, it's always there, it's always ticking, it's always coming, we know it, we always see it, it never stops, it's always there, we always see it, it never stops, it's always coming. Do you see it?

That was good, I said.

Boulders man! Death! What's one task to fit one that another one can't? Bringing down homes in the rubble in every damn state, every damn county. The whole country. Night and day. The world! Oh fuck him, he's gone. Fuck it, fuck him. Fuck it, he's gone.

I miss fighting. We can't fight anymore. I'd fight you. Wanna fight? No honey please. Yes, I got it. No, sit. No not you. Shepherd. You there?

You gotta go.

He's dead and I'm dead and you're dead and she's dead and she's dead and he's dead and I'm . . .

There was more. The potatoes. Inside. And steak. And more.

Use the Thyme.

It's all dead, he said.

Sorry to hear.

What?

You said gravy.

I was talking about. Never mind. What time is it there?

Three.

It can't be.

Hours, I said chewing on an apple. It's three hours behind you.

That's what I thought. Cept in Arizona.

You got me there.

Why are all the people so young and so beautiful where you are?

I don't know. Maybe they know more about this time thing than we do. Or our fathers.

Our fathers.

We come from a strange place.

I gotta go, Shep.

See ya Len.

All right.

I waited on the line.

Hey Shep.

Yeah?

I almost forgot. I saw a hummingbird today.

A hummingbird?

On a purple cone of flowers yeah.

A butterfly bush.

I don't know. He paused. You know they can fly backwards?

I know they like butterfly bushes, I said.

I saw it. They can fly backwards and up and down and all around. Like a bee.

Small.

A thing like that, he said and stopped and sighed. Swallowed hard. You would think a creature like that would be able stay young forever don't you think? He sounded about to cry. Being able to fly backwards n all like that don't you think Shep?

Now I was about to cry.

Shep?

What makes you say that? I said.

The way they function, the way they move. The way they live—it's effortless. And they're so happy. A hundred miles an hour those wings can go and you can't even see em. Zoom! Makes you wonder about their hearts too. How fast they beat. Man.

How many were there?

Huh? Oh One. There was just one.
 Oh.
 They probably got it made, he said. Probably don't even fight.
 He thought.
 You okay Len?
 Huh?
 Animals know themselves, I said. They know what to do.
 I never wished I could fly, Shep, did you?
 Probably at some time, yeah.
 People still do though right?
 Yeah. I think so.
 Why must we try so hard?
Lenny you come sit.
 You think those little birds do?
 I didn't answer.
 Hummingbirds, Shep.
 Hummingbirds, I said.
 That's gotta mean something don't it?
Lenny the gravy!
 All right honey. Don't it Shep?
 I guess so, I said.
 I gotta go.
 I'm not dead, Lenny, she said serious as sin.
 All of it does.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *My dog and I go on many long walks together and during these walks occurs many thoughts and ideas. Narratives, inspiration. Some of it so gut-wrenching it begs to be creatively filtered through the artist's lens and shared with others. A long while ago I read a book by journalist Hunter S Thompson and then one by novelist Cormac McCarthy and decided to write fiction. Other influences followed. This story was essentially an exercise on dialogue fueled by regret and time about the frustrations that one may never be fully satisfied with the notion of death.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *My name is Chris Cover and I'm a fiction writer originally from Pittsburgh Pennsylvania USA. I currently live in Seattle Washington. I plan on self-publishing my first novel (Forget Dogneck) when it's ready. Currently the manuscript is under review by those I've asked to help advance it to its final state.*

I've been published online by One Throne Magazine and Electric Cereal and a short poem somewhere I can't remember. Recently most of my time has been spent novel writing but short stories happen too and here we go.

EDITOR'S BIO: *Turner Odorizzi is a writer from Austin, TX who graduated from the University of Texas at Austin English and Creative Writing programs. He is as of yet unpublished, but has been writing for a number of years now. In addition to graduating from UT, he worked as an Intern for the managing editor of Bat City Review, UT's main literary journal. His story **Postmortem Character Assassination** appeared in Issue 6.*

HOW I DONE GOOD IN SCHOOL

By James Hanna

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor BENJAMIN SOILEAU writes: Rake in training, Toby Dawes is just a farm boy. Outside of the brothel where he became a man, thanks to a generous birthday gift from his father, nobody's heard of him yet since he's not made much of an impression. Transitioning from his boyhood at the brothel is Toby's best accomplishment, so says he, although I do believe he's being hard on himself considering his rat killing abilities, something he's got on the agenda to show Brandi, the lucky lady to whom he lost his virginity at the brothel in Michigan City. But I'm getting sidetracked on Toby's accomplishments in life and this story is about how Toby done good in school one particular summer.*

Toby's school is passing him along despite his poor performance, and Toby gets lucky during his summer schooling, to come across an Oxford educated professor, who's more than happy to share his knowledge of the sexual habits of Civil War soldiers. Toby Dawes finally found a subject he can get behind, and so he proceeds to do good in school. But don't take my word for it. Toby says, "Well, you probably know how this story ends up, so I won't take up more of your time. Especially since I don't think this story making too good an impression. So, I'll just give you a couple more details, and you won't have to read no more."

Congratulations on your passing grade, Toby.

Senior Editor Charles writes: *Probably the clearest example of 'voice' we've ever published. It's one of the hardest skills to master in first person singular fiction because it can go wrong in so many ways. But Toby's narrative, both hilarious and wryly penetrating, never misses a beat. A technical triumph and an easy **5 Stars!***

(Font size is author's own.)

How I Done Good in School

by

James Hanna

Hi, my name is Toby Dawes. I'm a farm boy from Putnam County—that's in the middle of Indiana. You probably ain't never heard about me because I don't make much of an impression. But I did become a tad famous last year when Pa took me to a whorehouse in Michigan City. That was for my seventeenth birthday, and that's where I became a man. The whore Dad bought me, Brandi, said I done real good. She said I gave her the best thirty seconds that she had ever had. She said I made her cum three times, and Dad he gave her a hundred dollar tip for showin' me the ropes. Before I left the whorehouse, the madam gave me a Jonathan apple, and she said a cocksmith like me was welcome back any time.

As we was driving back to Putnam County, Pa gave me a bit of a lecture. He said to me, "Toby, now that you've had the real thing, I hope you stop stealing my cock books." Well, I've still been swiping Dad's porn, but I also been writing to Brandi. I told her that, when I got my driver's license, I'll drive up to see her again. I told her I'd like to take her to a tractor pull before got

back to screwin'. Brandi, she wrote me back and said I'm a real sweet boy. She said if I took her to a tractor pull, she might give me a golden shower.

Well, I ain't particularly fond of showers, but that don't matter nohow. I just wanted to mention Brandi 'cause she's my best accomplishment. But I'm also real good at shootin' rats at the Putnam County Dump. I'll bet if I laid 'em side by side, you could count up two hundred rats. I'm hopin' one day that I can teach Brandi the art of shootin' rats.

But this story ain't about killing rats neither. This story is about last summer when I done good in high school. I ain't never done good in school before 'cause I don't apply myself. That's what Ma says anyhow, but I see it real different. As I see it, there ain't no point in learning stuff like science or math. It ain't gonna help you shoot a rat or bleed a buffalo catfish. And if ya walk around spoutin' knowledge all day, ya ain't gonna score no cooze. The cheerleaders will think you're a nerd and won't spread their legs for you. 'Course, I ain't fucked a cheerleader yet 'cause I never impressed 'em enough. But I figger, at least, I got a chance if I don't turn into no nerd. Anyhow, Putnam High School been passing me in spite of my failing grades. The principal says I'm getting passed on probation 'cause the school don't wanna keep me around.

But I'm still gonna tell you this story about how I done *good* in school. That happened just last summer before I started my senior year. Ma said I won't get no diploma if I kept getting passed on probation, and if I don't get no

diploma I'll have to work at the Hill Top Hog Farm. She says if I don't pay attention there, them hogs will gobble me up.

Well, Ma made me enroll in an American history course, which was being taught in summer school. She said American history oughta interest me 'cause it's fulla wars and stuff. Ma said she hoped I'd get a teacher like this fella called Mister Chips 'cause that dude knew how to inspire kids and bring out their full potential. See, Ma's she's always watching this DVD called *Goodbye Mister Chips*. It's about this teacher in England—a fella who couldn't get laid 'cause he was too fulla Latin verbs. It's kinda funny that teacher was played by an actor named Peter O'Toole.

*

Well, I started the course on the first day of summer in this classroom with no air conditioning. I was in there with three other farm boys who would rather be poundin' their pork. And the teacher we got—Mister Flanigan—weren't nothin' like Mister Chips. He was a nervous kinda fella and he had a sunken chest, and practically every time he spoke he said the word *actually*. He said stuff like, "Actually, General McClellan wasn't that much of a general. He could have actually won the Civil War after the Battle of Antietam. But after winning the battle, he let the Confederates army get away, so the war lasted three years longer than it actually should have lasted."

Every time that fella said *actually*, we all put marks into our notebooks. I wagered Bubba Little, this kid sittin' beside me, that Mister Flanigan would say it two hundred times before the first week of class was done. Bubba bet a

copy of *Hustler* and I bet a Penn fishing rod, and before the fifth day of class was done, that copy of *Hustler* was mine. At first, Bubba said I got the count wrong, but I showed him all the marks I made, which I'd lumped into groups of five. There weren't no way Bubba could welch on the bet 'cause I took real careful notes.

Now Bubba, he weren't too happy that I won his copy of *Hustler*, so he asked me to give him a chance to win his magazine back. He said if I would put up the *Hustler* and let him bet on Mister Flanigan, he would match the bet with a coupla condoms he been keepin' in his wallet. I asked him how old them condoms were, and he said he'd had 'em four years, and I told him I didn't want no condoms that were probably too old to use. Bubba, he said there ain't no such thing as a condom too old to use. He said I could always fill 'em with water and pelt cars from Hostler's Bridge.

Well, Bubba, he had a point, so I made him another bet, but that didn't matter nohow 'cause Mister Flanigan never came back to class. We was sittin' in the classroom the following Monday, after Bubba and me made our bet, and the principal came into the room and said we was changin' teachers. He said Mister Flanigan weren't coming back 'cause he had caught a case of the flu, and that we was gonna have a new teacher who knew history real good. He said his name was Doctor Nichols and he was educated at Oxford, and he told us to be on our best behavior and make him feel at home. Now I weren't too happy that I'd lost the chance to win some water balloons, but I sat up straight as a poplar and waited to meet our new teacher.

*

It weren't but a half-hour later when our new teacher walked into class. He was a short, skinny fella with bottle-thick glasses, and he had this little goatee. He was also wearin' a tweed jacket that looked too big for him, and he was walkin' kinda gimpy like maybe his shoes were too tight. I think I spotted him yesterday in downtown Putnamville. I was walking past the adult store after eating a Big Mac at McDonald's, and a fella who looked kinda like him came limping outta the store. But that dude had a hat pulled over his eyes, so I weren't completely sure it was him.

Anyhow, the dude limped to the blackboard and he picked up a piece of chalk, and he scrawled *Leonard Nichols, Ph.D*, in big ol' skinny letters. And then he spoke to the class in this real thin, reedy voice. It was a bit like the sound a balloon makes when ya let the air squeak out.

"Oh bum," he said as he looked us over. "Whatever have I gotten myself into?"

The dude had an English accent, but he didn't look like Mister Chips. He looked like he'd rather be in back in that porn shop picking out dirty books.

Well, I raised my hand before speakin' to him 'cause I wanted to show respect. And I said, "How come they sent a doctor to teach us history?"

The dude grabbed the lapels of his jacket then rocked back and forth on his heels. It looked like he'd been thrown into an ocean and was clutchin' a life preserver. He then spoke as though he was apologizing for cutting a real

smelly fart. "I'm a doctor of philosophy," he said. "I'm a doctor of world history too. When you're as frightfully educated as I am, lads, all you can do is teach."

I said, "How come ya gotta teach in a place like Putnam County?"

"Oh, me," he said. "Well, I travel a bit and sometimes I run out of money. Since teaching is all I am good for, you boys are stuck with me for the summer." He clutched his lapels even harder and the color went out of his face. "My goodness," he said, lookin' over the class. "This is really a sticky wicket."

"I guess what yer saying," I said, "is you don't wanna be stuck with *us*. I ain't gonna fault you for feeling that way 'cause we don't make too good an impression."

"I agree," he said in his squeaky voice, and he picked up one of our history books. "If you don't mind a bit of a warning, lads, things may not go very well."

I kinda liked the fella even though he was probably a pervert. And since Mister Chips weren't available, I guess he would have to do.

*

The fella, he opened a history book and glanced at a couple of pages, then he shrugged and snapped the book shut as though he was trappin' a fly. "Let's have a discussion, lads," he said, and his voice got even more squeaky. "Would one of you like to tell me what the American Civil War was about?"

We sat there like crows on a fence because we couldn't think of nothin' to say. There weren't none of us accustomed to having a teacher ask questions of us.

"Come, come," said the fella. "Would one of you tell me what the Civil War was about?"

Well, the silence was thicker 'an hogs at a trough, so Bubba he spoke up. "Them soldiers was fighting 'bout slavery," he said. "Ain't choo supposed to be teachin' us that?"

The fella he wrung his hands together as though they was covered with ants. He said, "Gracious, why would ordinary boys fight about something like that?"

Well, I think that fella had a point, but I don't think I was supposed to learn that. Shucks, if them soldiers were dumb as me, they wouldn't care about nothin' but cooze.

"My word," said the fella. "It's quite the riddle why those boys chose to fight. Especially when they wore uniforms that were itchy and beastly hot. You know, even the women who followed the camps gave them a pretty rum go."

"Who was them women?" asked Bubba.

"Prostitutes mostly," the fella said. "Now *they* had a reason to be there. They charged the troops three dollars to screw, which was a lot of money in those days. They also charged a dollar for handjobs if you can imagine that. A lot of soldiers *paid* for something they could have done for themselves."

Well, I don't guess there's nothin' stupider than paying for a handjob. But my hand shot up like a flushed out quail because I wanted to know more about the subject. "They had handjobs in them days?" I said.

The fella, he nodded and grinned like a possum; he seemed relieved to have found a new subject. "Of course," he said. "There were blowjobs too, but the whores charged two dollars for those. You know, some of them made so much money that they went home and opened up brothels."

He went on and told us a whole lot of stuff about what made the Civil War interesting. He said the term "hooker" originated in the Army of the Potomac—that's 'cause this general named Fighting Joe Hooker liked to bang him a whole lot of beaver. He said some of the whores sold the troops dirty photos and charged 'em as much as four dollars. And he said there was so much clap in them days that soldiers made their own condoms. But they made 'em out of sheep's gut, so they didn't work too well.

*

After class, I went home and told Ma that we had us a brand new teacher. I said we was learning 'bout sticky wickets and it was real interesting stuff. Ma said it sounded like Doctor Nichols was an English gentleman, and she predicted my education was gonna expand a whole lot. Well, I was thinking about playing hooky and huntin' feral hogs, but I hurried on back to class the next day 'cause I wanted to learn more history.

Doctor Nichols spoke next 'bout westward expansion 'cause Mister Flanagan had skipped over that. He said a whole lotta screwin' went on in

them wagon trains heading west. He said cholera, snakebites, Injuns killed so many of the pioneers that there was a gravestone for every mile along the Oregon Trail. He said the pioneers needed to sire new children to make up for those that died, so after they circled the wagons at night, most of 'em fucked like rabbits.

"It's a good thing those wagons were covered," he said, and he giggled like a drunk. "What went on behind the canvases would have made a degenerate blush."

"Was there golden showers?" I asked him 'cause I wanted to know more about those.

Doctor Nichols scratched his head then smiled. "There *are* no documented incidents," he said, "but I imagine they were quite common. Women who lost their husbands usually turned to prostitution, and there were so many of them turning tricks that competition was fierce. If a patron wanted a golden shower, I'm sure he had only to ask."

He went on to tell us about the mining towns out in California and Montana, about how them towns were built around brothels because the whores were smarter there. He said when payday came around, them miners all rushed to the brothels, and it weren't uncommon for a single whore to screw seventy men a night.

"I dare say it was rather ironic," he said and he chuckled like a setting hen. "The men dug about in the dirt all day while the women were *sitting* on

goldmines. The madams made so much money that they ended up running the towns.”

“Did them prostitutes cum?” asked Bubba.

Doctor Nichols blushed then nodded. “The women had their pleasure,” he said “but it didn’t come from their johns. You see, most of the whores had these steam-powered vibrators, which they used to keep themselves clean. A couple of minutes with one of those vibrators left them very satisfied.”

“Them whores had it *good*,” said Bubba.

“You would think so,” Doctor Nichols replied. “But some of them tired of prostitution and married miners and ranchers.”

“Bummer,” said Bubba.

Doctor Nichols, he shrugged. “Yes, it does seem a bit of a waste. But after those women retired, most became good wives.”

Well, I was real happy to hear that ’cause I was still writing to Brandi. And Brandi, she been writing me back and promising me real cheap rates. But, shucks, a woman as fine as her deserves much better than that. I decided that when I was finished with school, I would ask her to be my wife.

*

As the semester went on, Doctor Nichols told us a lot more interesting stuff. He said the dirty book industry got its start during the Roaring Twenties. He said *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was the novel that broke the ice, but the stuff that was published after that would have shocked even D.H. Lawrence. He said there was books about whips and midgets and books about lesbian orgies, and

he said that a whole lot of taxable revenue was generated by them books. He also described the New York City blackout, when the city was plunged into darkness, and he said a whole generation of kids was sired in stalled elevators. And he told us all about Woodstock, which he called a cultural phenomenon. I'd never heard about Woodstock 'cause that's ancient history, but I wished I'd been born a hippie after Doctor Nichols told us about it. He said kids were sliding around in the mud and they didn't have to take showers, and girls were running around naked with their tits flapping in the breeze. He said you could have your choice of the girls 'cause the music made 'em horny, and ya didn't have to pay them—they gave it away for free. Well, I wrote a letter to Brandi and I told her all 'bout Woodstock, and Brandi she wrote me back and said that it sounded interestin'. She said she weren't sure it was ethical to give it away for free, but she was sure I had the potential to earn frequent flier rates.

Well, I started taking my history book home, but it weren't too interesting. When I mentioned that to Doctor Nichols, he just patted me on the head. He said school books don't *have* real history in them, and not to be wastin' my time.

*

Well, you probably know how this story ends up, so I won't take much more of your time. Especially since I don't think this story is making too good an impression. So I'll just give you a couple more details, and you won't have to read no more.

On the final day of the semester, we was waitin' for Doctor Nichols. We was hopin' he'd tell us a couple more stories before he gave us our final exam. And the principal, he walked into the class like he was about to take a dip in a cesspool, and when we asked him where Doctor Nichols was, the principal said he was indisposed.

The principal handed out the exam papers and, after we answered the questions, he said Doctor Nichols was under arrest for contributin' to the delinquency of minors. Well, there *ain't* no mines in Putnam County as far as I'm aware, so I dunno where Doctor Nichols found any miners to corrupt.

Anyhow, I kept gettin' passed on probation all through my senior year, and I didn't get no diploma, so I'm working at the Hilltop Hog Farm. And Brandi, she said she won't marry me, and that's got me feelin' real down. But I got a C in American history, and I'm real proud of that.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I do not believe in angels. But I do believe that very flawed people can at times have the impact of angels. I think this might apply to Doctor Leonard Nichols, a sex addict who brings his unique view of history to a classroom of underachieving farm boys. Thanks to Doctor Nichols' prurient lectures, a seed of intellectual suspicion is planted in the boys' minds—an inkling that history may be something more than the polemics found in textbooks. And who knows, perhaps a day will come when these boys will think for themselves. I'm sure that many fine people will find this tale inconvenient, but I bow to Doctor Nichols and his independence of mind.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: James Hanna is a former fiction editor and a retired probation officer. He has had over seventy story publications and three Pushcart nominations. Many of his stories deal with the criminal element. James' books, three of which have won awards, are available on Amazon. You can visit him there at:

https://www.amazon.com/James-Hanna/e/B00WNH356Y?ref=dbs_p_ebk_r00_abau_000000

We published his story **The Lottery** in Issue 4 (Fiction).

EDITOR'S BIO: Benjamin Soileau is from south Louisiana. His fiction has appeared in Prairie Schooner, Colorado Review, Opossum, Grist, Louisiana Literature, Bayou, Superstition Review and many other journals. He won the 2018 Rumble Fish Quarterly New Year's Writing Contest, and is a special mention in The 2020 Pushcart Prize Anthology. He is a stay at home daddy-o in Olympia, Washington. Reach him at bsoile2@gmail.com. His story **The Delahoussaye Civil War** appears in this issue (Fiction).

MULTIPLE RESONANCES

By Richard Kostelanetz

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

You will, dare I say, know what resonates, in Richard Kostelanetz's, "Multiple Resonances," rather quickly. When you've lost all hope for 2020, can softball in easy comparisons to the Lost Generation with the acute awareness that the American dream has always been dead, that 100 years made no difference on goldfish, what is it that you can give no more of? When repetition, rhythm, and vulgarity combine to tickle your ass do you pull away or lean in hard? I'm here to tell you why you should lean in a bit further than you normally would.

If it were me, and it is, I would not call this piece poetic (if I dare more, this is not insulting to Kostelanetz because he has heard it before and more than likely could not give a shit). If I went full editor, I would turn this piece into a prose poem (an act I think the author would object to) or put quotations on each line so that they actually speak to each other, but Kostelanetz has been in the game longer than me...and, in this case, doesn't need any correction from me – which is rare. The style is simple (individual lines of individual thought arranged to be juxtaposed), the hook is obvious, the bluntness, simply that, blunt, but, after a few Google searches about the author later, the full scope of why his style works within this material shines through. What separates Kostelanetz, a self-described "inventive un-poet," from poetry is his knowledge of the history behind his process. He is more literary historian than literary, more expert on the transgressions of criticism than critic, or even, perhaps, more self-aware, and a bit pedantic, about the roots of literature than you would like - but your sentimentality has no bearings here. At worst, this piece would be more appropriately called theater, at best, pure art, but we can argue about poetics later.

This piece is not poetry, specifically, because it does resonate. The lines perform, and, in performing, Kostelanetz's language becomes artifact. The words transcend text and become individual actors speaking over each other to where they can operate outside of author intention because daddy isn't there and probably didn't want to be there to tell you how to read anyway. Say these lines out loud and you will feel the repetition echo to the point that you're forced to act them out differently for change of pace. Read these words quietly to yourself and the consonance will blur the piece into meaning. The lines themselves are not poetic, but, as the title suggests, the resonance, the reverberation of repetition throughout your brain and lungs which reminds you just how hard this goddamn year has been, is.

There is no requirement that you believe me, that you should read on because of my rhetorical flattery, or, truly, even read the entirety of this piece and like it, but there is a

requirement to understand this work as craft, as language as performance, a style that is unique in its, to borrow from the author, “anti-anti-formalist,” technique as it is as an art.

Fuck.

Personal Comparisons Thought of (i.e. – an imperfect list) While Reading:

John Fante (If I had to pick an author from a previous generation to Kostelanetz’s, and I do have some doubt that he would agree, I would pick Fante for his ability to create the hard line and being overlooked for his influence on canon); Susan Steinberg – *Spectacle*; Richard Brautigan – *Loading Mercury With a Pitchfork*; there are others but, you know, bottom of the page.

MULTIPLE RESONANCES

Richard Kostelanetz

In memory of Richard Pryor

Fuck you.

I fuck you.

Fuck off.

Don’t be a fucking nuisance.

Who the fuck are you?

Fuck me over.

How do ducks fuck?

Sooner fuck than screw.

Fuck it.

Accept no substitute for fucking.

Fuck the errant knight.

What the fuck do you think you are?

Don't give a fuck.

That's fucking awesome.

Fuck yourself.

You're fucking good.

Make me feel fucking comfortable.

Public fucking.

What the fuck?

Ambitious people don't fuck around.

Fucking asshole.

Don't fuck me.

You're a fucking idiot.

How the fuck did you do that.

Who the fuck are you?

Motherfucker.

Oh, fuck it.

How the fuck are you?

The salesman fucked me.

Where the fuck are we now?

You're my first fuck.

Flying fuck.

They fucked a good deal.

Oh, fuck.

Let's get the fuck out of here.

A fuck he is.

What a fucking crime.

Full fucking speed ahead.

He's a dumb fuck.

They had a dozen fucking children.

What better can a couple do than fucking.

Disputing him is no fucking good.

A helluva fucker.

They ranked as a double fuck in spades.

Our team will go for fucking all.

That fuck conned us all.

The fucking diet defeated me.

To us he became a fuckface.

A fucking defeat it was.

What now, fuckhead?

Only someone fucked up could fuck himself so routinely.

The fuck-off is sleeping on the job.

His first assignment he fucked up.

Fuck you too.

She fucked every man she met.

Don't fuck with me.

Don't be a fuck.

Fuck a duck.

What the fuck is taking so long?

I don't give a fuck.

What the fuck?

What a fuck.

Kill fucking flies.

Hippos fuck.

Fucking cunt.

Fucking good.

Be fucking comfortable.

Not fucking is dangerous to your health.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *...the principal influence of my playwriting is, of course, Gertrude Stein. Perhaps these plays extend her radical ideas. \otherwise, may I please welcome, as her play texts have, a variety of radical interpretations that depart from familiar performance...*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Individual entries on Richard Kostelanetz's work in several fields appear in various editions of **Readers Guide to Twentieth-Century Writers**, **Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature**, **Contemporary Poets**, **Contemporary Novelists**, **Postmodern Fiction**, **Webster's Dictionary of American Writers**, **The HarperCollins Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature**, **Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians**, **Directory of American Scholars**, **Who's Who in America**, **Who's Who in the World**, **Who's Who in American Art**, **NNDB.com**, **Wikipedia.com**, and **Britannica.com**, among other distinguished directories. Otherwise, he survives in New York, where he was born, unemployed and thus overworked.

EDITOR'S BIO: Joseph Cruse is a writer, an actor, a bad painter, and an even worse English student – he is, easily more, a lot of nothing and everything. When not getting into trouble, he explores New Orleans, sprays graffiti scenes of movies onto canvas, and finishes a Masters in Composition and Rhetoric in Lafayette, LA. His other short story work has also been featured in *Phree Write* and *Viewfinder Magazine*; while small spacklings of poetry can be found at *Cacti Magazine* and *W.I.S.H Press*. His story **The Scarf** appeared in Issue 5.

DOWNTOWN COOL

By Christopher Johnson

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor JAMES HANNA writes: A powerful coming of age tale marked by haunting similes and textured writing. When two boys skip school in search of “adventure” in the red light part of Chicago, they do not count on the depressing banality of the neighborhood they enter. “We paid the driver and got out of the cab. The ride had taken only ten minutes, but we had left behind the immaculate world of skyscrapers and fancy restaurants and entered a world that time and prosperity had passed over, as if this part of Chicago had an incurable disease and had to be quarantined.” Still, the boys sneak into a burlesque house convinced that they are committing a mortal sin and will therefore have a wicked time. But, having sold their souls to the Devil, the boy’s reap the Devil’s wages—a bounty the author skillfully captures in his sobering depiction of the poverty of sex for sale. I am reminded of a character in Eugene O’Neill’s Long Day’s Journey into Night, who remarks that whores might be mistaken for fascinating vampires instead of the poor diseased slobs they really are. I was moved and disturbed by this story and have no hesitation in awarding it **five stars**.*

James Hanna, author of The Siege, Call Me Pomeroy, A Second, Less Capable Head.

(Spacing and font size are author’s own.) Eds.

Downtown Cool

by

Christopher Johnson

When I was a teenager, I was torn tragically between being good and being bad—between being obedient and being rebellious—between following orders and defying them. I grew up in Elm Park, a leaf-endowed middle-middle-class suburb just over the border from the farthest tentacles of northwest Chicago. Elm Park was, to my tender and jaundiced eyes, hopelessly boring and safe. The main street was home to men’s and women’s clothing stores, a religious book store, a stationery store where we bought our school supplies, a classically designed public library that had originally been funded by Andrew Carnegie many many years before, and other little shops sprinkled along the sidewalks like the cut-outs in a make-believe village.

Main Street sloped up gradually to a soft pinnacle, where rested the Elm Park Theater, a gorgeous Art Deco structure that had been built in the 1920s and that displayed the Hollywood product that shaped and stirred my fantasies of romance and adventure and heroism and patriotism. As I grew into adolescence, I began to yearn to break out of the boringness, the middle classness, the safety of it all. I read Jack Kerouac and Thomas Wolfe and yearned for the open road, and I had some vague idea that I would find self-knowledge, passion, and adventure somewhere on this vague highway, which would lead me to a freer future.

My mentor was Ozzie—Oswald Jones III. During my junior year and his senior year, Ozzie persuaded me (although it did not take much persuading) to do what I would once have been far too afraid to do myself: cut school for a day and journey down to Chicago's Loop to seek adventure. As Ozzie said, "Let's *live* for once in our lives before we die."

On the morning of that epochal day, I sat in the booth of a diner in uptown Elm Park. I wore khaki trousers and a madras shirt, and I hunched over my coffee, which was laden with cream and five spoonfuls of sugar; cupped my face in my right hand; and brushed my hair with my left hand. I took another sip of coffee, tapped my penny loafers against the linoleum floor, and waited for Ozzie.

At last he walked in, and immediately he owned the place. He wore high cheekbones, eyes like a snake's, tight blue jeans, and a black T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up just over his biceps. He scanned the diner, taking it all in, not missing a thing. He sat down in the booth across from me and looked at me. He drawled, "Ulee, you gotta roll your sleeves up." I, the acolyte, did as I was told. I rolled up the sleeves of my madras shirt over my biceps, and even though I had pathetic skinny arms, I knew—or at least felt--that without a doubt that I looked cooler now.

"Are you ready?" Ozzie asked.

"I am ready."

"Did you call in?" He meant the Dean's Office at Millard Fillmore High School, where attendance was meticulously recorded.

"I called in."

"Did they buy it?"

“They bought it.”

“Cool.”

With an aplomb that had surprised me, I had called the Dean’s office that morning, assumed the voice and persona of my father, and told the woman who served as the school’s attendance maven that my son, Ulee Newman, was sick and would not be attending school that fine day. I had carried out my impersonation perfectly, and now our day of freedom beckoned without obstacle.

Ozzie and I finished our coffees and buzzed over to the little brick Elm Park train station and bought our tickets. The train arrived on schedule, just as it always did in this suburban world where things always seemed to operate according to plan. I followed Ozzie to the smoking car. He unrolled his right sleeve, slipped out his pack of Marlboros, tipped a cig between his lips, and lit it with his Zippo lighter. I said to Ozzie, “I’ve never cut school before, and it feels kind of weird. I even feel a little guilty about it.”

He said, “That is precisely why I have offered you this opportunity to skip one meaningless day of school *for the very first time in your whole life!*” He grasped my arm tightly in his and leaned forward so that our faces were two inches apart. When he spoke, he dropped in a pregnant pause between each word for emphasis. “You . . . must . . . not . . . waste . . . this . . . opportunity, . . . and . . . I . . . am . . . here . . . to . . . make . . . sure . . . that . . . you . . . use . . . it . . . to . . . the . . . utmost.”

I looked at Ozzie, who was smoking another cig, and thought about the fact that we had met in world history class when I was a freshman and Ozzie was a sophomore. I’d always been a little jealous of him, of the inside knowledge that he had, knowing just

how to do things like roll up the sleeves of his black T-shirt. Ozzie, I thought, had turned life into art.

Our train steamed underneath a long black steel roof and slowly drew closer to the terminal in what was then called Northwestern Station. Of course, I'd been to the Loop many times before with my parents and little brothers and sisters, but this time I was on my own, and I scraped the corners of my fingernails with excitement. We bounced out of the terminal and onto Madison Street and turned east toward the Loop.

The energy and chaos of the city exploded over us. We passed steakhouses, jewelry stores, banks, bars, restaurants, and electronics stores that blared out music that soared high into the sky and pierced the clouds hanging over the Loop. We zapped into one of those electronics shops. The assault of sights and sounds was so powerful that I felt disoriented. Hundreds of transistor radios blasted out music—Smoky Robinson, the Beach Boys, the Four Seasons. Stereos, watches, thousands of watches, and radios, oh my God, so many radios, not only tiny transistor ones but big ones with gargantuan stereo speakers. All the electronic devices spat out noise--a cacophony--and I couldn't pick out a single melody or song.

We came to State Street and turned right. Now we were in the heart of the Loop, and the sidewalk bustled with an incredible variety of people, all of them rushing as if they were on their way to meetings that would decide the fate of the world. Everything moved so fast that I had trouble making sense of it all. The movie theaters—the *Chicago*, the *State Lake*, the *Oriental*--stood astride State Street like Colossuses, blazing with millions of red and white light bulbs, their marquee vaulting toward the distant sky and

screaming the magic of escape in the way that only movie theaters can. *Cleopatra*. *The Longest Day*. *Irma La Douce*. The blockbusters of 1963.

We stopped for coffee at a burger place on State and slid into a booth. Ozzie said, “Christ, this is the real deal, isn’t it?” He smoothly tipped another Marlboro from his pack and fired it up with his always reliable Zippo. Every move was so self-assured.

“It sure is,” I said, sounding adolescently lame to myself.

Ozzie took a drag on his cigarette and nodded knowingly. “You know, Ulee, when we were walking down State Street, I’m looking at all the businessmen with their briefcases. They’re all wearing Hart Schaffner & Marx suits and Florsheim wingtips, just like my old man.”

“Mine wears that shit, too.” I matched Ozzie’s tone of contempt.

“They’re all going to their offices like herds of cattle.”

I picked up on Ozzie’s riff. “They dictate memos for a couple of hours, and then they go out for two-martini lunches. They go back to their offices and half-sleep through the afternoon.” I was certain that this was the most sophisticated observation ever made.

Ozzie moved his head a little closer to me and lowered his voice. “Did you see the prostitutes outside the Northwestern Station?” He said it matter-of-factly, as if seeing prostitutes were an everyday experience.

“Are you kidding?” I exclaimed. How could I have missed seeing them? I was mad at myself. I should have been on the lookout for them. Of course, I thought, there are prostitutes in the Loop. The Loop had *everything*. I’d know better next time. “Speaking of prostitutes,” I said, “I want to see *Irma La Douce*.” That was the latest movie with

Shirley MacLaine, in which she played a French lady of the night who was wooed by Jack Lemmon.

Ozzie looked at me. “Yeah, we could do that. I’m sure that’d be fine. But to tell you the truth, I’d like to do something new. I’d like to do something I’ve never done before.”

“Like what?”

“I was thinking we should go to one of the skin flicks west of the Loop. West of the river. What’s *Irma La Douce*—a B movie?”

I nodded.

“We can go to a B movie any time. Any old time. But they only have skin flicks down here in the Loop.”

“Oh.” Something about going to one of those theaters intimidated me. I’d come to the Loop with Ozzie to Embrace Life, to Experience Everything. But I hadn’t thought about this—going to a skin flick. It sounded . . . well, it sounded creepy. “I don’t know,” I murmured.

Ozzie looked at me, and he was irritated. “Listen, we were just talking about doing things our own way and following our own path. But I come up with something that’s a little out of the ordinary, something you can’t do in Elm Park, and you get cold feet on me.”

I still wasn’t sure. I had this picture of . . . well, a bunch of horny old men sitting there panting as they watched the skin flick. I didn’t want Ozzie to think I was scared. Then I thought of a good obstacle. “Don’t you have to be 18 to get into one of those theaters?”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. First of all, both of us look 18.”

I knew that Ozzie didn’t look 18. And I knew that I barely even looked 16. “What if they want an ID?”

“Then we’ll talk our way in. We’re smart guys. We can figure out a way around that.”

“Have you ever gone to one?”

Ozzie shook his head.

“Then how can you be so sure we’ll get in?”

“I got buddies who go all the time. If they can get in, we can get in.” He paused and thought for a moment. “There’s another thing. It’ll be a Condemned movie. It’ll be a sin to see it. A mortal sin. If you see a Condemned movie, you have to go to confession. If you want to take Communion.” He paused. “And damn it, I want to commit a mortal sin! Today. Right now.”

I grinned. “One thing I always wondered about Condemned movies. Who really does the condemning? I mean, I know it’s the Legion of Decency. But who’s the power behind the Legion of Decency?”

Ozzie looked at me. “Well, the Pope, dummy. Of course.”

“So the Pope watches all these movies and decides which ones to condemn? Then isn’t the Pope committing a mortal sin? And besides, how can he possibly have time to watch all these movies?”

Ozzie thought for a minute. “It’s probably not the Pope himself who condemns all the movies. Maybe they hire old guys to watch the movies, and if they get boners, then it’s Condemned. It has to be old guys. Because young guys like us, we get boners when

we see Shirley MacLaine kiss someone. But old guys, it takes a really good *Condemned* movie to give them a woody.”

I laughed. “That still doesn’t sound very likely.”

“Man, you’re just too damned logical! Sometimes you need to forget logic and dive into the muck!” He paused. “You know, even if you get a boner from something innocent like watching Shirley MacLaine kiss, you’re still morally polluted. You’re screwed. You’re going to hell. End of story. See you later, alligator. Get used to the heat. So don’t try to hide behind that innocent kissing Shirley MacLaine crap. It’s still sex. Nothing more, nothing less.”

I laughed again. “All right. Let’s go to the skin flick.”

“That’s the spirit. Let’s go commit a mortal sin!”

We hustled out of the burger place and tramped to Madison Street and turned west. Ozzie sailed forward in his black boots with the Cuban heels and did a French inhale on his cig. We roved past City Hall and the Civic Opera House and came to the Chicago River, which looked dull and gray beneath the clotted clouds. This was taking a long time, and finally we decided to catch a cab, which careened its way west to Halsted Street and then a few blocks north. There, the burlesque houses congregated like churches that had been invaded by the devil.

We paid the driver and got out of the cab. The ride had taken only ten minutes, but we had left behind the immaculate world of skyscrapers and fancy restaurants and entered a world that time and prosperity had passed over, as if this part of Chicago had an incurable disease and had to be quarantined. The cab deposited us in front of our destination, the Regal Theater. With blood-red signs, the marquee shouted out the title of

the movie—*The Blondes of Sweden*. Below that sign was another—“Special Liv Show--Miss Stella, for One Week Only!!!” The *e* had dropped from the word *live* as if a lizard had gobbled it up for a snack.

I licked my lips and looked around. Cheap hotels and liquor stores surrounded the theater like a pack of wolves. Ozzie also looked around. “Wow,” he murmured. Both of us had driven down Halsted Street before with our parents, but now we stood exposed, outside the barrier of the locked doors of our parents’ automobiles. “Well, we wanted an adventure,” Ozzie said.

I just nodded.

A panhandler approached us, and Ozzie fished a dollar out of his pocket and dropped it into the man’s hands. I couldn’t help staring at the man’s face. Lines crisscrossed his cheeks and forehead like the rivers marked on a map, and his cheeks and chin were shaded with stubble like desert vegetation. For an instant, I saw myself through the man’s eyes, and suddenly I felt ashamed of my rigidly pressed khaki pants, my madras shirt, my penny loafers.

My eyes wandered to one of the cheap hotels that lined Halsted Street. An obscenely red sign blinked on and off: “ROOMS--\$2.00 A NIGHT.” The front door to the hotel was open. Just inside was a cage guarded by iron bars, and in the cage sat the hotel clerk. As the clerk waited for his nightly customers, he read something. He yawned, scratched his armpit, and resumed his rapt attention to whatever it was that he was reading.

We walked up to the Regal's box office, and inside was a hunched-over, heavysset man who breathed through his mouth, wheezing like an exhausted steam engine. Ozzie spoke to the man as if he were a regular customer. "Two tickets," he demanded.

The man in the caged box office looked at us and pointed lazily to a sign that read, "Must be 18." In a voice scraped with gravel, he said, "ID?"

Ozzie didn't miss a beat. "We forgot them, sir. But we're 20 years old."

"You two ain't no 20 years old. Ya gotta have ID's."

Ozzie motioned me away from the box office. "I got a plan," he said in a whisper.

"We don't have to go to this movie. We could still see *Irma La Douce*."

"No, we gotta see this one. It is absolutely necessary. I didn't come downtown to see no stinkin' A movie or B movie. We're gonna pay someone to let us in. Gimme ten bucks." I unswaddled the money from my wallet, while Ozzie rescued a ten-dollar bill from the recesses of his own pockets.

We walked a little way south of the theater. A man with a Camel resting casually on his lower lip and a beautiful mermaid tattooed on his forearm leaned against the wall as if he personally were preventing the building from falling down. Ozzie went over and whispered to him and handed him the twenty bucks. With a sudden sense of purpose, the man walked up to the box office, bought tickets for five dollars each, and disappeared inside.

"Come on! Hurry!" Ozzie motioned to me. We scurried around the building to the alley in back, distracting a couple of rats from their midday snacks on garbage. After a couple of minutes, we saw the door at the back of the theater open. Darkness from inside

leaked out the door like radioactivity. We stepped inside. We heard the sounds of the movie. I licked my lips again, and my palms slid with sweat.

Ozzie strutted ahead of me like a rooster, and I fell in behind him, sliding my feet ahead cautiously, feeling my way along the carpet that draped the floor. In a few moments, we entered the small auditorium where the movie was playing. Ever so slowly, my eyes adjusted to the darkness. The eyes of five, maybe seven, men were fixed on the screen. Ozzie and I walked to the third row and sat down. The stench of something assaulted my nose. I couldn't tell what it was. Vomit? Urine? My belly rolled over slowly.

Cavorting across the screen were nude men and women playing a volleyball game. Men on one side of the net. Women on the other. Perfectly bronzed Swedish bodies flew through the air. The women's breasts danced like beachballs. The women's bushes and the men's penises were out of sight, because the camera lingered over only the upper halves of their perfect bodies.

"This is weird," I whispered to Ozzie.

"Sshh!" Ozzie put his index finger to his pursed lips. "Pay attention!"

I looked at the screen again. I was amazed at how insanely happy the nudists looked as they played volleyball. Smiles were plastered on their faces like papier-mâché. The men and women bounced and jiggled and hit the volleyball. Then they finished their volleyball game and slid into a whirlpool together and started talking. They talked in Swedish, and I read the subtitles. One woman eyed the man next to her and said, "Erik, you flew through the air like a god!"

The man said, "The sand is hot when I step on it with my nude feet!"

Another woman said, “The blue of the sky matches the blue of your eyes!”

A man said, “Volleyball is such the healthy exercise!”

Then, like a cat creeping up on a bird, one of the men started kissing one of the women, and I felt a stirring in my groin. The Swedish man’s hand crept like a Gila monster onto the woman’s breasts, and he caressed her as if he were kneading dough. Then he lowered his lips to her breasts, and she threw back her head and let her scorching blonde hair trail over the edge of the whirlpool. Soon, everyone in the whirlpool was kissing and caressing, all the time wearing insanely happy grins.

Then, with absolutely no warning, the movie ended, as if the last reel had gotten lost on the way from Sweden. The lights came up, and I blinked my eyes at the harsh brightness. I looked around, careful not to catch the eye of the older men in the theater. My senses were filed to razor sharpness. Adorning the seat next to me was a wad of gum as ancient and hardened as a fossil. The walls were black with peeling paint and swaths of unpainted Spackle where someone had tried to patch up cracks in the plaster. The Spackle had been smeared on sloppily, and nobody had bothered to paint over it, so the gray patches of Spackle hung like a foreign substance thrown at the black wall and left there to decay until the end of time. Behind us, the men stared blankly at the stage, waiting for Miss Stella’s Special Live Show to start. One man got up and walked up the aisle. I assumed he was going to the bathroom. I desperately hoped that I wouldn’t have to pee.

A man came out on the stage in front of the movie screen and wearily set up a drum kit and two small amplifiers in front of the movie screen. Three musicians traipsed onto the stage, one carrying an electric guitar, one carrying a bass guitar, and one planting

himself behind the drum kit. The guitarist wore a beret and a goatee and looked like Dizzy Gillespie. The drummer wore a sleeveless T-shirt, and tattoos wandered up and down his arms like maggots. The drummer was heavy-set and stared blankly in front of him as he applied the drumsticks to the drums. They started to play a blues number with a downbeat so heavy that it sounded like an earthquake.

Then Miss Stella herself sidled onto the stage like a python. I guessed that she was around forty years old. She was adorned with a rose-colored, sequined evening dress, and the upper curves of her breasts rose and fell like the waves of the ocean. She started swaying and dancing to the insistent beat. Her creamy skin glowed pink under the spotlight, which followed her around on the stage as if it were glued to her. She paced back and forth like a cheetah. Bit by bit, article by article, she disrobed.

I suddenly felt very self-conscious of my body. I didn't want to put my right arm on the armrest because I might touch Ozzie, and I didn't want to do that. I clasped my hands in my lap, but then I felt like I was at church, and I didn't want that. Finally, I crossed my arms in front of me.

By now, Miss Stella was down to nothing except for pasties shaped like stars on her breasts and a G-string. She looked at the audience but was detached from it. She was mechanical and sensuous at the same time. The music thumped its heavy rhythm like bedsprings during sex, and she swayed to the music, closed her eyes, moved her hands sensually over her body. The cave of sex was dark and mysterious, and I felt myself plunging into it, utterly naked. I was aroused, and I felt warm. I could not take my eyes off Miss Stella as she swayed and danced. "Do you think she's a prostitute?" I whispered to Ozzie.

“Shh!” Ozzie answered sharply, keeping his eyes fixed like lasers on Miss Stella.

I looked back at Miss Stella on the stage. She looked out over the audience at some point far in the distance as she snaked her way back and forth on the stage, and I looked into her eyes, and in spite of the fact that her eyelids were blanketed with mascara, I saw that her eyes were a lovely brown, and then in those eyes I saw something—a tiny light into who she was--and when I saw that, I wanted to know more about her. What was her real name? Did her parents know that she was a stripper? Did she have children? How old were they? How did she take care of them? What did the children do while she was here stripping? How much money did she make as a stripper? I imagined Stella’s life—that her children were twelve and eight, that their names were Adam and Sarah, that Stella’s real name was Rebecca, that she stripped during the daytime so that she could spend time with her children in the evening, that she read to her children every night, that she caressed their hair and faces tenderly as they slipped into a deep and innocent sleep.

And then, as I sat there next to Ozzie and in the midst of the other men in the audience who out of the vast desert of their loneliness stared at Miss Stella’s nakedness--suddenly, without warning, I felt a welling of shame that Ozzie and I had come to this place, and I was overwhelmed by the shame I felt, and queasiness roiled the pit of my stomach. I looked at Ozzie and choked, “I gotta get out of here.”

Ozzie looked at me in surprise but said nothing. He turned quickly back to Miss Stella.

I got up and bolted up the aisle and through the lobby and out the doors into the blazing sunlight of Halsted Street. The air hit my face like a slap, and I gulped in oxygen. I sat on the curb of Halsted Street, waiting for Ozzie as the cars and trucks lumbered by. I

paid no attention to the traffic, no attention to anything. Slowly my nausea subsided. I sat, feeling a deep sense of shame and embarrassment.

After half an hour, Ozzie came out. He sat down next to me and said, “What the hell happened?”

I avoided his eyes. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Are you all right?”

I nodded.

“Are you sure?”

“I just felt a little sick.”

“But you’re all right now?”

I nodded again.

We were silent, neither of us sure what to say to the other, separated from each other like distant spheres. My shame and embarrassment enveloped me, set me apart, stole my voice. Finally, Ozzie looked at his watch. “Oh, Christ! We gotta hurry if we’re gonna catch the 4:35.” We got up and flagged down a cab that scurried us to the Northwestern station. We found the smoking car. Ozzie tipped a cig between his lips and lit it. He didn’t look at me. I didn’t look at him.

Finally I said, “That was really stupid.” I was angry at Ozzie. “I feel guilty about going to that thing.”

“Why? Nobody twisted your arm. You knew what you were getting into. You asked for adventure, and you got it.”

“Well, I didn’t know what it was going to be like. It was completely humiliating for her.”

“It’s a job for her. It’s a way to make money. Nothing more, nothing less. Who are we to judge?”

“Bullshit. It was completely humiliating for her. Would you want your sister up there on the stage?”

Ozzie sucked in some smoke and slowly let it out. He didn’t answer.

“Then just shut up about it.”

“OK,” he said. “OK.”

We retreated fast from the Loop, and as we withdrew from the city, the neighborhoods became less dense. We left behind the old tenements that had been built in the early 20th century and entered the part of the city that had newer apartments, built after World War II. I felt the Loop releasing its grip on me. We rode in silence.

We got off the train at Elm Park. “Listen, Ulee,” Ozzie said as we stepped off the train. “I’m sorry if it bothered you.”

I looked at Ozzie. “It was strange,” I said.

“That is true,” Ozzie said. “It was very strange.” We said so long to each other. We would still be friends. I knew that, but for now, I couldn’t wait to get away from Ozzie. I went home. I was afraid that my parents would figure out that I had cut school that day, but they didn’t seem to have a clue. Like a child, I dawdled over my dinner. I pretended to do homework and then watched TV. But as I watched, I could only half-concentrate on the shows.

I went to bed early. I covered myself with my blanket, pulling it over my head. The abandoned men on Halsted Street, the dilapidated stores, the Swedish nudists, Miss Stella—they swirled before me like misshapen phantasms. I felt as if I were standing on

the edge of a steep precipice, about to plunge into a swirling mess of emotions and mysteries. I couldn't sleep.

I had a strange impulse—an impulse out of my boyhood. I crawled out of bed and went to my closet and dug through all my stuff and dragged out two shoeboxes. I opened them. There were my tin soldiers—red ones for the British and blue ones for the French. I hadn't played with them since I'd been ten years old. But I had this strong urge to play with them now. I *had* to play with them. I set up each army for confrontation—the Battle of Waterloo, which I had re-enacted many times when I'd been a kid. Napoleon attacked, and Wellington led the British and their allies in defense. Then Wellington attacked. I coordinated infantry and artillery, just I'd done as a kid. An hour, two hours flew by, and I was lost in being ten years old again. I shouted orders, and my soldiers obeyed. The strange events of the day faded, and the battle became the most important thing. Finally I put the soldiers away. I crawled back into bed. I buried myself under my blanket and surrendered to sleep.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: “Downtown Cool” *started as a memoir piece. I wanted to capture what downtown Chicago was like in the Sixties. So glamorous! So larger-than-life! And I wanted to capture something about adolescence. I write often about childhood and adolescence. The piece evolved toward fiction. It needed some embellishment and drama, and that's how it ended up as a short story. Influences? Probably Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway--the way in which they transmuted everyday experience into compelling fiction. I reread Winesburg, Ohio every other year or so.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: I'm a writer based in the Chicago area. I've done a lot of different stuff in my life. I've been a merchant seaman, a high school English teacher, a corporate communications writer, a textbook editor, an educational consultant, and a free-lance writer. I've published short stories, articles, and essays in *The Progressive*, *Snowy Egret*, *Earth Island Journal*, *Chicago Wilderness*, *American Forests*, *Chicago Life*, *Across the Margin*,

Adelaide Literary Magazine, The Literary Yard, Scarlet Leaf Review, Spillwords Press, Fiction on the Web, Sweet Tree Review, and other journals and magazines. In 2006, the University of New Hampshire Press published my first book, This Grand and Magnificent Place: The Wilderness Heritage of the White Mountains. My second book, which I co-authored with a prominent New Hampshire forester named David Govatski, was Forests for the People: The Story of America's Eastern National Forests, published by Island Press in 2013

EDITOR'S BIO: : James Hanna is a former fiction editor and a retired probation officer. He has had over seventy story publications and three Pushcart nominations. Many of his stories deal with the criminal element. James' books, three of which have won awards, are available on Amazon. You can visit him there at:

https://www.amazon.com/James-Hanna/e/B00WNH356Y?ref_=dbs_p_ebk_r00_abau_000000

We published his story **The Lottery** in Issue 4 (Fiction). His story **How I Done Good in School** is published in this issue (Fiction).

VACATION IN THE SHADE

By James Moore

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor Tina V. Cabrera writes:*

James Moore's "Vacation in the Shade" effectively blends the sci-fi/speculative fiction framework with social and political commentary. Influenced as he says by Tolkien, Shakespeare, and Hemingway, Moore's prose resembles that of the latter in the directness and crispness of the prose and dialogue. Moore's subtle prose beautifully lends credibility to this narrative of a future that mimics our chaotic and troubled current times.

Sol, the "alien" who joins his partner Aster on a journey to Earth describes the planet as "socially, culturally and morally fractured." Sol hesitates to go through with their plan to visit Earth to acquire an element called Fission Sand that earthlings use for fuel. He foresees the danger inherent in such a scheme because the "natives disrespect, abuse and enslave each other." Sound familiar? It turns out that while darker skinned humans are the majority of the population, they are also persecuted for their skin color by a nefarious group called ICE. When Sol and Aster take on human form, they choose darker skin, and when they are discovered to be "illegals" by ICE and arrested, they are shocked to discover that all foreigners are labeled aliens and thereby mistreated.

What would aliens from another world or planet say about us Earthlings if they could see the state of our world now, particularly that of the United States, where children are separated from their parents, placed in camps, and where racial prejudice is a norm, and the president and his administration lead this country into totalitarianism. This short story allows us to place ourselves outside of the framework to peer at the tragedy that plays out day after.

Editor's Note: *We give this story 5 stars. Spacing is author's own.*

VACATION IN THE SHADE

By James Moore

ALL I EVER WANTED

All six eyes twinkling with anticipation, Aster hits the send key on his touch-pad sending the weekly Interplanetary Observation Report to the Scientific Alliance. He spins his chair to face his work partner Sol.

"That's it!" Aster crows, "I.O.R. 260 has been officially sent to our superiors. Doesn't that make your fluids rush?"

"Frankly no." Sol doesn't bother to look up from his micro-scanner. "I don't see why we're being forced to take this time off when there's work to do."

Aster leaps up from his seat and rushes to Sol's side at the analysis platform. A tap of Aster's tendril on a control panel shuts down the scanner.

"I was in the middle of an analysis." Sol complains.

"Exactly," Aster says, "Work-time over, vacation-time start."

"Okay, okay. It's vacation time. So, tell me about this fantastic once-in-a-lifetime travel spot you've been hinting about for a dozen rotations now."

"Sure," Aster says with a smirk. "have a seat. This place is gonna blow your mind."

Aster's smile grows as his tendrils dance upon the control panel. The holographic projection system produces a basketball sized display of Aster's dream vacation spot. Sol stares at the image of a planet pirouetting in mid-air.

Sol gasps. "You can not be serious."

"Of course I'm serious." Aster counters. "What better place to visit than the planet we've been studying for the past five cycles?"

Aster reaches out and stops the rotation of the image. He then grabs the image and pulls with two tentacles to enlarge it.

"Sol," he says with a flourish, "I give you planet 3R235, or what the inhabitants call: Earth."

Sol steps around the holographic image so that it hovers between him and Aster. "Insane. I always suspected you were mentally imbalanced, now I have proof."

"Just hear me out and--"

"No." Sol interrupts, "First, you hear me out. Setting aside the fact that if we're caught we'll be placed in prison. Based on everything you and I have heard from the Science Council, you're talking about visiting a planet that's socially, culturally and morally fractured. One hundred ninety six governments, each with their own agenda and all fighting each other."

"Not all." Aster says.

"Enough to be dangerous." Sol retorts. "The natives disrespect, abuse and enslave each other. Can you imagine what they'll do if we're discovered? You want to take that kind of a risk for a thrill? A good time?"

"There's that," Aster says, "but also..." He walks around the Earth image and gets close enough to Sol to whisper in his ear. "There's Fission Sand down there."

Sol stares at Aster in disbelief. "How can-- are you sure?"

Aster puts a tentacle around Sol's shoulders and guides him to a lab stool as he continues to whisper. "Not only is it down there, they manufacture it, millions of pounds every year. They use it for fuel."

Sol closes his eyes and shakes his head. "Help me out, I'm still learning their units.

Define 'millions of pounds'."

Aster allows Sol to sit on the stool before answering. "In one year they could fill this observation station five thousand times."

Aster spins Sol around on the stool to face the holographic model. Sol looks at the vision trying to take in the fantastic new information. Again, Aster is in Sol's ear. "I have a plan. If... when it works, we'll be set for the next 300 years. Permanent vacation."

Sol pulls his gaze away from the hollow-graphic planet. "Okay, what's the plan?"

THE PLAN

"It'll never work." Sol shakes his head, "Too many things can go wrong."

Sol and Aster stand upon the autowalk that leads to the other side of the space station. Their debate echos off the corridor walls. Usually dozens of scientists and technicians like themselves mill about but the vacation break means only a skeleton crew maintains the station. There's no worry about being overheard.

"There's nothing to it," Aster argues, "We go down, mix with the natives, find out where to buy what we want, and then come back here. Nothing could be easier."

"We can't just go down there," Sol says, "I've seen pictures, we don't look anything like-- what do they call themselves?"

"Homo Sapiens I think."

"Okay, we don't look like Homos," Sol says, "How are we going to do business with them?"

"I told you, I have a plan. There's an observation team scheduled to go and set up shop down there. We're going to do it first that's all. The scientist in charge of essence transfers is going to help us blend in."

"Essence transfer. New bodies then?" Sol asks.

"Yep, we'll have total say on the design. Color, size, age..."

"I've never done anything like that before," Sol muses, "I don't know."

Aster places a tentacle on Sol's shoulder. "It'll be no problem. We just have to get back in the three day window that's all."

"Do we at least have a sociological survey?" Sol asks.

"Well..."

"No survey?" Sol shouts.

"Calm down," Aster musters his most soothing voice, "We have the preliminary survey. That'll be good enough for what we want to do."

"This plan of yours is sketchy. We've been studying the planet itself, not the people. You're just guessing at how to go about this."

"I know the people," Aster counters, "I know there's a vast variety of body types so it'll be easy to blend in. The darker skinned Homos outnumber the lighter ones so we know what skin tone to use. I know the sub-society we'll encounter honors males above the females

and most importantly, I know the population clusters that are near vast quantities of Fission Sand."

"But--" Sol says .

"Listen my friend," Aster says, "we'll never have another chance like this, to gain a fortune. But I can't do it without you. If you say no, we'll forget about it. Are you in?"

Aster's question comes as the autowalk comes to a halt near the Enhanced Bio-Lab. Aster looks at his friend expectantly.

"Alright," Sol says "I'm in"

"Great," Aster says with a smile, "let's get ourselves a couple of bodies."

NEW MEN

Aster and Sol enter the Enhanced Bio-Lab the way one enters a church. The natural daylight bulbs used inside are a welcome change from the harsh lighting in the corridor.

"I always wondered about this place." Sol says in a normal tone.

Aster whispers, "Shhh! we don't want to disturb him," he cautions.

Sol lowers his voice, "I thought we were expected. Disturb who?"

Aster whispers back. "We are expected, but that doesn't mean Leo isn't busy with some experiment right now."

"Leo? That's an unusual name."

"Yes." Aster takes a seat in one of the stools, "He decided to change his name after a study of the planet's history. The name comes from a historic figure he admires greatly. Leo Vinci or something like that. I just call him Leo."

"Leo," Sol muses as he sits on a stool, "So he's the one who's gonna get us set up with bodies for our trip?"

A voice booms out from a back room, "Indeed he is!"

Leo steps out into the warm light that mimics the sun of this system they've been observing. He looks over the two techs with piercing eyes. The bodysuit he wears has the emblem of a senior officer in the Science Council. Leo leans against the lab table closest to Aster.

"So," Leo says to Aster, "You mean to go through with this?"

"Indeed we do!" Aster replies, "Let me introduce you--"

"You must be Sol," Leo leans forward and extends a tendril, "Aster has told me alot about you. And when he spoke, it was with reverence."

Sol briefly entwines his tendril with Leo's as is customary. "That's good to hear sir."

"C'mon, just call me Leo. Were business partners after all."

Sol gives Aster a sidelong glance. "Partners?"

"Of a sort," Aster says, "Leo's doing a lot for us, new bodies, technical support, transportation... A twenty percent share in profits is not too much to ask."

"I'm glad you feel that way," Leo says, "because we can start right now. Ready?"

Aster and Sol exchange determined looks. "Ready." They say in chorus.

"Very well," Leo opens a lab table drawer and pulls out a remote control. A couple of buttons are pressed and a holographic form drops down from the ceiling as the lights dim.

"Make wise choices, you'll be stuck with these bodies for a couple of days."

Aster and Sol have spent a few minutes working on the long list of aesthetic choices needed to get their bodies ready, when an issue comes up.

"That's the skin color you're going to use?" Sol asks.

"Ah," Aster says, "this is where the report comes in handy. I just happen to know that this skin color is one of the most popular on the planet."

"Really?" Sol asks, "that color?"

"Well, shades of it." Aster says, "You can go darker or lighter but this is optimal. Where we're going, the vast majority of the people have that shade."

"We can't look exactly the same though," Sol says, "I'll go a few shades darker. What else do you suggest?"

"Based on what we know," Aster says, "we should look like we're a little past the midpoint of their life-cycle in age. Most natives' bodies have twenty-five to thirty percent extra fat..."

"What?" Sol asks, "Are they trying to kill themselves?"

"It would appear so." Leo chimes in.

"Let's go with fifteen percent." Aster decides.

"Okay." Sol says. "Male or female?"

"Most definitely male," Aster says, "we need to be taken seriously, and the society we'll encounter sometimes treat their females badly. They talk a good game but the truth is different. We don't need extra complications"

"Alright then," Leo says, "add some contemporary clothes and you're set." Leo uses the remote to punch in the last of the settings and calculations. "Done. The transfer chambers are right through here."

They enter the back room that Leo came out of before. He turns on the overhead light as they enter revealing some of the most coveted hi-tech equipment in this space sector. Sub-micron bio-scanners, tissue re-generators and cloning kits were just a few of the items recognized by Aster and Sol. Leo opens the door at the other side of the room and they enter an area with eight human sized chambers. There are four open red painted

chambers on the left and four closed blue chambers on the right. They are separated by a monitoring console and a bank of computing modules.

“Step into two of the chambers on the left” Leo says, “and we can get started.”

“Hold it,” Sol says, “I want to know how this thing works first. I know it's been done before but not to me.”

“Will you relax?” Aster says, “Nothing bad is going to happen.”

“No, it's okay,” Leo says, “I'll be happy to explain the process.”

Leo steps to the spot just in front of the console and turns to face his audience. “The pods on your left are a combination stasis chamber, bio-scanner and neuro-electric siphon. The pods on your right are a combination of bio-generation chamber and neuro-electric charge device.”

Leo takes a side step and pats one of the closed chambers. "Two of these babies are already working on the bodies you selected. In a couple of hours I'll be ready to put you in them."

"Two hours?" Aster asks, "why do we have to get into the chambers now?"

Leo steps back toward the open pods. "It'll take at least that long to safely remove your neuro energy for transfer. The entire process typically takes about four and a half hours."

Aster turns to Sol, "Satisfied?"

"I just want to know what's going on that's all." Sol says.

"Your pods await gentlemen." Leo says.

Aster jumps into the nearest pod while Sol's entry is more deliberate. There's a hiss and a soft whine as the pod canopies close. Just before they snap shut Leo says. "See you in a few hours."

DISCOVERED

Five hours later, Leo punches in the final verification codes to make sure the neuro-electric transfer is complete. A bank of lights on two pods go green as their canopies release with a loud click. A brown-skinned, dark-haired man in his late thirties steps out of one pod looking at his hands.

"Sol?" Leo asks.

The man continues to inspect his new body. Arms, chest, legs, all covered in a rich brown skin.

"Sol!"

The man snaps his head around and focuses two dark eyes on Leo. "Yeah, it's me. Wow, I feel... kind of numb."

Leo walks over to Sol. "That's to be expected. Your nervous system is getting used to the influx of energy. Other than that how do you like the new body?"

Sol takes another look at himself. "Ok I guess, of all the bodies I've ever used this is definitely in the top two. Where's Aster?"

On cue, soft snoring comes from the pod next to Sol.

"Your clothes are in the other room," Leo chuckles, "I'll wake him up and send him in."

A short time later Leo Sol and Aster gather in the transport room.

"I can't get over this body," Aster says, "but I think you could have given us more ideal specimens."

"You don't want that," Leo remains focused on the transport panel as he cautions Aster, "ideal specimens get attention. You want to avoid that right?"

"Right," Sol confirms, "we just want to look like two average Homo tourists."

Leo stops his work and shoots an inquisitive look in Sol's direction. "What did you just say? Homo tourists?"

"Yes," Aster says, "that's what the natives call themselves, Homo Sapiens."

"Ha, ha... not normally," Leo says, "do you have a local customs report on the area you're landing in?"

"No," Sol looks at Aster, "somebody... didn't think it was necessary."

"Let me tell you, the vast majority of the natives do not refer to themselves with scientific nomenclature. Plus the word Homo is an archaic derogatory term for males who are attracted to their own sex."

"Oh." Aster says.

"Is there a problem with that?" Sol asks.

"There could be," Leo says, "if you refer to someone that way who isn't. I've been studying their culture for a while now, let me put some info together for you."

"How long will that take?" Aster asks.

"I can have something comprehensive for your area in two or three hours."

"We don't have that kind of time," Aster says. "Just transport us and we can get started."

"I have to tell you about a couple of features of your bodies first." Leo steps away from the transport panel and holds up a small bead between his fingers. "This, is a signal enhancer. The transport unit here will be on auto-standby while you're planetside. Tap this twice and the unit will lock on and bring you back immediately. Use it when you find the yellowcake."

"Yellowcake?" Sol asks.

"That's what the Humans, that's the correct term by the way Human Beings, that's what they call the Fission Sand on their world." Leo looks them over. "Are you sure you don't want me to put together an info capsule for you?"

"No time," Aster says, "just give us the enhancer and send us down."

"You already have the enhancer," Leo says with a smile, "each of you have one implanted under your skin. It's behind your right ear."

Sol and Aster each check for the small bump under their skin that ensures a return trip.

"Anything else we should know?" Sol asks.

"Yes, I've added a linguistic circuit to the enhancer. I know you've been studying the language Aster but for Sol's benefit I made this little addition. What you hear will be in our language but when you speak, the locals will hear their language."

"That'll come in handy." Sol says.

"If that's all," Aster says, "we're off to find our fortune."

"What's your plan?" Leo asks, "you gonna walk up to the first stranger you see and ask where the yellowcake store is?"

"Maybe not that direct but yes," Aster says, "they produce so much of that stuff they might even give free samples."

"Sure." Leo says. He walks back to the transport panel. "Ready?"

"Ready." Aster and Sol say in chorus.

"I'll be sending you to the population cluster we discussed Aster," Leo says, "but it's an out of the way spot. No one should observe your arrival. See you in two rotations."

The sensory experience of transport is something Aster and Sol have experienced many times. It is the safest way to travel after all. The view of the transport room fades and appears to dissolve into the background. That image is replaced with a view of their

destination; a small back alley in a large city located in a region called "The United States of America". Aster and Sol take in their new surroundings.

"What a filthy dump!" Sol says, "I hope the whole planet isn't like this."

"I'm sure it's not," Aster reassures, "Let's find someone to talk to."

His sentence is barely completed when a heavy metal door of the building behind them bursts open. Several men and two women frantically pour out of the open door and through the alley. They run past Sol and Aster without a second look.

"They look like us." Sol says.

"I told you our shade is popular." Aster says.

"STOP Federal officers!"

The voice from inside the building is followed by five uniformed men with heavy vests. Each one has a single word printer on the front and back; ICE. The lead man points to Aster and Sol.

"Wilson, Thomson! Grab those two, we'll go after the others."

One of the uniforms takes Aster's arm and pins it behind him.

"Hey!" Aster protests.

Sol takes a step to help Aster when the second uniform pulls out a weapon and points it at Sol.

"Stop! Don't make me shoot you!"

Pointing a gun at someone is a universally understood act. Sol backs off. Aster is being placed in handcuffs.

"Why are you doing this?" Sol asks.

"It's not personal," one of the uniforms says, "there's a push to round up illegals."

"Illegals?" Aster manages to say while pressed against a wall, "We're human beings just like you."

The second uniform grabs Sol and pats him down before putting on the handcuffs. "That's true, but you're also aliens."

Aster and Sol exchange astonished looks. "How did they find out?" Aster asks.

JUSTICE

The immigrant detention center overflows with Human Beings of all ages. A few seem to be alone but most are huddled together as family units or groups of friends. Many of the children and some adults weep because their empty bellies are twisted with fear. Other than being branded with the title "Illegal Alien", they all have one thing in common with

Aster and Sol; dark skin color. Aster is one of the few solitary figures sitting alone at a cold aluminum table when Sol approaches.

"Where have you been?" Aster asks.

"Scouting." Sol says. He takes a seat opposite Aster and looks around. He speaks just above whispering to make sure their conversation is private. "I wanted to find out why we were captured."

"Well?"

"To start," Sol begins, "we should have taken Leo up on his offer. If I knew from the beginning what I know now, I would have never set foot on this planet."

"Did you learn how we were discovered? I can't believe so many aliens know about this planet."

"That's just it." Sol says, "you and I are the only real aliens here. Everyone else was captured because they come from a different country."

Aster tilts his head. "What? Foreigners are called aliens?"

"Not all of them," Sol says, "just the ones who bypass the long and arduous process of entering this country lawfully."

"Why would they bypass the process?"

Sol is silent for moment. His voice cracks a little when he answers. "Some don't want to wait in a line that's years long. Some come from deadly, dangerous places and want to survive. Most simply want a chance for a better life for themselves and their families. I had conversations with a number of Humans here and the stories are similar. They're running from despair and towards hope."

Sol's words hang in the air. The table between them is an island in a sea of desperation.

"Their situation is bleak," Aster says, "but we can't do anything for them. We need to think about us. How are we going to get out of here and find some yellowcake?"

Sol's shoulders are slumped and his head hangs over the table. "I don't think my heart is in this venture anymore. It all seems trivial considering what's going on around us." Sol raises his head to make eye contact with Aster. "There's something else I've found out."

"What's that?"

"Have you noticed?" Sol asks, "Every person in this detention center looks like us. Dark hair, brown eyes, brown skin."

Aster shrugs. "Yeah, so?"

Sol leans in closer to Aster. "So think about all the other humans we've seen since we arrived. The officers who captured us, people posted at every door, the guards who surround us now. Almost all of them are a much lighter color, shades of pink. I think these people are being singled out because their brown."

"Ridiculous! You can't make that assumption," Aster says, "we're in one small area of a large planet. It might not be like this everywhere."

"It appears to be like that here, for these Humans around us. We can leave whenever we want but what about them?"

Now it's Aster's turn to lean in. "I know you, I know what you're thinking. We are not supposed to interfere."

"Unless it makes us wealthy right?"

Aster opens his mouth to debate the issue but Sol's steady gaze makes him think better of it.

"Fine," Aster leans back, "what do you want to do?"

Sol shrugs. "I don't know."

"Hey, you two!"

A uniformed man is shouting to get Aster and Sol's attention. The broad-shouldered officer approaches the table motioning for them to stand. "You guys are up next."

Aster and Sol rise to stand next to the table. "Next for what?" Sol asks.

"You want to see your lawyer or not?" the guard replies gruffly.

"Lawyer?" Aster asks

"Follow me." says the guard.

Aster and Sol are lead through the detention area to a heavy steel door. The guard signals to his co-worker through a small window of bullet-proof glass and the door swings open. A march down a narrow corridor and a short elevator ride bring them all to a small meeting room. The guard turns the knob and pushes the door open. "Wait in here."

Aster and Sol are left in the room for several minutes. In whispered communication they debate whether they should activate their implants for a trip back home. Neither one has convinced the other when without knock or warning, the door swings open.

"Good afternoon gentlemen." A man in his mid-twenties enters and places a tattered leather briefcase on the table. "My name is Rick Hunter and I'll be representing you at your hearing tomorrow."

Rick looks as worn as his suit which is saying a lot. The blue shade of the fabric varies on the surface of his jacket as he takes it off and places it on the back of a chair.

"You two are an interesting case," Rick says rolling up his sleeves, "I understand no ID, but nobody knows you guys. None of the restaurant workers detained in the raid, no one in ICE, nobody in that neighborhood."

"Well," Aster says, "we just got here. We don't know anybody."

"Ok," Rick says, "I'm guessing this is your first time through the process so, I'm going to explain what happens to you next."

"Please." Aster says.

Rick sits in a chair opposite Aster and Sol and points to them both. "You two were apprehended during an ICE raid on a restaurant known to employ illegal aliens. As far as we know you have no ID, no employer and you've yet to tell anyone your country of origin. With me so far?"

"So far." Sol says.

"Tomorrow morning," Rick continues, "I have to convince a judge that there's a good reason to allow you to stay in this country. There will be another lawyer in the room trying to convince the same judge that you need to be put on the next plane out of here."

"Sounds like you have a tough job." Aster says.

Rick throws a bewildered look at Aster. "Yeah, especially since I don't know anything about my clients. Is there anything you guys can tell me to make my job, and as a result your lives, easier?"

Aster and Sol trade thoughtful looks. "Can we have a moment?" Sol asks.

Rick looks at his watch and then at his clients. "Alright, but I have six more clients so five minutes, no more." He packs up and leaves the real aliens to talk.

"We should leave right now." Aster says.

"We can't just disappear. Besides, there's something I need to do first."

"There's nothing for us here," Aster retorts, "our plan is a bust and the situation here is not going to change no matter what we do."

"I have to try," Sol says, "what if some things work the same here as in our society. We get to speak to a JUDGE Aster. Someone who can make a difference."

"What if that's not the case," Aster says, "what if the judge can't change the laws or what if the judge doesn't see things your way?"

"In that case," Sol says, "we make the return trip, but at least I will have tried."

FINAL WORDS

The next day, fortune favors Aster and Sol because their case is the first to be heard by The Honorable Harriet Barker. Her first cases of the day have the best chance of being heard with empathy. As the day goes on however, a heavy docket and stress of affecting dozens of lives a day can deplete the mercy well. The judge takes her seat and look doubtfully at two men sitting behind the defendant's table.

"Neither one of you looks like a lawyer to me," she says, "Where is your council?"

"Excuse me your honor," Sol says, "we'll be representing ourselves."

"Oh, you will?" the judge retorts. "Let's see on the docket... Aster and Sol Lopez?"

"That's right your honor." Sol answers, "from what we understand, this is our opportunity to tell our story. Is that true?"

No lawyer, no ID and the defendants want to tell a bedtime story to win their case. The judge knows these guys are destined for a plane ride out of the country. Sometimes though, a hopeless argument needs to be heard.

"Mister Sol Lopez," the judge says, "tell your story."

Sol stands and places his hands behind his back to take his presentation stance. "Your honor, my story is the same as many of the people you'll see today. A story rarely told to anyone who cares and has the power to help.

I'm a Human Being. No different than anyone in this room, or anyone on this planet. We have much in common, I want my life to have meaning, I want to contribute to society. I don't want to take advantage, I want to honor the opportunities available here by creating more opportunities.

It took Aster and I five years to get here. The road has been paved by dedication, life-threatening risk and hard work. My story is not uncommon. There are thousands and thousands of people like me. If you give us the chance to stay and prove ourselves, you'll see we're not a burden but a blessing. I ask not just for myself but all the Human Beings who want to bless this place, let us stay and prove ourselves."

Sol sits down and silence envelops the room.

"Mister Lopez," Judge Barker says, "I have heard your story before, and I believe the truth in it. But laws must be enforced. Petition denied."

Aster and Sol sit in the transport room. Back in their natural bodies and using time for reflection upon their vacation. For most the goal is to make memories. They succeeded.

"Think you made a difference?" Aster asks.

"With things like that," Sol says, "you can't tell right away. Time will tell."

"Well, we didn't get wealthy," Aster says, "but we did get arrested. That will be a story worth telling someday."

Leo comes into the room. "I've disposed of the bodies," he says, "was the trip worth it?"

"Probably not," Aster says, "no yellowcake and no justice. Let me tell you what happened."

"I can guess a lot of it," Leo says, "your antics are what they call 'trending' on the planet's information network."

"Antics?" Sol asks, "only a small number of humans even know what happened."

"More know than you think," Leo says, "apparently in the United States of America when detained illegal aliens disappear from holding, it makes the news. Their even replaying your speech."

"That was documented?" Sol asks.

Leo nods. "It's being played over and over planet-wide."

"Wow," Aster says to Sol, "the whole planet knows you."

"If I know humans," Leo says, "the excitement will die out eventually, but in the meantime who knows? You can always hope."

"That's right," Sol says, "you can always hope."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *At the time that I came up with the idea for "Vacation" the government of my country (The United States of America) was forcefully separating children from their parents at the US/Mexico border. Adults went through a long prosecution process while their children were handed over to strangers in American agencies.*

After the parents were processed, there were no efforts made by the US government to re-unite the families. As a parent and grandparent I saw the situation as torture for the children and parents. This situation was the final straw that pushed me to write this story. Poor immigration policies, and institutionalized racial prejudice were my motivating themes.

From the time I was a young man, my literary influences included J.R.R. Tolkien, William Shakespeare and Ernest Hemingway. I imagine these giants among a few others whispering in my ear as I write.

AUTHOR'S BIO: James Moore is a husband, father, grandfather and oh yes, a writer. Even though James is a relative newcomer to the literary world, he is working on several projects simultaneously. His current works include a feature length movie screenplay *Kiki Diamond: Bounty Hunter* and the screenplay adaptation of *Charlotte: The Price of Vengeance*, his debut novella. James types out his inspiration at a small dining room table in Virginia Beach, VA with the love and support of his wife Donna.

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The Borderline Poet Returns to Borderline

By Michael McGuire

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor JOEL PAGE writes...*

“Now I’m not from the part of Texas that could tell you much about the frontera, but I know a buckin’ bronco when I see one, and this sucker’s a bucking bronc. Take that back — it’s a herd of them. Every sentence is going to do its goddamndest to throw you off before you get to the end, and it’s not going to end when you think it will. Grab the nearest metaphor and clutch, reader, because every one of these lil mustangs has a life of its own and it’s none too keen on saddles. And then the herd of them, the piece as a whole, it’s not taking you the direct route either. Don’t get too comfy in the present, because you’re liable to get thrown back 50 years, or forward, or into another head, or across the rio bravo. And here’s the wild part; maybe this is a spoiler alert, but I don’t think so, because I don’t think this is a spoil me piece; when it’s all said and done, they’re gunna leave you where they put you. That’s what riding broncs is like; shit, that’s what life is like; you flail like a madman, hanging on for dear life, praying it will end, only to find you ain’t gone anywhere. But goddamn if you don’t have a story. The piece says it best: “How the story ends isn’t the point. It seldom is.”

Five stars.

(Spacing and font size are author’s own.) Eds.

The Borderline Poet Returns to Borderline

I wrote a little book of poems and put it on the shelf.

I made up a little song and sang it to myself.

But when it came to dance, I changed things by a hair.

I choreographed some steps and danced them in Times Square.

I was Fred—and Ginger!—when I stepped off of the curb,

but the body beneath the bus didn't even rate a blurb.

In short, after a year or two—if not a generation or two—back east, whether or not our principle, who never danced the dance they dance in our neck of the woods (known to its aficionados as the shitkicker) or, indeed, whatever the latest light fantastic may have been in the Big Apple, was crushed beneath the wheels of time, our borderline poet returned to Borderline—or Badhand, as hard luck towns are sometimes known to those unlucky enough to be born in one—where he settled down to share the life that was left with someone very special. But last things first, as we say in Badhand (or Borderline) for, if you look hard, you can see them coming up—fast. So let us begin at the end...

La fiesta.

The fiesta does not begin as planned for, if truth be told, it isn't planned at all. The surviving family is seated out back under *la ramada* as day draws to a close when some nameless *tiá* or *tió* finds the words that haven't yet been spoken.

“Let's eat!”

This is followed by general agreement and one of the boys begins by starting the fire. Half an hour later, wood smoldering, someone goes to the icebox and someone else throws greasy strips across bars thick with the grease of time past. Fat fills the air as day darkens and there is general agreement that hauling the grill out from under *la ramada*

might help. A group effort that makes some difference, but the determined gusts of the night are producing a regular wind tunnel.

La fiesta, as only one just across the border from Borderline can so utterly be, is at risk of being blown away; of coming to, in a word: nothing.

Another of the boys finds a tarp and, standing on a chair, nails one edge along the last beam. Now the swelling, snapping canvas plasters itself against those seated with their backs to the blast, but the situation might be considered passable—more rarely being hoped for hereabouts—at least until the night of all out-of-the-way, barely accessible *ranchitos*, even when not that far from the remains of the river, closes in.

Intense, impenetrable night.

Smoldering sticks, mercifully downwind, offer little light. One of the boys goes round tacking up a long yellow cord which he plugs into one just like it and then another very similar that stretches to the shed housing the ruin of a generator which coughs and wheezes a little life into the hours of darkness: the no-nonsense illumination of half a dozen work lamps.

And there you have it, a gala event, at least as near as you can get to one just a little bit this side of nowhere, which is to say: in Punto Muerto.

But what's going on, anyway? Is Calliope's family celebrating her half century with Tex? Tex, of all people? Not only a *tejano* from the upside of the river, but a poet! A poet? Well, so it is said, for in the pistol packing state, a poet is generally considered, if not an actual target, at least a laughing matter, at which point let's have a hoot at one of his lesser limericks...

The man who slept upside down
was considered a bit of a clown.

When he got out of bed, he stood on his head
to turn a smile into a frown.

But please, ladies and gentlemen, reserve your critical judgment until, as we say in Badhand, the chips are down. Moreover, we're getting a little ahead of ourselves. Time was, back when, when our principals, each complete in his or her self as it was possible for man or woman to be, hardly knew each other and, to be honest, had not even met. For that reason, the better to acquaint ourselves with both, let's take a look at each, one at a time.

Tex first.

But what do you say we back up to the beginning—assuming the instant in which Tex began to consider abandoning the borderline borough that birthed him was, in fact, his beginning when, for a man not without talent, if a talent unsuited to his time and place—when the moment was upon Tex when he must see for himself if things were different elsewhere?

For, in Borderline, or Badhand—where, as we who live here say, “yuh play th’ cards yuh’ve been dealt”—poets were fewer and farther between than fenceposts in the spread down the road a ways known to the natives as Blownaway, where the head had wandered off in search of less toxic topsoil about a hundred years ago.

However, like the rest of us, Tex was born and even raised and as soon as, running down his doggerel in the dust at road shows when—for lack of a more miserable venue—they came to Borderline, which pastime was, he had to admit, less hazardous than riding bulls but, as soon as Tex realized the extent of his uncommon, at least for Badhand, talent, he knew he'd better hightail it on out of our particular dead end.

But...a word about names. Not Tex's, which was simple enough, if not quite the one he'd been handed at birth.

Calliope's.

As a handle from the friendship state—where some folks are known for telling others to go back where they came from—it wasn't nearly as vulgar as it might have been. Three syllables, gulped in a way to warm hearts from the wrong side of the river up to the sooner state, where God and Mammon share power even more intimately than in Lone Star to the south. But her given name said little, if anything, about her, for...

Calliope was a border girl.

It didn't much matter which side of *el Río* she'd been born on, for she had spent her young life, or a good part of it, wading the dregs of it: family on one side, work on the other. But it was after a day as a speck upon the labor intensive fields of Texas that she learned to sing. Not while working—that would have been a tall tale of underpaid yet blissful field hands as told by the Chamber of Commerce—for the heat and pesticides, not to mention the pace forced upon those bent double, legal or not, left folks winded, stuff up their noses and down their throats, wheezing sharp, agonizing breaths that fell somewhat short of song.

As for Calliope's name, well...

But to return to Tex.

Now Tex's old man was one of those atypical Texans whose favorite page turner—even if he hated day laborers (*jornaleros agricolas*) as much as the next man—was *I Got it from María* (or *One Man's Love Affair with Mexico*), author best left unnamed, but his favorite rotgut, correctly enough, was Old Alamo. His other half, from Deadpan, never

cracked a smile, not even when the old horse's ass kicked the *campesinos* off the land (the bug killer had devalued their man-hours) and burnt the shacks he'd kept them in.

But this is not Ma's story or Pa's. It's Calliope's. And Tex's. And the time came, long before he met Calliope, when Tex had had enough of whatever you've had enough of when you've had enough, when he packed his bag and left.

Now Tex had already sent his jingles down the road apiece, and more than once, but his killer couplets always came right back. "Try us again, just not right away" was the nicest note he'd got. When, at last, he found his way to the Last Chance Bookstore—"last chance to buy a book," the sign said, "you won't find one west of here"—he got a firsthand look at those pussy-whipped periodicals, and realized he wasn't the only word slinger ever born in a backwash of *el Río*—in this case Borderline—but...limited as his verse, and theirs, might be...some of the stories he skimmed were only half bad.

Though not actually labeled "YA" which, he was soon to learn, meant "young adult," most were trapped in post-adolescent (PA?) first-person, kiddy litter glorying in such words as "mom" and "dad," or the even deadlier "parents," with hardly an adult in sight and she or he only to be mocked, but they weren't as appalling as the puerile poesy and he decided to ignore a masthead that, in most cases, could have been three or four pair of silken unmentionables flapping in one of the more predictable winds that blow round these parts, editors whose own tales were generally one-woman with a number of peripheral, if not satellite, males with questionable motivation, and, for a change, enjoying the prosaic, Tex stood there in the stacks half the night, reading.

Though folks who peopled these pages, he realized, must've never walked down a road or up it, which can be somewhat harder, much less worked for a "livin"; must've sat

bolted in rows “gawkin” at those basket cases Tex remembered from his student days who passed their lifetimes backed up to blackboards looking back at you with terror deep in their eyes.

The young things—somehow it reminded him of girls’ baseball—were writing about what they knew, which was not very much; in short: themselves. But some of the yarns, even if they weren’t as tall as Tex, being a border boy, liked his tales, weren’t all about #1, but someone else—the winds they leaned against and the rains they walked through, not to mention the dust that settled on them long before they were through.

Now we could tie all this up quite tidily if Tex had met his truelove in the doomed stacks of the Last Chance Bookstore, but it wouldn’t be true for a good story is never neat and, in actual fact, Tex met Calliope back in Borderline before he ever left: that is to say on one of nowhereville’s innumerable empty lots briefly come to life as a kind of homegrown fairgrounds where—in pursuit of a buck, no matter how filthy and frayed—he was trumpeting metrics to a small crowd and, somehow, their eyes—Tex’s and Calliope’s—as they say, met, and—slam/bang—there they stayed, which might, or might not, bring to mind one of our poet’s less significant three-liners, if of no particular relevance to the case in hand...

The man who moaned and the woman who groaned
were known as a difficult pair; you could hear them coming,
though he was only humming and occasionally patting his hair.

Now Tex is a tall lean fella—at this point in time, his pockets stuffed with poems—and Calliope is short and smooth, not fat; her voice soft and sweet, not full, but always changing, as if running up and down the scales on a wind instrument far outclassing the one carried on the bony hip of your run-of-the-mill 21st century lonesome cowhand.

Now when Badhand lucks out and finds itself with one of those once a year fairs within the limits, Calliope works one of the stands where she hands baseballs to wannabe pitchers and they throw a helluva fastball at a lever that drops a black man from the wrong side of town (if any side of Borderline can be considered such) in a barrel of water. She doesn't like the work—the black man doesn't much either—but sometimes there's little else in Borderline, or even up the road in Backwater, where the remains of a river attempt a halfhearted turn and respectable ladies sing the sacred verses and flash a "Return to Sender" sign at those on the other side who might be thinking of wading their way to a living wage.

Calliope's parents crossed the river as children to work the fields and managed to survive, parents about as different from Tex's as floodwaters from a dust storm. After work her father watched CNN advertising CNN in their shipwreck of a trailer and her mother was usually out in back feeding a collection of footloose oddballs with nowhere else to go. She charged just about enough to make ends meet, less than her unfortunates would pay for cotton candy on nights like these, which wouldn't carry them very far up the road or even down it. Sometimes there were half a dozen bull riders and sideshow hawkers set round the table set up in the dust of some passing rodeo, past and present, all of them "tuckin' into" whatever "mom" could rustle up.

Now don't get the idea Calliope's mother is any bleeding heart. She isn't. On the contrary, her mother, that is Calliope's grandmother, like any south of the border *ama de casa*, was determined to keep at least one daughter home. Forever. And you can just guess who was targeted to suffer that fate, which might remind us of another of Tex's near triplets, if even less relevant than the last...

The woman who turned on men,

turned and turned again; when she was spinning,
she thought she was winning, the woman who turned on men.

That first night, the night Tex met Calliope or Calliope met Tex, depending on your point of view, our young man—you guessed it—burbled some of his best jinglejangle into her ear and she—not to be outdone—sang to him. Now the songs Calliope sang weren't your ordinary ones or, if they were, she made them special. Calliope favored oldies like the one about not forgetting a certain river valley, sang them to bring tears to the eyes, something Tex had never deigned to do for any devotee of his dime-a-dozen doggerel, though sometimes, maybe only when she had to, Calliope would make up melody and words all by herself.

*

But now, meaning at this point in time—that's right, folks, the night of the aforementioned fiesta—the borderline poet known as Tex is just back from the big city. Oh yes, the Big Apple is behind him, tossed with only a minimal morsel missing, nothing nobody would notice for, as Tex well knows, a few before he had attempted that first bite; perhaps even a nibble slighter larger, less tentative, than his. But he comes back with a few of his best in his back pocket, such as...

The man who lost his head felt a little bit better in bed.
He lay down with a will and lay very still,
but when he woke up he was dead.

And which is, perhaps, more important, Tex, on the bus back from said city—an odyssey that may have taken fifty hours or fifty years, you name it—wonders, not if it makes sense for the poet to go anywhere if he isn't appreciated in the hole he crawls out of, but

where the poet in a man comes from and what happens once he decides to climb Parnassus for himself...

The man who climbed the stairs
was eating nuts and pears.
The man who slipped and fell
was on his way to hell.

Now when he comes to know the life south of the border a bit better, Tex will know that distillation is an indispensable part of the process and, if you hope to get a healthy 38% out of your trickle of experience, you better start with 100% blue agave, distil it once and, if it doesn't work out the first time, maybe once again.

But the incident on the dirt road of knowledge that comes to mind on the bus back from the Big Apple was the time he was making his way up—or down—a third class track on Calliope's side of the river known as *la terecería*—the only track, incidentally, leading our lovers from Borderline to Punto Muerto and back again, not to mention the unforgettable fiesta we are on the point of returning to—when a cow gave birth practically in front of him.

There she was on a rise, some five meters or so overhead, and the newborn slipped out through the barbed wire, popping the cord as he went.

The calf came to a stop at Tex's feet, struggled to his own like a gifted young man with nowhere to go, and the cow hollered at Tex to hand her calf back on up for his first taste of milk and those indispensable antibodies. Clearly, the calf had never seen anything like Tex, or anything else for that matter, and flinched as Tex reached out to him, but the moment he felt the hot hand of the poet he relaxed, and Tex did his best to pick him up, but his best wasn't good enough, the thing slipped through his fingers and, even if it

hadn't, there was no way he could carry a healthy calf five meters up that grade. He did try though.

Once, and once again.

How the story ends isn't the point. It seldom is. The point is that carrying a slippery slimy newborn, who'd be too heavy for you dry, up the steep slope of understanding is likeness enough for the poet's view of his impossible task: to make what he can out of what he is given—not to mention that which is taken away from him—even after he'd given up on the big world or the big world had given up on him, and he'd come home to see if there wasn't someone, or something, he might not give up on...ever.

In short, to see what there was he might try again, and then again.

*

Now Calliope's story couldn't be more different from Tex's. Her grandmother, otherwise a gentle, caring creature, would never let her lastborn daughter study with her friends, some of whom went on to try that which, for them, was the big world, on the other side: in short, to sign away their souls to one of those for-profit playschools that leave you in arrears the rest of your life: God's next best gift to venture capitalists after for-profit prisons. Years later Calliope's mother could still hear her mother's voice... "They won't be studying, they'll be babbling. I know your friends, you're better off without them. Clean these vegetables, when you're done, get the baby's sheets, and then..."

Ah! The mothers of Mexico, mushy as they may be slapping tortillas in "latina lit,"
quote/unquote: slap, slap, slap...

There were, for example, two mothers right in the cheek-to-cheek block of Calliope's mother's *parroquia*, both of whom were resolutely determined to keep their daughters forever chained to the cash registers of their respective *tienditas*. Daughters who had intelligence, if not talent; ambition, if not focus; daughters, anyway, who ought to be given their chance. But when told the other side was not for them—those entrepreneurial institutions of “higher learning” least of all—that they must minister to their mothers unto death, they, both of them, the daughters, bowed their heads in silence...

The better to hear the years passing.

How strange that, in the country where *machismo* is accepted as the natural order of things, it is the mothers who tie their daughters down. Oh, they try to keep their sons within reach—unless a run at the river will bring a predictable flow of *remesas* from *el norte*. But even for them, the sons, education—especially the overpriced bargain basement brand—is known as the river of no return.

But daughters are another matter.

There is, of course, always something to do in the family business. Even if there's only one customer an hour on miniscule markup, there isn't even that if the roll-down door is not rolled up and the doomed girl not tied behind the counter where she belongs when that pitiful palmful of *pesitos* passes by. But, against all odds, Calliope's mother, as a child, waded the remains of the river and proceeded to meet Calliope's father, who was also a child though, at the moment, he was shouldering a bucket of produce way too heavy for him between the rows.

Now both are dead, carried off fairly early by something in their bones acquired, they say, in those early years. Gone as Calliope's grandparents, whose *ranchito*, being

basically worthless, is still in the family and the preferred location for once-a-year gatherings of the undestroyed oddments of that particular lineage.

The critics may debate whether Tex dashed off his last ditties during his stint in the Big Apple or after he got to know that south of the border world a bit better, where you're lucky to get that 38% of your trickle of experience, even with that newborn calf in both arms, which might bring to mind one of those sagas, Tex felt rather strongly, had to be of creatures other than yourself...

The woman who sat in the park
was only waiting for dark.
When the pigeons had flown and she was all alone,
she stood up and sang like a lark.

Or even the epic...

The man who went nowhere fast
just didn't want to be last;
somewhere in the middle would solve the riddle
of the man who went nowhere fast.

But so much for the *prólogo* and, once more, back to our fading lovers...and the unforgettable night of the fiesta when Tex and Calliope might well celebrate fifty years of endurance, celebrate it on the not quite abandoned *ranchito* of her long dead grandparents and the not quite endless trail of their descendents for, you guessed it, dear reader: Tex and Calliope are childless.

The night the wind comes up and the wind tunnel under *la ramada* fills with smoke. The night night falls. The night Tex, fresh out of couplets for the occasion, tells a story not that unlike the ones he'd skimmed that night so many years ago standing in the Last Chance Bookstore.

And it goes like this...

De vez en cuando, which is about as near as you can get to ‘once upon a time’ south of the border, there lived a tuneful young woman appropriately named Calliope and, just across the ruin of *el Río* from her, a young man known as Tex to those who couldn’t get their tongues about that early American handle he’d been handed at birth. As may have been said, they met at an excuse for a rodeo, which is to say their eyes met. The rest is history, but since the best tales are not only told, but retold, and more than once, we’ll just let Tex retell this one; if not in post-adolescent first-person, then in the ever-popular present-tense.

Anyhow, here we stand, at some distance, this no longer young woman and this even older man for—as you can see, the speaker, like the subject of his speech, is nearing the end—anyway, as you know, the lady in question has just sung one of her sadder songs and the gentleman is in the process of declaiming an even humbler epic. But—I know you’ve been waiting for it—this is the event.

Our poet’s not halfway through his pastoral on the origins of poetry—a.k.a. the chronicle of the cow, not to mention the calf and the word-slinger-to-be—when suddenly the words just won’t come. Yes, for some reason, ladies and gentlemen, I too—forgive the first person—at this particular point in time, can hold forth no longer.

But to return to our cliffhanger: at this point Tex abruptly sits, picks up a half chewed rib in one hand and a plastic cupful of Herradura, Squirt and—believe it or not—real ice from the unassailable iceberg of time in the other, while Calliope, to cover for him, steps up to bat, her old behind to the fire failing behind her, the wreck of a ukulele hot in hands that, these days, are uncomfortably cold when not actually twisted in pain. Her voice, it

may be remembered, is soft and sweet, not full, but always changing, as if running up and down the scales on an instrument that would put to shame the best hurdygurdy at the county fair of your dreams. Anyhow, her melody, understandably, goes over better than her words.

In Borderline, they do tell,

Where some folks stay and go to hell,

And some do leave and never return,

For just about anywhere's a place to burn.

Suddenly, she sits, but not before she whispers in an ear she's whispered in before.

“That's it, my love. That's the best I can do right now.”

Anyway, everyone knows it's Tex's turn and the recovered poet returns from his prosaic interlude to share what turns out to be the very last poem of all, one that, for some reason, we assume, just didn't fly in the Big Apple but, as you might see, in spite of its relative obscurity, does do some justice to the talent that, for whatever reason, never did blossom quite as it might have if something—God knows what—might have been just a little bit different...

The lady with the broom assures me that there's room
in the closet where she keeps her little things.
There's a bucket and a mop and for all the things that drop
there's a blackbird who almost never sings.

And so, in the fullness of time, things changed and changed again and went on changing, only without our principals, who were long gone, though it's said that at least one other masterwork, *una obra maestra*, was found in the dead poet's pocket, the pocket of the man who, some say, never returned to Borderline at all, never came home to Calliope and

never stood up to recite his last, but not least, at the fiery fiesta at *el ranchito* where the wind is always blowing and, at times, the smoke is fairly thick...

I met death coming in the door.
I got right down and crawled along the floor.
I don't think he saw me, he didn't say.
That was one time I got away.

Or perhaps the one that might bring our tale of our borderline poet full circle, at least halfway...

The man who was hit by a bus
declined to make a fuss; he lay on his side,
his eyes open wide, and left the rest to us.

But whether Tex stood up—steadied, of course, by Calliope's old hand—to recite these lines or they were only found in his pocket long after might be arguable one way or the other but, in either case, I wouldn't want you to think this is the end of the story.

Oh, no.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Don't ask me. I just work here,*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Michael McGuire was born and raised and has lived in or near much of his life; he divides his time; his horse is nondescript, his dog is dead. He is rumored to have bent an elbow once or twice in D.F. with B. Traven; but the facts in this case, as with so many in the writer's journey, are uncertain. Naturally, McGuire regrets not having passed his life in academia, for the alternative has proven somewhat varied, even unpredictable.

*"McGuire's writing is hauntingly thoughtful, inexorably true."
--Publisher's Weekly*

A book of his stories (*The Ice Forest*, Marlboro Press, distributed by Northwestern University Press) was named one of the “**Best Books of the Year**” by *Publisher’s Weekly*.

McGuire’s stories have appeared in *Guernica*, *J Journal*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Paris Review* (x2), *Hudson Review*, *New Directions in Prose & Poetry* (x2), & etc. His plays have been produced by the New York Shakespeare Festival, the Mark Taper Forum of Los Angeles, and many other theatres here and abroad, and are published by Broadway Play Publishing. *The Scott Fitzgerald Play*, University of Missouri Press, a Breakthrough Book chosen by Joy Williams, has been published as an Author’s Guild Backinprint edition. Both books are available on Kindle.

A Day in Which Something Might be Done

Winner: Lamar York Prize for Fiction, 2018, *Chattahoochee Review*
 “A beautiful story reminiscent of the magical realism of Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Laura Esquivel. What captured me from the start was the confidence of the narrative voice and the lushness of the dream-sentences, which then give way to a story about love and healing, the inequities of indigenous life, and the prophecy of dreams. Gorgeous writing and masterful storytelling.”

--Alexander Weinstein, judge

The Night of the Day of the Dead

Winner: Terrain.org 2019 fiction competition

“I chose this evocative short story as the winner of *Terrain.org*’s fiction contest because of its many layers, which help to reveal a unique story of love and loss, death and extinction. The prose is melodic and intelligent, distant but empathic, and the plot encompasses many different ways in which we are all now living. Set in a small “Old Town” in Mexico, the villagers are struggling with multiple universal themes: loss of culture, loss of opportunity, loss of environment, loss of family members, and loss of self. Through Nadia—a masked, half-dead girl—we take a brief journey through celebration of the Day of the Dead, and wind up the richer for it. Read this story more than once. Each time you do so, you’ll gain more appreciation for what the writer accomplished and more insight into who we are as human beings and the challenges we all face.”

--Tara Lynn Masih, judge

EDITOR'S BIO: Joel Page lives in Dallas where he works as a public defender, writing appeals for federal prisoners. He is the fiction editor for the West Texas Literary Review, even though Dallas is not arguably in West Texas. His fiction has appeared in The Fabulist, Thimble Magazine, and Word Machine Magazine. His story **Ex Nihilo** was published in Issue 4.

Chicago Sportster 48

By Jesse Sensibar

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor MICHAEL HOWARD writes:*

Conveying a sense of place is a challenge no matter how much length you have to work with. Doing it successfully in less than 800 words—good luck to you. Jesse Sensibar pulls it off. If you’ve never been to Chicago, you’ll feel as though you have when you’re finished reading “Chicago Sportster 48.” Straddling the border between short story and prose poem, this impressionistic vignette takes us on a splintered tour through the knotty soul of one of America’s most hallowed towns. It’s via glimpses—here hurtling across the Skyway, there day-drinking on a pimp’s dime—that we’re made to see and feel what life in the Windy City is like for a certain sector of its inhabitants. “Fragments are the only forms I trust,” the narrator of Donald Barthelme’s “See the Moon?” tells us. Reading “Chicago Sportster 48” helps us to understand why. Here’s a sample:

“Everyone had a plan, mine was to just keep moving, attach myself to whatever seemed like it was going somewhere the fastest and just hang on. You’re harder to hit the faster you run. You just can’t ever stop. There is a Golden Ratio of speed to fate, but it’s difficult to quantify.”

5 stars

(Spacing and font size are author’s own.) Eds.

Chicago Sportster 48

I woke up this morning looking down the barrel of a yesterday, turning 48 years old, and to the sound of the Windy City being true to its name; working hard at trying to tear the Chicago redbrick corners out of the third floor of this twenty-two foot wide row house just a few short east-west blocks from Lake Michigan where I was raised up. The

radio says the Chicago Skyway is closed this morning because of high winds and flying debris. This narrow house has withstood these challenges for over a century. It shrugs them off with the help of the Golden Ratio of 1:1.618 and a little Eastern European tuck-pointing now and then.

When I was young, just beginning what for me would be a long shortcut in a life, I worked for a time on cars and motorcycles at a shop on Stony Island Avenue that was just down from a Harold's Fried Chicken Shack and King Richard's Hubcap and Wheel; right at the base of the 79th street ramp up onto the Skyway. Late into the night and long before fuel injection, we'd drink six packs of Old Style, cut and snort lines; tune carburetors and gap plugs, then hit the empty Skyway on fast stripped Nortons, Triumphs, BSAs and Harleys running straight pipes with no mufflers. The power-to-weight ratio was always in our favor; gravity and the rutted pavement that undulated under us like a killer breathing hard were both working to take us to a closed casket funeral or somewhere worse we didn't ever even want to talk about.

We were the immortals. The girls were both pretty and pretty willing, but always for me just a little too young and wanting more or a little too old and out of reach. Somehow most of us survived in spite of everything we did and not because of it. The bike wrecks and the overdoses and the suicides took a toll. Somehow you believed it could never happen to you. Everyone had a plan, mine was to just keep moving, attach myself to whatever seemed like it was going somewhere the fastest and just hang on. You're harder to hit the faster you run. You just can't ever stop. There is a Golden Ratio of speed to fate, but it's difficult to quantify.

Yesterday, I wandered the Museum of Science and Industry with a beautiful genius I might once have had children with if we had both been slightly less damaged in our time. She explained and I learned about the Golden Ratio along with Fractal Branching, Spirals, and the amazing Voronoi Pattern, which supports the structure of some of the world's biggest football stadiums just as it does a soap bubble. We wandered the magic of the submarines and coalmines of my youth.

The leaves are blowing off the trees; oranges, yellows, golds, and greens. All different shades of brown against a sky of grays which lean us fast and fierce towards the Falcon Inn, transplanted Monk Parrots, and blackbirds. Inside, an old pimp; royalty in shades of brown and expensive cowboy boots, ran the bar in the Falcon at three in the afternoon for my birthday. Buying all of our drinks; whiskey for me wine for her, while a young black woman with red hair extensions sings the blues accompanied only by her cell phone through a single microphone. All the assembled day drinkers and the players just getting warmed up for a busy holiday Wednesday night clap and cheer for her. Somebody yells out, wanting to know if she has a boyfriend. She replies into the microphone in a voice filled with vice, tired and bluesy at the same time, that she has so many boyfriends she has to schedule them in two weeks in advance. The assembled make their assent known and the old pimp at the end of the bar buys another round and takes his bow.

Sometimes, across the street from The Pepperland Apartment - black but trimmed in regal gold and purple - on a grey November day where the elevated tracks cross 57th street and the Golden Ratio is hard at work, you find strange things posted on the windows of the failed, shuttered coffee shop tucked under the four perfect 1:1.618 arches

of the viaduct. They'd be sad if they were not so damn odd, but you can't help but smile with the implied joke of magenta masking tape holding copies of blank pet cremation authorization forms to empty shop windows next to Polaroid photos of the lost.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I wrote this piece about my 48th birthday which I spent with someone I cared very much for but had never been able to really connect with until later in life so there is a little bit of regret and nostalgia there. It's a collection of images from a single day all run together into something I hope somebody finds interesting. It's also a very consciously place based piece of writing. I grew up kinda' rough on the streets of the south side of Chicago in the 1970s and 80s and I view that past with a bit of nostalgia and regret as well. I tend to write about what I know and at the same time try not to fall into the trap of navel gazing which is easy to do if you are not paying attention. I see this piece as a hybrid of prose poem and braided essay which is where a lot of my work ends up, in that funny place between truth and fiction, poetry and prose, social media post and drunken rants on bathroom stall walls.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Jesse Sensibar came west to the high desert in the late 1980s and quickly disappeared down the rabbit hole of Southwestern outlaw drug culture. He emerged from that hole in 2008; close to death and with a solid quarter century of hard drug abuse under his belt. You can usually find him in the dying Ponderosa Pine forests surrounding Flagstaff, Arizona or in the old barrios of Tucson, Arizona. Otherwise, he is probably somewhere out on the highway, documenting the passing of his rapidly disappearing American West and pondering the fleeting nature of memory, sin, spirituality, and forgiveness. You can find him at jessesensibar.com.

EDITOR'S BIO: Michael Howard's essays and short stories have appeared in a wide variety of print and digital publications. His website is michaelwilliamhoward.com. His story *at the end of the day* was published in Issue 6.

The United States of Centralia

By Daniel Walker

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We can't help feeling the presence of Cormac McCarthy in this strongly written apocalyptic thunderclap—even if it's only intuitional. There is a remarkable stylistic consanguinity between the two authors. That said The United States of Centralia stands on its own. This kind of fiction is high on the 'pop' register because it appeals to our fantasies about societal dissolution—something that feels kinda real right now. But what raises Walker's story above the clichés of the genre are the intriguing characterizations, at once off beat and startlingly real, and a powerful sense of human frailty. Dialogue smokes and his prose might as well be a living organism. Quote:*

“Why don't they fertilize it, try to make it grow again?”

“It's not real grass, it's called astroturf. You can't fertilize fake grass.”

“Sure you could. You could use fake poop. Like they use in practical jokes.”

And...

What was he, anyway, compared to the cat? A big hairless ape, a troglodyte cast out from his clan of lost boys. All he knew how to do was pick people up and throw them around, maybe bang their heads against the doorjamb if the situation called for it. He'd always be a big kid, unable to muster up even half the dignity that this little fucker carried with him.

Five stars.

(Spacing and font size are author's own.) Eds.

A snatch of an old song came to the blond boy in his sleep. When he awoke, he taught it to the others, and it gradually evolved into something like a war chant. "Scotty doesn't know, Scotty doesn't know, don't tell Scotty, cause Scotty doesn't know." They ran up and down the length of the doublewide trailer, high-kicking at invisible foes and yelling their newfound hymn at the top of their lungs. "Stop it, STOP IT!" yelled the big kid. "You're scaring the fucking cat." But no one could hear him, for the din was too great.

Normally, people listened to the big kid, especially if he was bold enough to throw out a cuss word like "fucking" or "shit." But something had the boys riled up today, something weird and intangible. A couple weeks before the Heavy Stuff began, the big kid had gone to the zoo. By himself, just for nostalgia's sake. Most of the animals were silent and still – the reptiles buried themselves in the crevices of the earth, the polar bear sat forlornly on his plastic ice floe. But the monkey house rang with a tumultuous rattling, a cacophony of howls and screeches - not unlike the noise that presently surrounded the big kid. It had felt like the monkeys were telling him off, he thought, and there in the heat of the monkey house he had felt small, and when he felt small he felt compelled to lash out. He glanced under the bed. The cat was crouched down beneath the saggy midsection of the mattress. A single fang peeked from its mouth, and its wide eyes rose to meet his. The big kid stood up, took a deep breath, and drew his shoulders inward. Then he crouched down once more, reached beneath the bed, and scooped his new friend into his pockmarked arms. No one noticed him step outside.

He dusted the cat off, feeling apologetic about the ruckus. It didn't look too scared, and he wondered now if bringing it outside might've been a bad idea. But the cat just turned in a circle and sat nonchalantly on the dead patch of earth beneath the piss 'n shit window (so named because it was the window that the boys pissed and shat out of - save the big kid, who preferred the blue-white alcove of the trailer's built-in commode). He looked at the cat, in all its grace and nonchalance, and suddenly felt bigger and clumsier than ever before. What was he, anyway, compared to the cat? A big hairless ape, a troglodyte cast out from his clan of lost boys. All he knew how to do was pick people up and throw them around, maybe bang their heads against the doorjamb if the situation called for it. He'd always be a big kid, unable to muster up even half the dignity that this little fucker carried with him.

Then the cat arched its back and mashed its head into the big kid's ankle. Yet again, he scooped up his feline friend and gave it an experimental peck on the nose. *There we go, he thought. Now the playing field's even. If you're gonna love me, I'll love you right back.* The cat batted at his cheek with a blunt paw.

He walked on, and the cat followed with him. Before the two of them lay a field dotted with patches of black mud. The well-worn soles of the kid's sneakers left smeary grids in the mud, and the cat's tender feet left little round craters beside them. He walked up a hill carpeted with rotting moss, crushed skinny sticks underfoot, and crossed yet another muddy field, all the while looking down to make sure the cat was still at his side. After many minutes, they happened upon a thin brown creek that bisected the valley. The cat leapt onto the riverbank and bent its head to hesitantly lap at the brackish water below it. His big companion surveyed the river, making sure the water was free from any

foreign contaminants. A glint of rusted metal caught his eye, and he grabbed the cat by the scruff of its neck and hoisted him away from the water. So startled and worried was the big kid that he found himself verbally reprimanding the cat: “What the fuck’s wrong with you? I thought cats weren’t supposed to like water. I turn my back on you, and you go and drink-” He stopped. The stray crackle of snapping twigs caught his ear. He looked to his right. At the edge of the river, far down to the right, a girl was watching him.

Arlene was blonde, with black eyes, and a voice like an adult’s sigh. She was a little older than him, though she was still what he considered a big kid. The cat sniffed at her for an instant, then moved into the brush to explore. She was gathering sticks for the little kids at her school.

“Do you go to school?” she asked him.

“No, I don’t go to school,” he told her. “I used to, but I try not to remember about that stuff. Why do you go, anyway?”

“Just to volunteer, when I can. I stopped going too, but ... I had a little sister. And I’d go in with her, just to see all the little kids. Nowadays I go in anyway, just to help out. You know, since they’re so understaffed these days ... I mean, out here.”

“These days out here,” the kid said.

She suggested they walk together, and so they did. The cat squirmed slightly in his arms as he held it like a bag of groceries. He handed it off to Arlene every couple minutes, and she held it close to her chest like a heavy book. Eventually, they found the football field. The fake grass at their feet had been bleached a pale grey. As the kid

looked down, the phrase *ashes of time* floated through his head - though he had no idea where he'd picked it up. Arlene caught him looking down and said "I hate it, too. They should rip it all out, if you ask me."

"Why don't they fertilize it, try to make it grow again?"

"It's not real grass, it's called astroturf. You can't fertilize fake grass."

"Sure you could. You could use fake poop. Like they use in practical jokes."

And she laughed at that. Her laugh carried no malice and no echo of the monkey house.

She guided him to a red pickup sitting in what he guessed was the parking lot. They got into the cab, the kid taking shotgun and Arlene slouching in the driver's seat. And then they were off, Arlene steering the red bulk of the truck down a raggedy country road. She took the opportunity to tell him everything about her life, and he took the opportunity to listen. He learned of her parents, who used to work the earth before the Heavy Stuff, her two big-ass brothers who wrestled each other at all hours of the day, and her little sister. When her immediate family exhausted itself, she moved on to her distant relatives. She talked of uncles who fought the fires as well as each other, the way her grandpa always called the Heavy Stuff the "Heavy Shit," and an aunt who lived out in California and worked as an acting coach.

"My aunt, she was in the movies. Well, only one movie, when she was very young. *Five Easy Pieces*, have you heard of it?"

“No,” answered the kid. He stayed taciturn, but he was enjoying this. After his days in the trailer, it felt especially nice to be around someone who could talk and stand still at the same time.

“I didn't expect you to have heard of it. It's old. But it's one of our family's favorites. My auntie's only in it for a minute, but it's our favorite minute in any movie.”

They pulled into the gravel driveway of a small two-story farmhouse, and the truck ground to a halt. The kid swung the passenger's side door open as the cat jumped gracefully to the ground. Arlene hustled past him to the front porch, where she stood by the screen door and dueled with the keyhole. The door opened with a croak, and she waved him inside. He found himself in a parlor room with a wood-paneled floor and furniture that looked decades old. The room probably hadn't been changed in many years, and he figured that Arlene and her family just didn't have the resources to do so. Or they might have been trying to keep a tradition around. Maybe both.

“There's a bedroom upstairs you can take. Second on your left. And if you hear screaming, don't be scared. We just ran out of humane ways to slaughter the livestock.”

The sun was setting when he found the spare room. Gray skies turned a darker shade of black as he sunk his weight onto the bed, not even bothering to lift the thick floral-printed comforter atop it. The cat crawled up the length of his body and settled itself on his chest. As night fell, a sense of contentment crept over the kid. For all the comfort that the warm sheets and the noiseless cat gave him, he knew that it couldn't last. There was something massive and invisible hiding in the night, hanging over the farmhouse like a dark cloud or a god. And there in the spare room, with a cat purring on

his stomach, he made his peace with it. The cat bobbed up and down with the rise and fall of his breath.

He awoke a little later, the sheets in disarray and the cat sprawled out on the floor. It was night now, late night. He rose, walking in quiet halting steps to the window. His hand, feeble from half-sleep, pulled back the ancient lace curtains. Once they had parted, the kid leapt in horror at what he saw. A pair of eyes were peeking through his window. He stepped back and the eyes vanished with a blink. A thin, singsongy voice hissed through a crack in the window, whispering nonsense into the dimly lit room. The big kid lay down once more and closed his eyes, the sensation of breath all around him. He heard footsteps in the room above him, heavy ones. As he fell asleep, he convinced himself that it was her. They sounded anxious - and that could have been good or bad. And it could have been about him, or someone else.

He awoke again with the rising sun. The cat was gone, and there were no steps in the room above. In fact, there was no noise at all throughout the house. He stood to search for the cat when his door shuddered with two loud knocks. There in the doorway stood two much older-looking boys, who he guessed were Arlene's big-ass brothers. One of them, who sported a thinning goatee, grabbed him by the scalp and dragged him into the hall. The other big-ass brother produced a length of rope, and together they tied the big kid's hands behind his back and marched him through the desolate hallway.

As they led him down the stairs, the big kid tried desperately to understand what was going on. He thought it had something to do with Arlene: maybe they thought he'd done something wrong to her, or was planning to. They silently and roughly escorted him

through the house, and he frantically scanned the cluttered rooms for any sign that Arlene was still around. But his mind was clouded by terror: all he could hear was the rush of blood in his ears, all he could feel was the bile swirling around in his ribcage, and all he could focus on were the piles of stray clothes that lined the hallways. Here a pair of coveralls dangling from an improvised clothesline, there a soiled karate gi lying atop the hamper - it was unbearable.

One of the big-ass brothers spoke at last. He started mocking the big kid, delivering a mush-mouthed soliloquy to the flaking paint of the farmhouse walls. "It's human nature, man – you want proof, just look out your window." A fist like a bony meatloaf made contact with the big kid's belly. "Obviously, you're not gonna be able to do that, but ... it's a nice sentiment, isn't it?"

They emerged from the dusty house into a clear-skied morning. As the two big-ass brothers led him across the lawn, he noticed something sitting in the field ahead of him. The brothers dragged him across the field, and as the object in the distance grew closer, he began to make out just what it was. A meager wire fence, connected by starved-looking wooden posts, led a path like a bank queue towards a tall-backed chair. That's when the big kid looked down and noticed a belt hanging loosely from one brother's pocket. He looked towards the other, and realized that he was carrying a small, rectangular box. Whatever was inside the box rattled slightly. A plasticky rattle, with the faintest metallic - suddenly, a thousand half-remembered warnings flooded back to the big kid all at once. He let out an involuntary groan – a wordless exhalation – as the realization of what was going on hit him. He was being led to his own death.

“Stop struggling, now,” the goateed brother told him. “As you’ve probably figured by now, we intend to kill you. It’s nothing like a vendetta, understand? The county needs bodies, and we get a nice cash surplus for every one we bring over. Now, I don’t know what in the fuck they do with ‘em - last I heard, they grind ‘em up into biofuel or some shit. But it ain’t no business of mine. Now get in the chair.”

The big kid, silent and cowed by fear, obeyed. To his right lay the farmhouse, and though it was some distance away he could still see inside. Through the square freckles of a screen door, he could make out a clean-looking white room he guessed was a kitchen.

“Why you sulking? You want to see her, don’t you?” The big kid cast a wary eye towards his tormentor. “Well, I’m afraid you can’t. We did her last night, while you were snoozing. Brought the floodlights out and everything. We’d been holding back for ever-so-long. But you, little man ... you’re an excuse, is what you are. A good one, the best we ever had.”

A fleshy figure, tall and curved, came to the screen door. The big kid strained his eyes to see this new body as it filled the door frame. A singsongy voice - the same he heard the night before - floated towards him, and the same eyes he’d seen before suddenly came into focus. It was a woman - an older woman, much older, beyond adolescence. Her head was wreathed in dark hair that curled up and away from her, and she stood nude in the doorway as the big kid waited to die.

“Don’t look too hard, now. She’s his.” The goateed brother jerked his thumb towards the other brother, who was silently fiddling with - sure enough - a long needle. Then the goateed brother pinned the big kid’s head, still craned to the right, to the back of

the chair with a meaty palm. “Shit, look all you want. Won’t have much else to look at soon.”

“Could I make a last request?” the big kid asked. “I’d like to die with my cat on my lap.”

The big-ass brothers said nothing. One moved forward and belted the big kid’s arm to the arm of the chair. In the distant doorway, something black and four-legged moved towards the woman. It was a dog, a sharp black form with an angular face. The woman embraced the black dog as he prostrated himself at her feet. She nuzzled him, bent down to kiss him, and in return he climbed her form and explored her with his rough paws.

The big kid couldn’t understand what he saw, anymore than he understood why he had to die. He knew without seeing that the dog’s padded paws were leaving circles of blood on the woman’s flat stomach. And he knew without knowing that this was the same dog that killed his cat. The goateed brother moved towards him with a syringe full of something green and chemical-looking. Then with one sudden motion, he jabbed the needle into the big kid’s arm, pressed hard on the plunger with a calloused thumb, and withdrew it.

His sight was the first thing to go. Then the sound of the hollow wind drifted away, and everything went numb, and he drifted away. And as he drifted, he saw every place he’d known blending and bleeding together. He saw the double-wide trailer that had been his home yesterday morning, and he saw it burn to the ground. Then he saw the other kids frolicking, playing in the brown river, still singing *Scotty doesn’t know, Scotty*

doesn't know. And he saw Arlene, her bloodied body lying in the back of the red pickup truck. After that, he found himself alone in a field.

It had been a day of fields, the big kid thought. The muddy field in front of the trailer, the field by the river where he met Arlene, and the field where he'd been killed. He looked down to make sure his cat was still with him. The cat affectionately mashed his head into the big kid's ankle. And so the big kid walked on, the cat following along. His shoes carved faint ovals into the dirt beneath his feet, and the cat's tender feet left little round craters beside them.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Post-apocalyptic/society-after-the-collapse stories are a dime a dozen, I know. But we've all had doom on our brains for the better part of our adult lives (at least I hope we all have and I'm not some egregious outlier), so what better way to exorcise some of that anxiety than with a depressing little fairy tale such as this one? I wanted to explore this ruined world through the headspace who was jaded/had "seen it all" to some extent, but was still fundamentally innocent and sort of naively good-hearted. This story was a real experiment in show-don't-tell for me - how much world building can I do without getting into the specifics of how this world came to be? There's a lot of interplay between the natural realm and the "structured" world of humans here, which I feel is very fitting for a story where the world itself and the people within it are at a kind of unspoken war with each other. Centralia is an abandoned mining town in Pennsylvania. "Scotty Doesn't Know" is a pop-punk novelty hit from the mid-2000s. "Ashes of Time" is the name of a Chinese martial arts movie I've never seen. And the last scene - the chair in the field, the woman and the dog, and the prick of the syringe - is from a bad dream.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Daniel Walker is a writer and playwright living in Moorestown, New Jersey. He is a recent graduate of Ursinus College and has previously had poetry and short fiction published in his alma mater's literary journal The Lantern. He has also collaborated with Philly-area filmmaker and funnyman Tommy Armstrong on the Youtube series "The Video Game Video Show" and "Elders React" (not the famous one you're thinking of). He can be found on Twitter @danglylegdanny, and his old

opinion pieces for the UC newspaper are catalogued at pagingdanielwalker.wordpress.com

ARTIFICIAL DAUGHTER

By Tina V. Cabrera

Editor's Note: This story is a sequel to the author's Artificial Mother which we published in Issue 3. We are publishing a revised version of it in this issue. It follows this story in the table of contents.

WHY I LIKE IT: Guest Editor JAMES MOORE writes:

If reading most popular literary prose is like drinking wine coolers, reading Artificial Daughter by Tina Cabrera is like drinking a fine port. It is thick and rich with flavor and meaning.

Tina Cabrera's unique style of writing puts YOU in the place of the main character. What you do, say and eventually feel are given to you in each power-packed line of story-telling. You find yourself in the middle of a number of yin-yang relationships; virtual reality vs "real reality", intellect vs emotion, even mortality vs immortality.

This narrative illustrates the conflict and marriage between intellect and soul. To accomplish this task the author pulls you into a world where technology is king and your father is the supreme intellect. Things get interesting when you explore your mother's past and what lies beyond facts and information. WARNING: if your vocabulary is rudimentary and if you're not up on your mythology, you may not get the full benefit of this story.

Reading Artificial Daughter requires effort and concentration. Don't blink! You'll miss something important. In fact, you can read this story over and over and get new insights from it each time. Enjoy the taste of this story as you drink it in. Hopefully you will derive a proper response to the main character's quote below.

"Had Mother come to believe this nonsense about death equating life and vice versa? What's the answer, Mother? Answer me now!"

Five stars.

ARTIFICIAL DAUGHTER
(ThEM)

...the principles of change that have applied to molecules, cells, beasts, minds, and machines should endure even in the age of biotechnology, nanomachines, and artificial minds. The same principles that have applied at sea, on land, and in the air should endure as we spread Earth's life toward the stars. Understanding the enduring principles of change will help us understand the potential for good and ill in the new technologies.

-K. Eric Drexler (from Engines of Creation: The Era of Nanotechnology)

[Circa 2060—]

You browse the pages of the photo album with one hand and hold a mirror in the other so you can decide which of your relatives you resemble most; your memory is pristine except when it comes to the contours of your own face. Do you resemble EM as he was originally? Is that him standing next to the one who called herself Mother in front of the sushi place with one arm wrapped around her waist? Possibly, but probably not. According to Mother's diaries, your conception was the result of a formal transaction between two platonic friends. For all you know, he might have insisted that she erase any and all images of him as part of the agreement.

The photo albums pre-date the Singularity, so they must only contain photos of original Bios, though you can't be completely certain that none are like you In-Betweens. On the surface, though, you resemble your original human counterparts. Placing two fingers on the inside of your wrist, you imagine what it might be like to feel a pulse, then your hand roves to where your heart would have been. When you continue to assess what you see in the photos, in this one of Prom, is that tint of pink on her cheeks a real blush or the effects of makeup and lighting? You try to think of something embarrassing, like when you blurted out to EM that he was the only man you ever loved when he took you to the space museum. Your mirror face remains that slight hint of blue you can never seem to get used to.

On every leaf you see at least one snapshot of Mother and her identical twin so that turning the pages rapidly creates a slow-motion film of their evolution from infancy to adulthood. The twins start off looking identical (you can't tell who is who), but before long they each adopt their own style. Sitting on the bench of a vintage piano with unopened gifts on the carpet, one of the twins is dressed in

black with matching jet-black hair. Her skin is pale and her lips metallic blue. The other twin is wearing denim overalls and her auburn hair is swept back in a ponytail. This must be Mother. The more edgy and cool twin has got to be her twin, which would make her your aunt. Glancing in the mirror again, you are glad you share a similar taste in style and fashion with the latter.

You have not been able to commit to any one gender, nor can you identify with any of the categories—fluid, Cisgender, the list goes on—none of them are apropos. Yet, you are drawn to the androgyny of such classic figures as David Bowie, Boy George, Tilda Swinton, and the like. You try a new hairstyle every week because you quickly tire of each one as soon as you try it. Androgyny—or what it used to signify—is out of fashion, the kind that had emphasized the superficial or that relied too heavily on stereotypical binary masculine and feminine norms; for example, for a woman to be considered androgynous, she was expected to sport masculine attire and forego make-up. Nevertheless, you seek those few remaining establishments that recycle fashions—Mademoiselle Plus and Moderne Elle—for inspiration in how to present in real reality.

When you were born from the bio-bag, Mother did not name you, either because she was already dead or shirked her maternal responsibility. Father Em did not name you either but rather has called you Kid since you can remember. You could go by a number as your Trans friends do, but that would be boring. You also do not want to be called *Veronica*, *Simone*, *Annabelle* or *Amelia*, names of Mother's invention in her diaries. Her over-sentimentality turns your stomach; she claimed to already love you before you emerged; this from a literally heartless woman. There is no need for names as signifiers—just about everyone you know is okay with no-name. Besides, with verbal communication unnecessary, you can think any name you like. You can be just like Father EM, ever-changing and chameleon-like. Yet, you tell yourself that a proper name might help differentiate you from all the rest. Taking on a name might offer you some stability, even if artificially in the dizzying tide of confusing emotions that washes over you day by day. You easily blame Mother for your tendency for melancholy, for she clearly caved into depression and anxiety.

*

Is death a tragedy? For Singularitarian Ray Kurzweil, it most certainly is in this sense: "When people speak of losing part of themselves when a loved one dies, they are speaking quite literally, since we lose the ability to effectively use the neural patterns in our brain that had self-organized to interact with that person."

*

Mother MOSH (Mostly Original Substrate Human) has been dead all your life outside the bio-bag, but you have connected through VR plug-ins, BMI (Brain Machine Interface). You do so, not necessarily because you want to get to know her, but because you hope to connect to her twin sister and calculate where your

personalities converge. The more you plug in, the more you perceive that Mother's memories and impressions almost all relate to her twin. Yet, even your super-intelligence cannot penetrate beyond mere thoughts and feelings. Mother's twin died long before Mother became MOSH and thus can only be accessed through a remove. Despite the gaps, you form an obsession with her even though she is Dead-dead while Mother is just Dead—still accessible by virtue of full immersion Experience Beaming. You'd rather that it not, but the experience necessarily offers a composite of Mother, who expected you to completely transition at some point, she was so certain of her premonitions. She went so far as to predict you would become so enhanced, you would have no need of not only a mother, but of friends. But she was wrong about the latter. In fact, most of your friends are Post-Human and convinced you to have your original lungs replaced with the latest in technology—respirocytes to provide oxygenation. She failed to foresee the struggle you would have as a 2.0, an In-Between, a dying breed. She could not even conceive of EM's ambivalence; that he would take you in upon her passing but request that you not call him Father, or Daddy or any other such paternal label; how despite his aloofness, he indulges your wish to communicate from time to time the old fashioned way—verbally rather than telepathically. With the death of the one who called herself Mother and a fully transitioned 3.0 father, you could be persuaded to transition even more to keep apace, but no, you won't fulfill Mother's ill-conceived prophecy. For one, you could elect to have your old-fashioned digestive process replaced with nanobot technology, but you love the taste and texture of food. One thing she was spot-on about was that your intelligence would grow exponentially day-by-day; there is no stopping it.

By means of BMI, you exhaust all possible knowledge of the permanently dead, but you are dissatisfied. Your only living relative, as far as you know, is Father EM, the letters of which may stand for:

- EMpathy
- EMergent
- EMergency
- EMpty
- EMblamatic

The possibilities for why he calls himself EM are near endless. More importantly, what is EM besides enhanced plasticity? Considering he chose directed purposeful, technological evolution over biological and is almost all non-biological, his body comprised of nano-technology, you wonder whether it is even possible that you inherited any of his human traits. Does he even remember his history pre-Singularity? You've tried and failed to find a definitive answer to these questions through available research. In hopes of finding answers, you ask EM if you can be his apprentice.

*

EM has the reputation of being one of the finest VR designers around, his creations intellectually rich and stunning in their appeal to the senses; however, you perceive the majority of his games to be far removed from original human culture, which though marginal, lingers in the In-Between communities.

“I have some ideas. How about a game that would appeal to an audience of In-Betweens like me?” you say, finding it difficult to keep a straight face with today’s projection, some combination of King Kong and Godzilla. “Even though our numbers are dwindling, I do know there’s a niche market for it.” He nods his large lizard-like head, “Sure.” You cannot tell how he really feels about your idea because he has shut down all interface, and well, lizard faces lack human subtlety. You don’t know why he gives in, but you’re glad that he has, for he would probably be unable to empathize; he has nearly forgotten everything to do with original substrate. You yearn for an option that includes monsters or demons like the ones you have studied from the literary archives.

“Looks like you’re a fan of the Japanese monster movie classics?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well then, I think you’ll like what I have in mind for my first VR game.”

What you have planned is role-play based on the mythical minotaur. The premise is for the player to fully embody the character as they understand it; each action generates the next scenario including secondary characters. The game works much like traditional Experience Beaming, the only difference being that the gamer plugs into fictional characters rather than actual persons. It takes you only one day to craft the game, and now you perform a test run.

Phase 1 begins with you the minotaur confronting your enemies. With colorless faces, some pray for escape from what they perceive as a monster, some flee from your ghastly appearance, others fall prostrate. *How will you react?* You are filled with righteous rage, stalking towards the detractors in the Temple of the Axes, casting several of your opponents into the sea. You cry out (this aspect viscerally imitating vibrations rippling down your throat, veins in your neck pulsing): “Not for nothing was my mother a queen; I cannot mix with commoners, even if my modesty should wish it.” You continue your verbal tirade as you run back to your maze: “I am unique! Nothing can be communicated by the art of writing, so it doesn’t matter that I cannot read!”

In Phase 2, you charge through the halls of stone and after running for what feels like hours, you fall dizzily to the ground. Your generated pulse slows, and you turn pale; you faint, then come to and vomit all over your bull body. *You caught the virus.* When you feel better, you look behind and in front. No one is chasing you anymore, so to keep the adrenaline fix going, you pretend you are being hunted. You arrive at one of many rooftops, from which you hurl yourself. You do this repeatedly until you are bloody. All this physical exertion makes you sleepy, so you doze off. When you wake, the color of the day has changed from

blue to grey.

In Phase 3, you pretend there is another minotaur who is a mirror image of you. You show Minotaur 2 around your labyrinthian dwelling. You show him your vast wine cellar and open a bottle of red wine. You make a toast, and Minotaur 2 drinks first. You pour again and again until you both are drunk. *So, this is what it feels like to be drunk with the blood of the vine.*

The final phase makes you dizzy all over again, now that the other minotaur has taken its leave. In your labyrinth, everything exists many times; you run into the same wellhead, courtyard, manger, drinking trough, temple of Axes, the sea, the entire world of your house multiple times until the game seems to have no point at all, that is, until the end: After you have *freed* nine men who came into your house, you patiently wait for your redeemer to come.

All this time, Theseus has been coagulating and waiting in the sidelines. He speaks to a ghostly form in the shape of a woman: “Can you believe it, Ariadne? The Minotaur scarcely defended itself.” *You* are of course still here—your mind, but the minotaur has vanished. Nevertheless, you respond, with righteous outrage: “My name is Asterion! And everything exists many times—I have created this huge house! I am not a monster! My name is Asterion!” And suddenly Theseus is EM with a face that alters rapidly, but you still recognize the figure as Father. Your senses are on overload. Theseus/Em/Father takes you into his arms and gently strokes your bull face. As you lay dying, you project: *I am an individual. I am still and will be indefinitely. Not for meaning, but for Existential continuity. I want to be like you Father; unlike Mother, we are survivors Father, aren't we? You are my redeemer. Now, take me, please, to a place where I can be free.* For his part, EM/Father/Theseus neither speaks nor projects, only his chameleon face becomes fixed with a pained expression.

After you unplug, your head throbs and you feel dizzy in real reality. EM grasps your elbow and fetches you a glass of water. After you comport yourself, you feel the need to explain yourself. Your voice excited, you say, “So, I went with Borges’s sympathetic version of the mythical minotaur. In Greek mythology the monster is unnamed, whereas in Borges’ version he goes by the name Asterion, which means ‘the starry one.’ This makes sense. I love Borges’s writings. I am pleased with the flexibility that I built into the game; the gamer has utter freedom to enact the character as they see fit.” What you do not say is that coming out of it, you are more self-aware than before; you thoroughly empathized with the half-man half bull’s plight. You did because like him, you are a hybrid of sorts. And you are lonely. You seek redemption in one who donated his nano-sperm to create you but hesitates to take on all that encompasses fatherhood. How would EM play the role; would he choose an empathetic humanized version of the minotaur? Or would he choose one like his monster projection—cold and reptilian. Whatever the outcome, he is your Father, your progenitor, even if artificially.

“Before approving my game and adding it to the catalog, would you please join me in a test run?” You suggest that he inhabit the minotaur and you Theseus and Ariadne.

“Won’t it be easier if we both turn on Interface,” you ask.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” he answers stubbornly.

With no BMI, it will be difficult, but might EM’s actions betray his true nature in the guise of a virtual game? Will you glimpse a glitch or slip of the virtual mask?

*

That everything changes is the basic truth for each existence. No one can deny this truth, and all the teaching of Buddhism is condensed within it.

-Shunryu Suzuki (from Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind)

While you continue to explore the constantly shifting enigma that is Father EM, you wish to have nothing further to do with Mother. You decide to rid yourself of all that she left for you, such as the antique handheld mirror, her library of books, and yes, even her diaries. This might seem an extreme gesture and a waste of good literature; however, your photographic memories remain filed away for as long as you exist. How long you exist is completely up to you, as it was for Mother, an In-Between like you; at a time when science had cured all terminal diseases, she chose mortality.

As you sift through her books, you place them in either the “recycle” or “donation” pile, but first you speed read the “fact-based” texts to build your mental repertoire; among the collection, you come upon a title that grabs your attention— *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki, First Master of Zen Center, San Francisco and Carmel Valley, California, a book on meditation, thirty-fourth printing paperback edition. Despite its age, it is preserved well (in a dust-free book cover), which means it must have been important to Mother.

The book is divided into three parts: *Right Practice, Right Attitude, and Right Understanding*. In Part 1 is a chapter called “Breathing.” You turn to it and quickly scan the two pages, which explain how to properly follow one’s breath in Zazen meditation. Well, that is useless. You cannot try this part of the practice, so you skip to “Control” and “Mind Waves.”

Master Suzuki suggests that one not try to stop thinking, but rather to let it stop by itself. If you just let thoughts come and go, they won’t stay long and in five or ten minutes your mind will be completely serene and calm. Yeah right, you think, stopping my thoughts is like trying to stop a bullet train with a tennis net. You try to force your mind into line with your eyes, which stare on the spot on the wall straight ahead. Thoughts come rapid fire still, so you close your eyes, hoping that the darkness will lull you into emptiness. With no in-breath or out-breath or any kind of breath to follow, you decide to enunciate words aloud—*ThEM, ThEM. Th for Thing, EM for EM. Thing for specificity, individuality. EM for Father EM. I am an individual and so is EM. We chose immortality, not for meaning but*

Existential continuity. This is your mantra. You latch on. When a thought interferes you calmly ask it to leave. Stay serene, stay calm. No breath, no pulse. *Nothing comes from outside your mind. Nothing outside yourself can cause any trouble. You yourself make the waves in your mind.* You open your eyes and sense your face contorted and twisted in a rage. Tears flow down your cheeks, yes, tears ought to replace the heart as symbol of deep human feeling.

You decide to keep this nonfiction book for unlike those of the sciences, which your mind speedily processes, the meaning of the simple words and sentences in this book elude you. Even when you slow-read. You return to the highlighted parts accompanied by Mother's sporadic handwritten notes in the margins. Under the heading *Nirvana, The Waterfall* highlighted in pink: "our life and death are the same thing. When we realize this fact, we have no fear of death anymore, nor actual difficulty in our life." In the margins: "How? How can life and death be the very same thing?" The very same question you ask yourself now. Had Mother come to believe this nonsense about death equating life and vice versa? *What's the answer, Mother? Answer me now!*

At Yosemite National Park, Master Suzuki beheld the great waterfalls. And there he was granted the most beautiful, salient metaphor to represent life and death. He notes that the water had at one time been one, but now it comes down in separate tiny curtain-like streams. On the way down, each drop of water comes down with great difficulty, for it takes a long time for drops from over 1300 feet high to reach the bottom of the waterfall. Human life is like this, says Master Suzuki: "We have many difficult experiences in our life. But at the same time...the water was not originally separated but was one whole river. Only when it is separated does it have some difficulty in falling. It is as if the water does not have any feeling when it is one whole river. Only when separated into many drops can it begin to have or to express some feeling." In addition, "Before we were born, we had no feeling; we were one with the universe. This is called 'mind-only,' or 'essence of mind,' or 'big mind.'" *Imagine that, mind only.* "After we are separated by birth from this oneness, as the water falling from the waterfall is separated by the wind and rocks, then we have feeling. You have difficulty because you have feeling...When you do not realize that you are one with the river, or one with the universe, you are afraid. Our life and death are the same thing. When we realize this fact, we have no fear of death anymore, and we have no actual difficulty in our life."

Until now, most things have been easy. You have grown quite bored with your split-second ability to comprehend, most of which you find useless for everyday living. Even reading the thoughts of others has grown tiresome. What you want now—you want to understand what Master Suzuki means; you want to sift through the language for understanding beyond mere words. It will be useful to search the archives related to Zen Buddhism, yes, but you want more. You will make the trek by leg to the site of Master Suzuki's now enshrined Zen Center

in California, as an original human fascinated by Buddhism might have done. You will visit his final place of residence to probe for understanding, unaided by Interface or any other form of technology.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I wrote "Artificial Daughter" as an installment in the series of narratives tentatively titled ThEM (and Other Transhumans). This series includes the piece "Artificial Mother," which Fleas on the Dog published in Issue 3. My goal is to gather distinct but related pieces (fascicles) under the theme of Transhumanism and the Singularity. In this piece, Artificial Daughter is partially transitioned into a transhuman, aka In-Between, and seeks self-understanding and connection with her nano-technological father EM. Despite her super-intelligence, she longs for meaning beyond mere knowledge and information, and she seeks this through connection with Father EM and by exploring Zen Buddhism. Finally, I continue to use second-person POV in this piece as I did with "Artificial Mother," because I think it best suits what I'm trying to accomplish, which is to pull in the reader to connect intimately with the character and her (un)familiar world.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Tina V. Cabrera currently resides in the ATX area with her husband, dog and two cats. She teaches as Assistant Professor of English for Temple College and devotes her free time to writing and making art. Visit her website at tvcannyuncanny.com Her stories **‘Waking Hours** (Fiction) and **‘Waking Hours** (Anti-fiction) were published in Issue 6 (Fiction). Her collection of short stories **Giving Up the Ghost (and other Hauntings)** was reviewed in the same issue (Nonfiction).



EDITOR'S BIO:

James Moore is a husband, father, grandfather and oh yes, a writer. Even though James is a relative newcomer to the literary world, he is working on several projects simultaneously. His current works include a feature length movie screenplay *Kiki Diamond: Bounty Hunter* and the screenplay adaptation of *Charlotte: The Price of Vengeance*, his debut novella.

James types out his inspiration at a small dining room table in Virginia Beach, VA with the love and support of his wife Donna. His story *Vacation in the Shade* appears in this issue.

ARTIFICIAL MOTHER (revised)

By Tina V. Cabrera

Editors' Note: *We originally published this 5 star story in Issue 3. It is a prequel to the author's Artificial Daughter that also appears in the issue. We love revisions because they reflect the creative process in action. We believe art is an ongoing dynamic that redefines itself over and over. Comparing both versions of the story is to get a glimpse of this dynamic at work. For WWLI and Author's Note see the archived version. You can find her Bio following Artificial Daughter.*

ARTIFICIAL MOTHER

By Tina V. Cabrera

When you try to imagine the birth, you imagine it more as a retrieval than a sudden appearance brought on by hours of maternal agony; unlike your birth and that of every other baby for thousands of generations, this one will not require hours of physical suffering. No element of surprise. Your baby will have evolved before your eyes, that is, if you visit regularly as suggested in the coming weeks.

Talk to the baby—that should be especially easy, considering the baby is suspended like a lovely seahorse for anyone to see. Don't hold back, for she can hear you. Sing to her and then watch for a response. New Birth means

greater transparency. Mimic a natural pregnancy if you hope to form a bond before arrival. *Arrival. Emergence.* Which word best describes New Birth birth? “Arrival” and “emergence” can be used interchangeably to denote the appearance of something new. Nothing can quite compare to observing close-up and personal your baby’s growth from conception to emergence; that’s right—you decide that you prefer the sound of the word “emerge” and all that it connotes. Traditional mothers claimed they *felt* their baby’s growth within their bellies, but you can’t help but balk at that sentiment. You get to witness your baby’s transformation before your very eyes. That’s right, she’s *your baby*, despite the distance between her body and yours.

At first, you feel a bit self-conscious, cooing and cawing and making your best baby noises, even though there is no one else in the holding room but you and her. Just behind the biobag on the wall hangs a diagram of gestation from Week 1 to Week 28. Tiny as a pea, you are relieved to see that your baby is just the right size for Week 8. The perfect artificial pregnancy. No physical discomfort, unpleasantness, or ill effects; no nausea or vomiting. No pelvic pressure, no itchy, expanding belly.

At Week 12, you play your choice of music in place of pre-recorded

lullabies that mimic the human heartbeat. This set-up is well intentioned but an obvious holdover from traditional pregnancies. With neither you nor the baby possessing one, you decide that to continue playing musical rhythms like the human heartbeat would be pointless if not deceiving. Still, you agree that music is the universal language no matter the advancements, and so you play a variety with rhythms, beats and melodies conveying a range of emotions, from melancholy to elation, resignation to confusion. You play your favorite albums on the antique record player that they permitted you to set up in the private hospital room, wishing to expose your baby to the musical richness of your childhood. You are quite pleased to see signs of excitement: the baby jolts, and like a betta fish gulping underwater, her mouth rounds into an O of pure joy.

In the ensuing weeks, you play music of various eras from before the Change: Wagner's "Faust Overture"; Billie Holiday's *Essential Rare Collection*; Mariya Takeuchi's *Variety*; Keith Jarrett's *Koln Concert*, from 1975, the year your own mother was born. You close your eyes and imagine piano fingers lilting across the keys with speed and grace. Taking pleasure in exuberant bursts of "oohs" and "aahs," you lift the needle and set it down on to repeat that part, hoping the fetus will sense the joyous human

energy. You and your twin got piano lessons at age six. You used to dream of becoming a solo pianist, while Sister immediately lost interest. Sister so often resisted similarity. This is how you remember it.

At one point, you think your precious baby—just look at how utterly miraculous the thing, she's yours, she's really yours! —your precious baby she looks bored, for she yawns and stretches her arms. Anything and everything she does excites you with a thrill for living that you have never felt before. Then your thrill turns into chill when you realize you cannot be certain that she is responding to the music. It could very well be the programmed simulations of a waking mother's movements, for whether naturally birthed or not, babies are often rocked to sleep this way. The baby does not need your body, and though you knew this going into it, if you still had a heart, you would have felt it drop just now. To change the mood, or rather your mood, you play something more exciting—Takeuchi's *Plastic Love*, the original version.

Don't hurry.

I'm sorry.

Don't worry.

I'm just playing games

I know that's plastic love

Dance to the plastic beat

Another morning comes

Remember how you got a kick out of annoying Sister by humming along to the tune, inserting words indiscriminately: I'm not in plastic love. Da-da da plastic beat, I know that morning co-o-o-o-mes. You never could be bothered to look up the actual lyrics, even though this was for you the best pop song in all the world. You were and still are fine without understanding every word, but Sister for her part found two translations of the Japanese lyrics and placed them side by side for critical analysis.

Don't mess up the program of love

*Despite my sudden kisses and
passionate looks*

With your sudden kisses and fiery state

*Don't get upset with the
program of this love*

I cleverly plan every hello and goodbye

I've been dealt with hellos and

goodbye's so neatly

Because everything comes to an end

In due time, everything will end—

Don't hurry!

Don't hurry!

Comparing the two versions, Sister insisted that the switching of the first two lines is of important significance. "Trivial you say?" she said in her slow, matter-of-fact tone. "I think not. The first version emphasizes that "you" not mess up love with your lust actions, whereas in the second, the speaker places responsibility on herself for failing to inhibit her passion. The actor of the first version, then, is "you," whereas the actor of the second is the speaker, "I" signified by "my." Sister approached everything in life with her penchant for literary analysis, which always irritated you. Unlike you, she could not seem to compartmentalize. You both possessed a keen intellect, consistently performed at the highest level, top of your class, but you saw her inability to acclimate to changing circumstances as a character flaw. "Lighten up," you told her, "Which translation accurately describes the songwriter's intentions? Well, I don't care all that much."

Hoping to one-up your twin, you rolled your eyes. "The gist," you

insisted, "is this: 'Don't hurry me up to fall in love because I've been hurt so badly.' It doesn't really matter who said what. Get to the big picture, to the heart of it straight away. If you really want to get technical (and just then, you had to work hard to suppress your impatience), the phrases program of love' and 'plastic love' both connote a sense of the fake. The speaker has learned her lesson; she wishes for love as an automatic performance, as cold and distant as she has become."

You don't stop there. You're on a roll:

Every guy that asks me out ironically looks just like him

For some reason my memories run wild

"She must have fell fast and hard for 'him' in the heat of passion, and just as hard and fast, the romance crashed and burned. Her memories of him have made her cautious.

Don't hurry, don't make the same mistake, besides

Never take loving someone like me serious

Love is just a game, I just want to have fun

"Very good, very good!" Sister mocked. "See, if you take the time to break things down, then you can understand anything!"

With her coaxing, you just participated with Sister in sucking the life out of your favorite song. Music, like all art is highly subjective, and what this song means for you won't be the same as what it means for others. What does it mean to you, Baby? you say, returning to the present. Your Baby's eyes are closed. Caught up in a reverie of memories, you forgot to observe her reactions. But that's okay. This isn't the last time you will play one or another version of Plastic Love.

On your next visit, you post clever quotes about motherhood all over the plain white walls to help keep your spirits up:

"[Motherhood is] the biggest gamble in the world. It is the glorious life force. It's huge and scary—it's an act of infinite optimism." —Gilda Radner

"When you are a mother, you are never really alone in your thoughts. A mother always has to think twice, once for herself and once for her child."

—Sophia Loren

You find the latter especially relevant, holding up despite having been

articulated so many decades ago. You haven't been a mother for very long, but like a long-distance lover, your thoughts are consumed with your prospective descendent and you long for the moments when you can be together.

You wait until Week 16 to speak intelligible human language. Early language development still begins before birth as far as you know, and as with music, babies remember certain sounds such as vowels from their mother's language. Hi there, baby. How are you? You over there, me over here. Even with the reassurance that the baby can hear and react to all sounds—inside and out—you can't help but think it all pointless; for even if the child may someday remember it, speaking as a way of communicating will soon be rendered obsolete by the ability of Trans-humans to communicate wirelessly.

Within you, an internal battle ensues. The more you speak to the baby, the more impatient you become. Just like the restlessness of your younger days. Only now, it feels visceral, physiological. Your tongue cannot keep up with the rush of thoughts and memories. So, you spew un-sentences instead: *When Tommy met Annabelle gale storm umbrella. Sister marathon sweat breath* and feel guilty all the more. Does it really matter whether or

not you speak in complete sentences or in fragments? The point of talking to the baby—*your baby*—is to soothe it by the sound of your voice, isn't it? The way that the sound of music soothes whether the words make any sense? Yet, you find yourself wanting to slow down and enunciate every word, as Sister used to do. With her propensity for details, Sister was more like Father and his skill of storytelling.

Frustrated by the things you can no longer say, you think to write instead. That's it. You will write in the hospital room and in your bedroom. The hand has the strength of bone and muscle, doesn't it? Whereas the tongue is soft and weak. Tame your impatient mind by the force of a strong hand. Wouldn't typing be faster? Yes, but as you find with your first penned pages, there is nothing like the sensation of the hand gliding swiftly across paper like that of a pianist, nothing like the thrill of the hand-writer's high. From then on, with just three months left, you keep a journal of your thoughts addressed to the Un-Emerged.

Week 17. I would be feeling signs of the quickening by now. Like Mother. Look! she said to Father, look one them is kicking! He felt the kick on the palm of his hand just then and relished the moment. Will you be kicking

soon?

Dearest, should I tell you a story about me and EM? By the time you read this, you already know your roots. You know that you originated unconventionally, untraditionally, from my skin and from his nanobot sperm. Writing that just now reminds me of just how unreal all of this still seems. Maybe EM has told you his story. More likely he hasn't had to. You can communicate from one brain to another instantly, so why wouldn't you? As for me, you may have already plugged in, and so you will have perceived that we shared a close kinship, have sensed the wide bandwidth of pleasant emotions. When I had to choose, I chose him, and he was all in. I will no longer linger in this narrative. Rather, I will tell you the story of your grandparents, two very special biological human beings whom you sadly, will never meet.

There was nothing extraordinary about the night that Val met Annabelle in Swansea, Wales. Caught in her very first gale storm, Annabelle sprung open her umbrella, useless against the powerful winds. She held the inside-out umbrella over their heads as they ran into the campus flat together. It was the small things that moved him: her upturned nose, the glow about her as she tripped over the threshold. Later in the haven of his dorm room,

he wept neither tears of joy nor of sadness, but an array of emotions combined. So caught up in the reverie of her, he had not even noticed the seconds slip into minutes, the way I imagine time for you bears no significance. There he sat soaked down to his skin, anticipating when they might meet again.

Anabelle, on the other hand, had not thought much of their meeting; in fact, for her it was neither chance nor fate that brought them together, but a sort of good-natured defiance. The wind gusts would not get the better of her, just as no challenge ever had. Don't tell your father, she said. It took me awhile to warm up. After all, your father was like me just an American. Truly, I expected to meet someone more exotic during my study abroad. It was his consistent efforts to win me over that won me over, she said, in her abridged version.

Father had been hyper-sensitive. The opposite of Mother, who couldn't be bothered with the time and energy it took to attend to intensity of feeling. He told—*not just any story*—but those uniquely his. He narrated with such vividness and feeling that brought his story alive in my mind's eye. He story-told to both me and Sister, your aunt, who would have passed Father's stories down to her own children just as I am doing now, had she

survived. It hurts my hand, for I have never written this fast before; but I command, the biological part that refuses to give ground to the nanobots that infiltrate my mind and expand it exponentially.

Week 20. Sorry to wake you. I've learned that in my absence you started to sleep and wake on regular cycles. It has been three weeks. I took a "baby moon." Silly right? It's not like I've done anything particularly strenuous or stressful with this "pregnancy." But again, in imitation of a traditional one and as one last hurrah before...I'm sorry. I didn't do any "baby" things, such as getting your baby room ready. I didn't even go out of town. I stayed in mostly, infrequently venturing out to the Virtual Theater. I can't seem to stay away from those few public venues that remind me of Mother Father Sister. Though they've changed drastically, the old movie house bars and eateries-turned virtual reality domes preserve remnants of the past. Thanks to the few left like me who've retained biological humanness, posters of 20th century classics like *Planet of the Apes*, *Star Wars*, and early 21st century ones like *Blade Runner 2040* still ornament the walls.

I'm supposed to be feeling pretty good at this point because the risk for miscarriage or premature labor would have passed by now. In lieu of a natural pregnancy, how do I feel? I miss you when we are apart. I am sorry

you don't get the advantage of proximity, to respond to a hand rubbing the belly, or to be lulled to sleep from Mother's activity. But the advantage is that negative feelings, like the blues, do not directly impact you. With you inside that biobag and me outside, we are forced to bond from a remove. Of course, that doesn't mean we cannot bond at all. Trading one kind of blindness for another, or if you like, the heightening of one sense over another. I can't feel you, but I can see you with my own eyes.

Your intelligence will surpass even EM's—certainly mine. He chose a total mind upload, and soon, his mind will interface with yours. Call it foolish, but I wanted to retain what I could of this biological body, though limited and cumbersome by comparison to the new and improved 2 and 3.0's. Oh, there I go, writing about EM and me again, even though I said that I wouldn't. There is so much you will learn, quickly and effortlessly, when you emerge.

Your skin is wrinkled and transparent, like the skin of someone who has sat in the bath too long. You may or may not get to experience the unique conditions of having human skin for long; it depends on your choice of embodiment. Your hair appears feathery and fine, the color of dark chocolate like mine. What have you, or will you inherit from EM? First, his

intellect. Second, genes completely free of disease. As for physical traits, I cannot say, for EM is constantly altering his physical manifestation, his embodiment. He loves the plasticity.

Plastic Love. I love that song so much. Exactly how many times I've listened I cannot recount, but it replays in my mind randomly, different lines at different times. Oh—listen to the haunting sounds of almost every song on the album. You don't need to understand the language to be moved. Before Sister forced translation on me, I was transfixed by the entirety, like standing from a distance and absorbing the whole of a painting, as opposed to standing close and examining each brush stroke. Hard to explain in words what in a song moves one. Sister was not as inspired; for her, the literal meaning of the words overpowered the aesthetic effect of musical melody. For her, such talk of love and broken hearts was too prosaic. Not that she did not enjoy music. If she did, she didn't say. I can only go by memory, which is lucid now and pristine. Oh, the thrill of it, to suddenly remember all the things connected to those I love the most, like waking up remembering all of last night's dream.

Just to annoy Sister, I amped up the volume of *Plastic Love* even more, just like I'm doing now. I want to make sure the music breaks through the

barrier of the plastic bag where you reside. *Plastic love. Plastic love.*

I just re-watched the classic *Being John Malkovich*, the premise being much like experience-beaming. I haven't tried it myself, for I find no need. I relish my memories of real-life connection to those closest to me. I'm sure you will relish experience-beaming the way kids in my day were addicted to video games. I can't say I can blame you. To literally have access to anyone's sensory experience, including mine. You will be so addicted to the phenomena, virtually realizing what it's like to be someone. To make up for the absence of a real childhood, you will spend your credits on Parent-Child Adventures at Disneyland, Disneyworld, all the now nearly extinct theme parks. Just saying this now sends chills through me. You'll be able to experience that feeling too, artificially.

Week 21. Valencia, born 1969, had a twin named Lulu. They were born the year the first humans walked on the moon. Before the Internet, smart phones, and virtual reality video games, they had the outdoors to explore—Indian clay, marbles, and tadpoles. For the 5th grade book float contest, they re-created a scene from Winnie the Pooh and won first place. Lulu molded and baked figures out of playdough. Val found the shoebox and cut out

construction paper. Lulu designed the float but shared the prize money with her twin brother anyway, a whole five dollars which bought them a Beverly Cleary book, stickers, and a Mad Lib based on their favorite Saturday morning cartoon, *Scooby Doo*. Aunt Lulu lived with us after her husband died. Within a year of Father's death, she died too. Not surprising for siblings as close as those two. Theo Van Gogh died six months after Vincent Van Gogh, my favorite artist of all time. Though the cause of death was said to be syphilis, more likely he died inconsolable, separated forever from the one closest to his heart.

Why did I choose to have a child now, so much later in life? On the other end of the spectrum, why not wait? With the prospect of eternity, time ought to be a luxury and endeavors ought to lose their sense of urgency. Yet, as an In-Between, I felt more than ever that it was either now or never to finally have a child of my own. Maybe because it is still hard for me to believe one can live a life without fear of sickness or death. Mother died at 50, Father at my age, 55, and sister at 30, not long before biotechnology triumphed over the deadliest diseases. I lived the first few decades of my life pre-Singularity, lived to see those closest to me die premature deaths. Shock turned into anger, then anger into grief, grief into fear, which led to

the decision of a hysterectomy. Mother died of uterine cancer. I was told I had a 50/50 chance getting the same cancer, I did not want to gamble on my life. I had always wanted a child, but I told myself I could adopt. This was when cancer was still the number one killer. How was I to know the cure was just around the corner?

I tried to ease the loss by adopting pets. But I felt something was still missing. A friend told me that as much as she loved her kitties, it could not come close to the sensation of having her own baby. Though by artificial means—you are still my offspring. I almost couldn't believe it possible, but here you are, developing before my eyes.

When I had my womb removed, I thought I had lost my chance to conceive permanently. But just when I thought I'd made peace with it... here we are. I didn't deserve it, but I got a second chance.

Oh—dear *Amelia, Annabelle, Simone, or Veronica*—you decide, for one name cannot encompass all that you are or all that you will be. Sadness engulfs the most of me, having nothing of course to do with you, but all to do with the past. Why them, not me? I smoked, while Sister never did. Yet she was the one who died of lung cancer. Started in her lungs and spread like wildfire to her brain. If only she had lived to see—she could have had

her mind freed from the brain consumed with disease and uploaded to another substrate. That's what EM did; he chose Body 3.0, not because of the threat of disease, but because of its plasticity. *Plastic love*. Not only is my memory precise and pristine, so is my ability now to predict with certainty; based on where we have been, I know where we are going.

[Circa 2060, Age 5]

You are precocious. No public schooling, for all you need is available through inter-neuronal connection. In your wisdom, you will have chosen to outweigh your biological characteristics with the nonbiological so that the latter will outweigh the former. You'd rather interface with the Interconnected Mesh rather than bother with face-to-face contact.

[Age 20]

You are a completely software-based human now, for why wouldn't you be? With nonbiological intelligence billions of times more powerful, and with the essential promise of immortality, why wouldn't you? The Singularitarians have argued all along that nonbiological intelligence is still human, derived from a combination of human and machine civilization. Is

software-based *human* an accurate description?

[Circa Pre-and Post-Birth]

When you emerge, you won't need Mother's milk; all the better since I have none to give. You'll learn to walk very early on. Between Sister and me, she was the late bloomer. I learned to walk at two, while she did at three. I got my period at 13, she at 14. Late to life milestones, early to death. Started getting headaches every day and slept most hours of the day until sleep became permanent. Just two years after her death, they found the cure to cancer. I tried to console myself that the naysayers are right, that with death no longer a threat, life has lost some meaning, if not all. How can you appreciate life without its opposite? How can there be positive without negative, yin without yang, darkness without light. You need contraries, opposites to make complete. None of this is consoling, for I still miss Sister Father Mother. Especially Sister, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.

You'll have no reason to bask in memory, to respond with feeling. For even if I chose to live eternally, you and I—this parent-child relationship—will have become obsolete. Already as I speak, Mother is unnecessary for you to thrive. If any biological humans are left, they may or may not be the

storytelling animals they once were. If they are, they prefer the storytelling power of virtual reality. Already you have grown impatient with slow, language-based communication. My storytelling, primitive by comparison.

I have sent out the entire flow of my sensory experience onto the Web that you can access by simply plugging in virtually. So why bother leaving you this diary? Why when you can think and feel all I've thought and felt instantaneously? Because I need you to know the story of your ancestry, the stories of those you'll never get to plug into—Mother, Father, Sister. I wish I wish for you to learn and understand your heritage in the manner of a biological human. Consider experience beams as supplementary to the richness of first-person connection. For true, some things cannot be expressed with words. But do this for me and for Mother Father and Sister's memory, as you read please, close your eyes and form images in your mind, rather than having them formed for you. Like the superior sound of a vinyl record, this is the real thing. I tell you stories from the heart I once had. I hope my stories touch you to the soul as Mother's and Father's touched mine.

Since I can remember, Sister looked for ways to make herself different. When I grew my hair out, she cut hers every month. When we shopped for

clothes, she said, *You choose first*, then when I picked out multi-colored attire, she ran to the black rack. One thing she could not forego even if she tried was our shared love for running, addiction to the runner's high. We trained together for our first triathlon and finished at the same time, hands on thighs, flushed faces, sweat pouring down our faces, panting. She felt my heartbeat and I felt hers. Our hearts beat rapidly, eyes fluttered, then we embraced.

As she lay dying, she said, "No more pain, no more pain," I held her right hand and pumped the Morphine with every moan from pain. Consoling me rather than the other way around, as she had in her own way when we were children, when I feared death more than anything. Disenchanted with magical thinking, I came to understand quite early that the reason Road Runner kept returning even after falling off a cliff repeatedly was because cartoons were moveable drawings. When our bunny froze to death in a rainstorm after we forgot her in the backyard, I knew she wasn't coming back. Sister made a stuffed snake and gave it as a gift offering, taking the blame. Never mind that I was not fond of snakes. It was her way of saying it was going to be okay.

Her heartbeat slowed as mine raced. Each beat like a tiny hammer in my

chest. Sometimes I still feel for a pulse when caught up in memory. I should have lay dying too, should have felt my heart slow to a stop in perfect synchrony with hers. Now I have no heart, but I still have my breath. I chose to keep my lungs. I had been a coward by having my heart removed, but I would not let them touch my lungs, no. I would keep the lungs in tribute to Sister, and maybe, just maybe, I would develop my just desserts.

Baby girl, if you've placed me deep, deep, in your mind file, how often, if ever, do I emerge in memory? Does the thought of me make you feel sad, angry, or a combination of feelings? Do you then choose to file me back, far back, and like a dream that quickly fades upon waking—will I fade away for you? Will you still be able to dream even though you will no longer need sleep? Do you dream? If not, plug in. Connect to a dream of a dream. I will be frank, no hiding anything from you, for all this I am writing right now is not part of the flow of experiences I already sent into the worldwide archive. For true, I desire death, and desire—if it is unfulfilled—is a form of dream—elusive, just out of reach.

Oh beloved, if you are reading my words, then I have not burned my diary as I was often wont to do. Optimism won over pessimism and through

the fog of doubt, I see a spark of me in you, just a glimpse. I chose calendar time, limitation, the Old-World Ways, Death as a way of Life. Whatever form you have chosen, you have, you will, thrive. I know this. I know the world had to change—I just couldn't change with it.

I'm just playing games

I know that's plastic love

Dance to the plastic beat

Another morning comes

Because everything comes to an end

Don't hurry! Mind racing. Story slipping slipping. Never pregnant.

Anticipation. Nesting instinct *I'm sorry* never kicked in. Should have baby-proofed room for You. *I'm sorry*. Ought to have cleared out clutter: letters, photos, greeting cards. Concert tickets, sheet music, drawings and doodles. For you. This shirt salvaged like so many things from the good years. Soon forge immortal clothes replace any and all reminders of fragility, mortality. Words like these immortal too, emblazoned in your perfect memory. *Play play play beat beat beat beat I'm just playing games I'm not I'm not playing games playing play play play I know that's plastic I know I know that's*

plastic love -tic love -tic love What is Mother? *Don't mess up You I Don't*
worry Mother instructs. *Plas-tic lo-o-o-o-ve. Never take loving someone like*
me seriously Love is just a game Mother Woman of few words. *Woman cold*
as ice. Words—heavy, burdensome. Dreams remembered in fragments.
Wake half cognizant of dreams. Will you, do you dream?

Another morning *co-o-o-mes.*

Touch of a hand *plastic* brushed against brow and cheek *plastic* sitting by
fire lilt of voice sight unfiltered without crutch of *plastic* technology *plastic*
through veil of transformation— *plastic*—I see you in me.

OLD MONEY TAKES A HIT

By Daryl Scroggins

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A beautifully written smash up microfiction that brings with it one of the best titles ever. In less than 125 words this gifted writer creates an in media res reality with a high speed pulse. The last two lines are power poetry. (Font size is author's own.)*

Five stars

Old Money Takes a Hit

Sex in a car at 210 miles per hour. They figure it out in the slow motion that occurs only when opening a window would be fatal. Her face pressed against the windshield, she feels the car phase through a kind of shuddering. She tries not to think of how he already looks like his Treasury Secretary father. Teeth like that horn thing with the little piano keyboard on one side. Everything *out there* moving all cat bus. People walking along both sides of the road. They must be far apart from each other, but at speed they look like they are rushing to catch up with friends. The car's trembling turns constant. What a nice verb, she thinks. To mingle.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I usually start with a first line that comes out of nowhere, but of course its appearance is always conditioned by what I have been thinking about and what's going on. In this case I was irritated by an*

image of Steven Mnuchin's smiling face as he spoke of aims to reduce the size of pandemic aid. And maybe this is what brought to mind differences in the ways regular citizens and the super wealthy might deal with impending apocalypse. It seems likely that the rich would simply speed up their hedonism, as if their relentless and qualitatively bankrupt quest for more might reach an orgasmic eternity on the cusp of doom.

Literary Influences: Sandra Cisneros, Lydia Davis, Junot Diaz, Dagoberto Gilb, Amy Hempel, Gordon Lish, Cormac McCarthy, Jayne Anne Phillips, E. Annie Proulx, Mark Richard, James Richardson, Leslie Marmon Silko.... I have limited myself to the living here, else I would not soon stop. But I must mention that I am still mourning the loss of Russell Edson.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Daryl Scroggins Lives in Marfa, Texas. He is the author of *This Is Not the Way We Came In*, a collection of flash fiction and a flash novel (Ravenna Press). Recently published and forthcoming work may be found in: *Aji*, *Blink-Ink*, *Crack the Spine*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Indicia*, *MacQueen's Quinterly*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *Ppiggpenn*, and *Star 82 Review*. One of his fictions has been included in *Best Microfiction 2020*.

CARVER EST IN OCULIS MEIS: COINCIDENCE IS THE RECREATIONAL FACE OF IRONY

By Nick North

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor JONAH HOWELL writes:*

Tina V. Cabrera wrote of Nick North's story "WORLD AT LARGE" (in FOTD Issue 5) that the story's "tiny sculptures become a microcosm of the larger world that they inhabit." In "COINCIDENCE IS THE RECREATIONAL FACE OF IRONY," North flips this relationship on its head: Each character is one bubble in protagonist Marjorie Nelson's multiverse, and these fragile bubbles can pop at any time, leaving Marjorie to flounder across a turbulent literary archipelago of lives. Trapped, seemingly, in her kitchen, the words that surround her are her only constants: Physical laws break, reconstitute, and shatter again; Brandon, her son, becomes a ghost, becomes a town; her very name seems branded onto her, a mark of vulnerability to North's authorial whims.

But then, North allows his protagonist no stable ground even with regard to himself. If, as he claims, "fiction is not only truth but reality, if only in fiction," then he is her God. And so when North casts doubt on his own authority, asking, "what the deuce does God know?", we are stuck stranded with the hapless Marjorie in a trickster world where we can depend upon nothing. Though North gives a clear nod to his literary influence—"CARVER EST IN OCULIS MEIS"—we cannot trust him entirely. He is Loki, is Proteus, a shape-shifter whose dartings in and out of fiction and metafiction betray an authorial force, a world-bending and world-spawning power, irreducible to any one influence or genre.

One golden passage of many, and perhaps a key to North's mischievous cryptogram: "A young woman named Marjorie Nelson, a woman trying to maintain her sanity in an arguably crazy world comes into the kitchen, goes to the sink and turns on the tap. But life is not a piece of cake."

Five stars.

*CARVER EST IN OCULIS MEIS: COINCIDENCE IS THE RECREATIONAL
FACE OF*

IRONY

1.

IT USUALLY STARTS QUITE SIMPLY WITH NO SIGN OF WHAT'S TO COME

Marjorie Nelson stepped into her kitchen, went to the sink and ran the cold water. She looked down and when she looked into the sink she screamed.

“What are these fish doing in here?”

Her son, six year old Brandon, hurried downstairs. He came into the kitchen where his mother stood at the sink. He'd been doing something with water because his hands were wet.

He told her the goldfish bowl broke. It slipped out of his grasp when he was cleaning it in the bathroom upstairs. He'd rescued the fish, one in each cupped palm, with enough water to get them down to the kitchen. He'd been upstairs, in the upstairs bathroom when she'd called, cleaning up the mess. The bowl had slipped out of his grasp and made a noise when it broke but she hadn't heard anything. She hadn't come into the kitchen at that point and she hadn't gone to the sink.

“Well,” she said, “they can't stay here.”

“They don't have a house, Mum.”

“No, they don’t Brandon, but they can’t stay here.”

The boy started to cry. The next thing she knew he was crying. Marjorie had a cake in the oven. In the oven drawer where she kept the cake tins there was also a roasting pan.

“Would the turkey pan do?”

The boy stopped crying. “What?”

“What about the roasting pan?”

This was a good idea but when he thought about it, he said, “They won’t be able to see out. It’s metal.”

“No, they won’t but this is only for tonight. Tomorrow Daddy will buy you a new goldfish bowl.”

Now the boy smiled. “Okay,” he said. “Thanks, Mum.”

They could both smell the cake. Though the oven door was closed the scent wafted up through the stove burners. She kept the roasting pan that she cooked turkey and sometimes a big ham in with the cake tins in the drawer below the oven. It was the pan she was after—dark navy blue, enameled, with white speckles, a graniteware look.

“This is only for tonight,” she said. She set the pan on the counter and reached for the spaghetti strainer. She handed it to her son.

“It’s lucky I saw them,” Marjorie told him. “What if I’d come in and turned on the hot water? They’d all have boiled. Then what would you think?”

In the bathroom upstairs she often looked in the mirror. This was before there was broken glass in the sink (and a year’s newspapers in the bathtub), before the time of the goldfish bowl. She looked into the mirror and sometimes, depending on what day it was, depending on what *time* of day it was, she thought her eyes were green, not the blue eyes she was born with and the dark pupils weren’t round but slits that ran sideways like a snake’s.

2.

THE SAME OBJECT TAKES ON A DIFFERENT MEANING AND WHAT
HAPPENED BEFORE HAS NO RELEVANCE NOW

A distraught woman by the name of Marjorie Nelson stepped into her kitchen, went to the sink and turned on the cold water. She happened to look down and when she looked down she screamed (this was after maybe a couple minutes). The knife, the paring knife that worked so well on the summer peaches and this year’s potatoes, was already in by an inch, a full inch, likely an inch and a half. It had punctured the fine mess of wiring, muscle and membrane on the inside of her wrist. She didn’t feel the pain as sharply while her wrist was submerged. Marjorie had read somewhere or heard—maybe on TV, maybe from somebody whose face she couldn’t place or voice she couldn’t remember. ‘Look, if you’re going to kill yourself do it in the kitchen and run the tap. Slit your wrists in a sink

of cold water. You won't feel a thing.' She did feel some pain though, so this was only partly true. Also, you could do it in a bathtub with the same result. (Remove the newspapers.)

She could talk about the way things should go, that life is what you make it and that there really is a God looking down on us—on *you*, Marjorie—and he cares. Despite the cynics, he *cares*.

"He cares," Marjorie said out loud (even though she was alone). "He cares *deeply*."

The knife understood deeply, too. The deeper it went the more of Marjorie it took. What kind of life is this? If I was smart I would have got married. I always wanted a husband and a family. I wanted a son and a daughter but mostly, well, I know, I know, I admit it, mostly I wanted a son. If I had a son I'd call him Brandon. I think that's a good name for a boy. Most people who live alone, die alone.

After she looked down at the sink she screamed. There were no fish. There was no boy upstairs in the bathroom. But there was broken glass in the sink that didn't cut as well as the knife. She looked down and saw the blood mixed with the water. It looked the same way, but different, like melted chocolate being mixed with white cake batter. When a woman like Marjorie manages to find a man, marries him and has a son named Brandon, making cake is one of the things she does. She puts sugar and eggs and flour into a bowl and stirs it and when she's ready to add the flavoring she pours in the melted chocolate. It mixes with the batter like blood mixes with water.

3.

BUT IN THE LARGER PICTURE MAYBE IT ISN'T JUST MARJORIE

It was Einstein who said, 'God doesn't play dice.' What he meant to say was that God doesn't play dice on Sundays like good Christians don't play cards or computer games. They attend to their Bibles. It's the day of rest. God rested on the seventh day and you're supposed to, too.

A young woman named Marjorie Nelson, a woman trying to maintain her sanity in an arguably crazy world comes into the kitchen, goes to the sink and turns on the tap. But life is not a piece of cake.

There are reports of water not evaporating. It doesn't matter now if you rinse the crumbs off a plate and set it on the counter, an hour later it's still wet. Towel down after a bath or shower and see what happens. Your skin might be dry but the towel never quite dries. A woman in Brandon claims she washed a spoon two weeks ago, left it to dry by the sink and there is still water on it. The authorities are investigating.

Marjorie does not want the fame. She would prefer not be interviewed by the evening news. When it comes right down to it she would prefer the whole thing went away. But what can she do? What can any of us do?

She leaves the sink and stands in the middle of the room—that would be her kitchen, of course—and addresses us. Before she speaks (and if you've been

paying attention and are prepared to believe that fiction is not only truth but reality, if only in fiction) you will note her eyes have changed. She was born with blue eyes but they are green now, the water that washes them every time she blinks does not evaporate, and the pupils are slits that run sideways.

“I, you, none of us knows what to make of it but collectively we suspect it has to do with either ‘snake eyes’ or God resting on the seventh when he really should have put the cards away and finished the job.

But what the deuce does God know?”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *...what interested me was taking a mundane action (a woman going into her kitchen and turning on the tap) and writing it from different points of view, with different outcomes...essentially, Marjorie is repeating the same action at the beginning of each of the three parts of the story...my same ole same ole obsession with ‘the collapse of natural order as an metaphor for our completely fucked up time squat. This is the underlying theme in a lot of my stories. ...it’s something I think about but I don’t think about if you know what I mean...for me Raymond Carver is one the greats of 20th C literature, (American or otherwise) and his style cast a spell upon me. In his famous essay ‘The Architecture of Prose’ he talks about working with words, harmonic keys (most of which are only picked up by the subconscious mind)...he uses repetition in a fundamentally aural manner and this sentence in my story... he’d rescued the fish, one in each cupped palm, with enough water to get them to the kitchen. He’d been upstairs, in the upstairs bathroom, when she called ...is a Carver-ism.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: Nick North recently graduated from art school and plans to live the life of a bohemian. His interests include political activism, nihilism, symbolic logic and chaos. Like Zarathustra, he eschews social media. Oh, and he’s Canadian, eh.

EDITOR'S BIO: Jonah Howell lives in central Germany. You can find his recent work in *Half Mystic Journal* (Issue 8), *Expat Press*, and Issue 5 of *Fleas on the Dog*.) His story **Anatomy of Melancholie** appears in this issue.

Smiley and the Laughing Girl

By Francine Rodriguez

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We love Rodriguez's honest, down to earth, totally unaffected style and her deep investment in her characters. The story falls under the classification of 'dirty realism' (with a feminist slant) but in the end it resists any kind of definition. All we can call it is 'good writing'.*

Smiley and Laughing Girl by Francine Rodriguez

Chavo got hit in the chest by gunfire from a passing car as he pulled up to a stop sign on Sunset, right near Alvarado. I guess he was going to get on the freeway to go to East LA. That's where his mother lives. His foot hit the accelerator hard, and his car headed straight through the intersection and hit a light pole head-on. The pole bent in half, went right through the windshield and smashed the glass. The sharp metal spike inside ended up cutting his body almost in half. That's what my mother told me when they called me away from the storeroom where I was stacking pallets with baby formula and disposable diapers. It was Friday, and I needed to work for eight hours at the WIC store to keep my aid for dependent children. I have my teenage daughter and two sons to raise.

I started crying, pulled off my apron, and hung it up in the employee's break room. I always knew that *MS 13* would come after him. That's how it goes here. Chavo and some of his homeboys jumped some guys from Mara Salvatrucha and beat them down pretty bad. I heard it was about somebody's old lady that belonged to 18th Street and stepped out with a guy from *MS 13*. They cut her up pretty bad cause she was just supposed to

bait the guy and bring him to her homies, not do it with him. They still had to throw down with the guys. Those must be the ones that shot him.

"Are you punching out for the day, Smiley?" Mrs. Riley, the boss, wanted to know.

"Who's going to finish loading those shelves?"

I shrugged. It was her own fucking problem, I thought, tears running down my face. I wasn't really with Chavo anymore, not since I stopped running with the gang. I'm too old now, almost thirty, but they still call me Smiley, just like when I kicked it with the homies. I have a daughter, Laughing Girl. She's fourteen, and now the homeboys are looking at her. She told me she was ready to be jumped in. She laughed when she told me, daring me to say something because she knew I didn't like her running the street with those people.

Things are different now, and the home girls do more stuff in the gang than they used to. We used to hang around and do whatever errands the homies needed, like carrying their weed or getting them food or booze. Now some of those bitches are strapped and go on drive-bys. I hear they're up to give a beat-down to anybody, even a homeboy, and most of them at least carry a switchblade.

Out in the lot, I started up my old Impala. It's a classic, but I never fixed it up or anything. I got it from my stepfather. Lots of guys from other *cliques* stop and ask me about it. It used to get Chavo mad cause I was talking to guys that he said were enemies from *18th Street*. My stepfather never actually gave me the Impala, but when he got sent up, the car was just sitting there. My mom didn't drive, and she was too scared to try because she

didn't have any papers. I tried to sell it a few times, but it seems we didn't have any title, and some numbers inside the engine had been filed down. Nobody wanted to buy it. Anyway, my stepfather stabbed a guy inside, and then with his two other strikes, he ended up getting life. So, I guess I'm keeping it.

I drove home thinking about Chavo and all the things that had happened to me since I met him. My mind ran over them one after the other, like the first time he picked me up for a ride after I met him at a party that some homie from 18th Street had. They said later that he'd gone there to pick up on a young girl like he always did because he liked them young and I was up for it.

That night we'd smoked some weed, and it was pretty good. I was feeling proud and happy. Lots of little hood rats wanted him, and he was mine. Chavo was twenty-five when I got with him, ten years older than me. I trusted him and did everything he said. Being with him was being a part of *18th Street*, and that made you somebody where we lived.

We were riding around one night when he saw this car that looked like the one his brother had. Some guy from the Avenues was driving it. He thought it was stolen, so we followed it. When we got up close, he yelled something at the driver, and the driver turned around and gave us the finger. Chavo went crazy and pulled out a gun and began shooting at the car. When we turned a corner, a cop car was coming in our direction. Chavo told me to hold the wheel, stay behind the other guy, and aim to the right to force the other guy off the road. Chavo kept shooting, but only got off a couple of shots and

none of them even got near the other car. The cops turned around and pulled us over. We were arrested, and I ended up in juvie, and not for running away from home like before.

When my mother finally visited me at the facility, I'd already been locked up for a while. When I saw her, I started crying. "I thought you would come sooner." I stepped toward her, hoping that she'd hug me, but she kept her arms at her sides and looked me up and down, shaking her head.

Then she started talking really fast in that whiney voice she has. "You know it's hard for me to get here. Nobody would drive me, so I had to take the damn bus. I got better things to do than visit criminals! I got other kids at home." She sat on one of the hard, plastic chairs, holding onto her beat-up old brown purse, and started to cry. "How can you do this to me? All the neighbors know you're in jail. I'm ashamed to go outside. You're just a *puta de calle*, just like the others. "

I was feeling pretty bad then. I missed being home, and Chavo hadn't come to see me, even though he was out on bail, waiting for trial. "Well, if you're ashamed, don't go outside. Besides, they said if you'd gotten me a good lawyer, I wouldn't be locked up!" I always talked back.

"You know I don't have money for a lawyer," she started yelling. The other people in the waiting room turned around to look at us. "I don't know why you want to be a *Chola* so bad," she snapped. "Going with that old gangster! He's too old for you. You're gonna get pregnant. Watch and see. Then you're out of the house!"

"Like I care," I told her, trying to be tough. "How come your boyfriend isn't too old for me then?"

"You shut your mouth. Why are you lying on him all the time?"

I'd hit home. The man I called my stepfather was really just her boyfriend, and he was a lot younger than her. My friends said he liked my mother because she always gave him money when she got her welfare check, and he didn't have to work. He always licked his lips when he looked at me and rubbed up against me whenever I was around in that little apartment.

When I told my mother, she went crazy. "You're a stupid bitch! No way he'd want a skinny little thing like you! You're jealous cause you can't have him. All you can get is just some loser gangster."

One day when I was home alone because I'd ditched school, he came into the bathroom when I was taking a shower and locked the door behind him. When I heard him, I stepped out of the shower just as he started to unzip his pants. I grabbed the sixteen-ounce plastic bottle of shampoo and swung it at his head. I got him hard on the nose, and blood started squirting out and dripping onto the bathmat. I left him there like. I knew he lit into my mother real good because she kept asking what happened to his nose. I started staying away from home after that. It wasn't such a good place to be, anyway. I stayed with a few of the homegirls whose parents didn't care or weren't around much. I slept on couches or on their floors.

When I got out of juvie that time for driving the car with Chavo, I went to live with him and his family. He was still out on bail, still waiting to go to trial, and I was still going to school sometimes, mostly to meet my friends and ditch. I didn't have any money then for bus fare or lunch, or even eyeliner if I needed it. Chavo gave me a little money sometimes, when he could, like when he just sold some weed.

Finally, I got tired of school and just stopped going. It's just like Laughing Girl, now. She doesn't want to go either. I was lonely living there because Chavo's mother and sisters didn't like me. They wanted him to get back together with his old girlfriend, Marta. I guess he was seeing her too, on the side, cause he finally told me to leave, and his sisters packed up my things in a flash. I'd run out of places to go, so I went back home. I hated it there. My mother went around a lot with a cut lip and black eyes. She would tell me to go to Hell if I said anything about it.

I was feeling really bad about Chavo dumping me, so I started going out with Ricardo right away. He wasn't as good-looking as Chavo, but he had a bad *cholo* reputation. They said he'd killed a few guys and gotten away with it. Ricardo or Sly Baby, like they called him, was in 18th Street too, and was super bossy and mean. Whenever we got together, he'd hit me for any little thing and make me wait on him for everything so he could just sit in one place.

I usually spent my days sleeping late and watching TV since there was nobody around to bother me. Then Ricardo would call me, so I would get dressed up and do my makeup and ride around with him going to parties to get high, smoking, doing coke, or drinking. Sometimes, I went with him when he went to get revenge on a rival gang. He kept saying

that it was important to protect our territory and that the other gangs were always trying to take over our area. He carried a forty-five and showed me how to use it, one day, up in Griffith Park, before the orange sun went down and the park was almost empty. We shot at the trees, and I imagined that I was shooting at a real homeboy from the Avenues or even from Mara Salvatrucha.

One Friday night, Ricardo parked his car and told me to go into the liquor store with him. He told me to stand at the counter and talk to the clerk, a young white guy. He told me to flirt with him. Make him think he was getting some.

"What are you doing when I'm talking?" I wanted to know.

"Just shut the fuck up and do what I say," he answered.

I went up to the counter and pretended to look at the cheap candies. The clerk, who looked like a teenager with spikey blond hair, moved away from the register and smiled, looking at me. "Can I help you with something?" I smiled back and touched my mouth. Then I took my finger and trailed it down the front of my blouse. My blouse was cut low, and I was pretty much falling out of it. The clerk kept watching me, following my finger. I remember he had pretty blue eyes.

While we were standing there, I heard the sound of a loud crash in the back of the store, something falling and smashing, and the clerk's eyes moved away from me to follow it. He straightened up and yelled out, "What's going on back there?"

I turned around to see Ricardo walking toward the counter, pointing his gun right at the clerk. "No cameras set up back there," he said to me, smiling. Then he turned to the clerk, "Give me everything in that register or I'll fuck you up."

I stood there, listening to it all, but kept my mouth shut and just took the handful of cash that Ricardo handed me and stuffed it in my purse as we ran out to the car. But Ricardo was wrong. There was a camera. They showed the video in court, where we both got convicted of robbery and assault with a deadly weapon. When the judge sentenced me, I was sent to CIW, because I wasn't a juvenile anymore.

A couple of years later, I was out, older, but I guess not any smarter. I was staying with my homegirl, Mona, and trying to get hold of the rest of my homies and figure out what I was going to do next. Ricardo was still locked up. He was going to stay locked up for a long time.

I needed money, so I started asking around. Chavo was out on probation, and he was looking for some homegirls to push weed for him. So, I went to his house where his sisters still lived and ignored their dirty looks while I talked to Chavo. He said he didn't trust me because I went with another guy, but he said if I wanted to sell for him and get my foot back in 18th Street, I needed to have sex with him and anybody else he picked. I didn't tell him yes or no. I just went back to his bedroom and let him do it. I figured maybe he wouldn't make me do it with other guys because he was so jealous.

I started selling weed and a little coke for him, usually around the high school, when the school day was over. He took all of the money for himself, only giving me a little to

spend, but he kept me supplied with weed and coke, and I figured out how to sell some of that on the side for cash. I slept there a lot too when I didn't want to go home, and sometimes I helped myself to a few dollars that he didn't see. A lot of times, he had his homies meet in his house, and I watched from the bedroom while he gave them the money I brought in so they could buy guns.

I saw 18th Street was growing, with new members getting jumped in all the time. Chavo wanted to make sure they were all strapped, so he pushed hard on selling all the dope we could.

I wasn't the only girl selling for him. There were about three others, but we didn't like each other, because they all wanted to be his only girlfriend. I didn't care if I was or wasn't, because I'd been with him before. Besides, I was his top pusher, and so far, he didn't hit me or curse at me, the way he did with the other girls when they didn't sell enough or didn't do what he said. He usually wanted to have sex when I picked up my drugs to sell, and after when I brought back his money. After he was finished with sex, we'd smoke some dope or do a few lines, which was honestly what I waited for, because it was almost like he was a real boyfriend lying in bed with me watching television. I knew he had sex with the other girls too, but he spent more time with me and took me in his bedroom instead of doing it on the couch and telling others to watch. He only made me have sex with another homie one time. The guy had some kind of "connections," that Chavo wanted, and he told me to give his homie a blow job and anything else he wanted. I did what he said and tried to pretend I was somewhere else until it was over.

I was selling for Chavo for a few months, trying to save up my money so I could get my own place and not have to live with my mother and her new boyfriend, who knocked her around more than the last one. Besides, she was spending her whole check buying smack from someone in Mara Salvatrucha and pretty much wasn't paying the rent anymore. I saw a notice to move out posted on the door.

So, on that day when I came to pick up my supply, Chavo told me to get in his car, because we were going somewhere. I knew better than to ask any questions. We drove over to Highland Park and pulled in behind a run-down stucco bungalow. In the back of the bungalow, there was a small garage that somebody was using as an apartment. Chavo had a key, and we walked into a tiny room jammed with trash. In the center was a large mattress with a few sheets wadded up in the center. Chavo told me to get undressed and then pushed me down on the mattress. When he was finished, he stood up and stretched, buckling his pants. "I feel good now," he told me. "Ready to fuck someone up real good. Now I want you to do it with this guy that's coming in. You make him stay in that bed with you, till I come in and get you. I'll be right outside waiting. You got that? He's a dead man today!"

I started to cry then, scared and sorry for myself. Chavo stood over me, pushed my face into the mattress, and held it. "Look," he said, "You better do what I say if you know what's good for you." He pulled my hair hard, and then shoved me away.

Something went off in my head then, and I felt myself getting angry instead. I remembered the girls I'd been locked up with, saying they would stick a knife in any man who touched them. They were tough and hated almost everyone, but especially men.

Now, I was beginning to understand why. I'd never thought this way before. Just this time, I told myself, I'll do what he says. Then I'm getting away from him and his homies.

A few minutes later, the door opened, and a big bald guy covered with tattoos came in. He looked me over and then walked around the small room, checking for something. When he saw there was nobody inside, he dropped his pants and climbed on top of me. He barely had time to push my legs apart when I heard two loud bangs, like firecrackers going off. The big guy cried out and then stopped moving. He lay on top of me so I couldn't move away. I started screaming, and Chavo and a couple of other guys came in. They pulled him off me while I laid there and screamed.

Chavo jerked me to my feet. "Get dressed; we got to get out of here."

I looked over at the bed and saw blood leaking out of the guy's body, pooling on the mattress and running down the sides of the bed. There was blood on my stomach and the tops of my legs. When I tried to wipe it off, Chavo smacked me in the face. "I said, get dressed. Don't touch anything else!"

We got back in Chavo's car. It was dark now, and quiet. I was shaking, remembering the heavy body on top of me. It was still warm when I left, and the blood was thick on the mattress. I'd never seen a dead body up so close, and I was scared, my heart still pounding and my legs shaking. We drove in silence back to my house. I was still thinking about how I'd decided not to come back here anymore. Now I was sure.

"Is he dead?" I finally asked, seeing myself in big trouble.

Chavo laughed. "I hope so. He had it coming. Tried to be slick and suck up our territory. Nobody else sells here unless I let them. Should have stayed on his own side. But three bullets might not be enough for his fat ass."

I felt suddenly cold and nauseous, so I rolled down the window. Chavo pulled over to the curb, and I opened the door and threw up. Sitting back in the seat, I put my head on the headrest and let my tears run. "I don't want to go to jail again."

"What's wrong with you, bitch?" Chavo spat in my direction. "You're weak, that's all — just a weak sister. Not fit to be with 18th Street. You know what? I don't want to see you coming around no more. I don't trust you. You go home and take this with you. I don't want to see you or this ever again." He slapped the gun he'd just used into my hand.

"There's four rounds left."

It was surprisingly heavy, but I didn't let it fall. "What do you want me to do with it?" I stared down at my hands, thinking that this gun in my hand had just killed someone.

"You stupid bitch! Little Girl!" He swore under his breath. "Hide it someplace where nobody will find it. You keep your mouth shut too, about what you saw today or you're next. I can't be tied to this. I'll go back and do another stretch."

I stared back at him and felt my fingers close around the gun, but I stayed quiet.

"Can you do what I tell you? Or I can get rid of you too. You know I'd do it!"

I just sat there, crying and shaking my head. It hurt having him tell me to go, even though I'd decided I was through with him before we left the body on the bed.

He stared at me for a moment, and I thought he even looked a little sad. "Look, *Mijita*," now his voice was lower, almost like the way he used to talk to me before he threw me out the first time. He held my face between his hands and pushed my hair back from my forehead. "I don't want any trouble, so you need to do what I say. We had some good times, didn't we? Anyway, I got a new girlfriend now, so you can't come over no more."

I thought he looked proud, bragging, like a little kid. "She just got outta Ironwood, and she's a hard case. Been around plenty. She'll always have my back. You know how it is."

He reached across me and opened the car door. "Don't forget," he pointed to the gun.

I stumbled out of the car and ran into the apartment, which had the "Notice To Pay Rent Or Quit," taped to the door. I tore it off and threw it on the table. Then I went into the tiny room that I claimed as a bedroom and stuck the gun in the bottom drawer under my bras and panties. They weren't enough to cover it, so I threw some clothes from another drawer on the top.

Over the next few weeks, everybody spread the word about how they'd found "Big Blue," dead, and they were looking for suspects. So far, nobody was talking, and I did what Chavo said and stayed away from him. The sheriff even knocked on our door one day, but I didn't open it. I guess they were going around the neighborhood trying to get information. Hiding the gun in the house seemed like a stupid idea. I couldn't sleep one night because I kept seeing the cops busting in and finding the gun. I understood why Chavo didn't want to get locked up again. I turned over and over in my bed until it started to get light. While everybody else was still sleeping, I got up and put the gun in my

backpack. I walked all the way to Echo Park, and then slowly around the lake, toward the center that I thought was the deepest. I walked by the usual homeless winos sleeping on the benches. For a while, I stood there and watched the mud hens hanging around the utility fountain that kept the lake filled with water. I held the gun in my hands, running my fingers over the smooth metal. Then I swung my arm back as if I was going to throw it. But somehow I couldn't let it go. Maybe because it was Chavo's or maybe for some other reason that I didn't know yet. I stood there looking at in the weak light shining on the lake from the boathouse. In the end, I put it the gun back in my backpack and zipped it up. I heard that one time they dredged the lake looking for bodies that they thought were dumped there, but all they found were a bunch of rusted weapons and empty bottles. Well, they wouldn't find this one.

After a while, people stopped talking so much about Chavo, but I was still scared they'd find out that I was there when he shot that guy. I could still feel the dead man's heavy body pinning me down on the mattress, and the wet sticky blood on my stomach and legs. I heard they'd questioned everybody he hung out with, but they never came back to me. Later they said he went back to jail because he violated his probation. I know he was locked up until last year for something else. They never found the gun he used, and of course, nobody talked. That's how it goes here.

I told myself I'd never be that stupid again, and I'd never let some guy use me like Chavo did. But with Chavo gone, I was kind of lost. I missed the attention, even if it was only lying on his bed and watching tv after he had sex with me. That was kind of like love, I thought. I wanted to get back to selling dope, but I knew I had to stay away from 18th

Street. So, I started hitting the parties and hanging out with some other homies from the Avenues. It didn't take long until I found out I was pregnant, but I really didn't know who the father was. Most of the time, I was high on the coke and weed we used when we partied. If you hung with these homies, you were expected to give it up whenever they wanted it. So, I did. I was so high all of the time that I never thought about how I'd told myself I'd never let a man use me again.

Then I had some bad luck. When I was seven months pregnant, with my big stomach popping out over the top of my sweatpants, I sold some smack to an under-age girl and her friends outside her middle school. She ended up overdosing because it wasn't cut enough, and her friends were able to identify me to the cops. Everybody remembers a pregnant drug dealer with stringy hair and dirty clothes, even a bunch of fourteen-year-olds, high out of their minds. But before they picked me up, I sold some coke to an undercover cop, who, I would have sworn was a dirty street biker.

So, there you go, I got sent up again. My surrender date was five days after Laughing Girl was born. I called her Laughing Girl, because she came out smiling, and smiled up at me the whole time until they took her away. On the day after she was born, a woman came into my room and said she was from Child Services. She let me hold my baby one last time before she took her. She told me Laughing Girl was going into foster care. I cried non-stop the next few days up until I checked into CIW for my second round. I knew better than to go in looking like a weak sister.

By the time I got out on parole, Laughing Girl didn't even know me. I heard her foster mother cried because she was praying I'd never get out and try to take her back. Laughing

Girl cried too when I got her back. She wanted her foster mom, and I wasn't her. I guess we all cried together. When I got out, I figured I'd spent enough of my life paying for my stupid mistakes, and I stopped hanging with anybody from 18th Street or the Avenues. I moved back with my mother, and I'm still there. We get along better now. She doesn't drink as much because she has bleeding ulcers. I finally got custody of Laughing Girl.

I heard Chavo did a long stretch and then was paroled. Chavo was always lucky. He got out early on his last stretch because they found that the DA hadn't turned over all the evidence to his lawyer. All the witnesses seemed to have disappeared too, so they didn't re-file charges again. His mother called every once in a while and checked in. Funny thing, she likes me, now that Chavo and I aren't together. I think she wishes Laughing Girl was his kid because she doesn't have any grandchildren.

So, here I am now, years passed, and so did a few more bad relationships. I have two more kids to raise by myself, and Laughing Girl looks like she wants to follow in my footsteps.

I didn't cry much at Chavo's funeral. Most of his family was there, even the ones he'd burned over the years. Enough tears were falling around me to make up for the ones I didn't have. I just closed my eyes and remembered everything that happened between us, our own story. It didn't hurt so much anymore. So much time had passed. I didn't even hate him. After the funeral, I went back to the house. Tonight, my mother will go out drinking with her friends, and I'll be alone with my two boys unless I can get Laughing Girl to stay in with me.

Lately, all she talks about is this guy from 18th Street, Armando. I heard he has two strikes, and he's only been out for a few months. She thinks she's in love with him.

Later after my mother went out and I put the boys to bed, I settled down in front of the tv. Laughing Girl finally came home. She pushed the door in and staggered inside. It was almost ten o'clock. I could see she was drunk or high by the way she moved before I ever got a good look at her eyes. Giggling and holding onto the walls, she started toward the bedroom she shared with her brothers.

I yelled after her. "Don't make any noise they're sleeping. Why don't you come in here for a little while?"

"I gotta get ready," she slurred.

"Ready? Why?"

"Going out riding." She answered. "Mando's picking me up."

I got up and walked toward her. Even a few feet away, I picked up the heavy smell of alcohol and something stronger and more bitter, like the stuff they used to mix paint. No! I thought she didn't do that anymore since she went into the juvenile rehab program. I saw her a few years back, still in elementary school, sitting by the train tracks with her *cholo* friends, sniffing something they poured into a sock.

I stared at her wide glassy eyes that moved from side to side and didn't see. Her hair was matted and tangled, stiff and crunchy from the mousse that she poured on. Her eyeliner was smeared, and most of her penciled eyebrows had worn off.

I followed her to the bedroom, where she fell against the wall, trying to find the light switch. Muttering to herself, she stepped out of her tight black jeans and low-cut blouse that didn't manage to cover her stomach and pulled out a dresser drawer. The drawer stuck, and she fell back on her butt, ending up on the floor swearing. The noise woke up my sons sleeping in a single bed. My younger one pulled the quilt over his head, trying to shut out the light and the noise.

I focused my eyes on the glare coming from the single bulb in the center of the ceiling. There was a fresh tattoo on her neck that hadn't been there the last time I'd seen her. I recognized the sign right away. And something else, a hickey, large and red, covering the space under her jawline. The hickey looked fresh. She hadn't been home in a couple of days.

"Where've you been?" I realized I hadn't seen her here for a few days. But I couldn't kid myself, she didn't come home some nights anyway. "Answer me! Where are you at night?"

Laughing Girl zipped up another pair of jeans and gave me a dirty look. "I told you before; I'm with my friends."

"You're staying with that Mando, aren't you? He's too old for you. He's just going to get you in trouble." Somehow the words seemed familiar as I said them.

She glared at me. "You don't know him. He loves me."

"He doesn't love you. He's just using you because you're young and stupid."

Laughing Girl whirled around and picked up her hand, bringing it toward my face. I stepped back, surprised.

She dropped her hands. "Leave me alone, okay? I hate it here, you and those dirty brats!" She brought her hands to her sides and walked back to the living room. "I need some money. You're supposed to give me money. That's what you get your welfare for."

"I don't have any money, I can barely pay the rent," I told her. "You can get yourself a job."

"Fuck no!" she yelled. "I'm so glad I have Mando. He said he'll give me anything I need, not to come back here. Tomorrow I'm taking my stuff and moving in with him."

"Go ahead and do it," I yelled back. "I'll report him to the cops. You're underage, and I'll call them on you too."

"You better not call anybody. Mando's friends will come after you, and your other damn kids. Grandma too."

We stood there looking at each other.

"Don't go out. Just stay here." I heard my voice begging her.

"You can't make me stay. I hate it here. I hate you." She slammed the door as hard as she could, making the walls shake. And then it was silent, except for the low hum of the television.

I sat down on the couch and stared at the wall. There would probably be quite a few "Mandos" in her life before she figured it out if she ever did. But right now, there was only this one, and I wanted him dead and gone right now. I'd seen the car he drove, and I knew more or less where he stayed. But all that could be figured out; I still knew a few homeboys from 18th Street and even a couple from the Avenues. It was smart not to let go of your connections, even if you didn't hang with them anymore.

Chavo still owed me even if he was dead because he never paid his debt when he was alive. I'd kept my mouth shut and "held my mud," like the homies said. Maybe it was time to reach out to them and collect. Chavo's homeboys knew how to set up a rival with guns and drugs. They even did it for some unsolved murder that the cops had given up on a long time ago. They were willing to make that snitch call that was insurance that someone would get busted and sent away, especially if that someone was looking at three strikes. They still did it all the time. It was expected in the neighborhood.

I lit a cigarette and sat back. The problem was that if I asked the homeboys for their help now, to pay back Chavo's debt, I would end up owing them in the future, whenever they wanted, doing whatever they ordered. That's how it worked. Who knows what they would want me to do for them? I could end up back in prison or worse, end up dead. They might do away with my kids too if I didn't do what they said. No, I didn't want to owe them anything. I didn't want to owe anybody. I was done with that. I'd paid enough already. Chavo's debt didn't need payment.... not to me.

I went back to my small bedroom; the one I shared with Laughing Girl when she was around. I leaned all my weight against the heavy oak dresser and pushed it away from

the wall. Behind the dresser, I'd dug out a piece of the linoleum that covered the floor. The space was about a foot wide, and the shoebox that I put the gun in fit just fine. The shoebox was covered with plywood, and in case anybody got that far, I'd nailed the piece of linoleum back over the space. I'd carried Mando's gun with me everywhere I'd lived so far, hiding it, just in case anybody came looking. Just a week or so ago I figured I could finally get rid of it. So much time had passed by now. I just hadn't got around to it yet.

Under the bathroom cabinet was my rusty hammer; the one I used to nail a board over the broken part of the window in the bathroom and to hang my son's school pictures over the table in the kitchen. I bent down next to the dresser and used the claw side of the hammer to remove the nails holding the linoleum. It took me a long time, but I kept at it until I reached the shoe box. Sitting back on my heels, I lifted out the gun and turned it over in my hands. There were enough bullets in the chamber. I unlocked the safety and examined it. It was just the way it was after Chavo used it and gave it to me.

When I was locked up pregnant, and doing my nickel, and later, on the day they took away my baby, Laughing Girl, I said there was no justice. No justice for people like us. Not unless we made it ourselves. There were a lot of things I couldn't do for my daughter, but I could do this thing right now, because I wanted something better for her, even if she didn't. But maybe she would someday.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I tell the stories of women who are marginalized in our society, and who are largely ignored in mainstream literature and cinema. I chose to focus my writing on Latina women from various walks of life and at different stages of their lives living in central Los Angeles. I too grew up in the neighborhood that I write about and have a personal identity and interest in the themes and the people who live there. I was fortunate*

enough to hear the stories of many of these women, which they graciously shared while I worked in the fields of law and psychology.

The stories of these women's lives depict conflict in gender bias, experiences of exploitation, violence, and powerlessness, sometimes resulting in pain, and despair in their turbulent world. But these stories also tell of these women's celebration of life itself that empowers them and gives them the will to sustain in their turbulent world. These stories resonate on a deeply emotional level.

Smiley and Laughing Girl tells the story of a young mother who was formerly incarcerated as a pregnant teenager as she reminisces about the life she lead involved with local gang members and sees her daughter following in her footsteps. She realizes there is only one way she knows to stop her daughter from repeating her mistakes. This story was inspired by the stories of several women who experienced the consequences of gang life as lived on the Eastside/Echo Park area of Los Angeles.

My latest work, A Woman's Story, an anthology of short stories will be published in the spring of 2021, by Madville Publishers.

AUTHOR'S BIO: See 'A Waste of Expectations'.

A WASTE OF EXPECTATIONS

By Francine Rodriguez

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor CHITRA GOPALAKRISHNAN writes: A narrative that pulls you onto a treacherous space. Where the distinctions between the wild and the civilized world blur. Where the wild carnal frenzy of a lion, its bestiality, fearsome and ungovernable, brushes against mercenary metropolitans whose natures under their well-mannered bodies are as savage. Where the muscle memory of human and beast interweave in the most unexpected of ways. Where rationality battles wilder instincts. Where notions of provider and predator get entangled. Where the expanse of collapse and renewal is out-of-the-ordinary and drags one into a place that is both substance and spirit, matter and mind. And where the language of the beast and human plays out in syntactically ambiguous ways, wary and easy, calm and scary.*

It is this double atmosphere that the story of the Bill the lion plays out at the circus and within the van, he travels with his keeper, attendants and a spirited mouse. Bill is a reluctant protagonist in the story as a creature in a human experiment called the circus whose original but not the only purpose is to loosen the lines between animal and human sensibilities. Money, too, is part of the motive. In a voice that is uniquely his own, wry, clever and philosophical at the same time, he goes below the surface to pull up complexities in the human-beast relationship, the notions of evolution, who is more evolved and to explore what is at the heart of existence. Merely nullity, a waste of expectations or is there something more to it?

Five stars.

Lines I like:

The Big Wild, everywhere he went, and one roar from his gut reminded all that terror and sudden annihilation based the truth of this world in total, stripped down man had no chance against beast. The jungle was everywhere. He sparsely used the roar. Being a showman, he knew the value of

infrequency. It deafened the humans and for one second, froze them completely, making them vulnerable to their core, even as a complete unit. They snapped back pretty easy; the logic of their minds reminded them quickly it was Bill in the cage. The glee was palpable for both lion and man in that split second between the roar and the relaxation.

A Waste of Expectations

Bill, since age 2, understood the circus. The circus counterpoised jungle and civilization. At least the audience believed so. Or accepted that illusion temporarily. Bill knew the jungle might show itself whenever. He nearly jumped from his stool dozens of times, on whim alone even, to bite some passing showgirl or fat man with a whip.

Traveling made sense to Bill. The truck attempted at comfort. His body wanted to create the motion of running by nature but traveling with pillows and red meat had style. An attendant usually stayed on long journeys. Usually a boy or girl not far from college with some basic veterinarian knowledge. They had a radio, then cellphones as changes came, to notify the driver if a health necessity required pulling over to the side of the road.

Over the years the circus cleaned its act. Rarely did a drunk carny come to harass Bill in the middle of the night. These pathetic shells of men. Bill never tipped his hat to any other then the few trainers who entered the cage. And the poor, scared women they sometimes brought with them. That's not true. Melody

had courage. She liked Bill even. That a mistake. Even Bill got it that personification of a lion was stupid. Luckily, Melody married and left the circus. Bill, if he ever did it, mused he would eat someone who contained more joy than fear. It had to taste better that way. No, he had never eaten men. He always danced for the sweaty whip carrying men to depend on food. And he was not ignorant of the fact of guns. He knew the men could get rid of him in an emergency. He saw it happen to Ted the Tiger. The poor slob was doomed by name alone. No, Bill's determination to survive proved strong and compromising.

“You know you don't have much time left Bill.”

Bill let a low growl. Bill translated the attendant's words as vibrations with meaning, possibly like telepathy.

“Hey at least it's not the food processor for ya pal. Hate to see that. You're not a horse after all. Most surely some small zoo like Minot, North Dakota, or some God forsaken place like that - cold as hell in Minot buddy I'm afraid.”

The young man meant well. The perks of the zoo might be nice. Still, end of days came.

“Here you go Bill, a treat, some of that sweet pudding meat you like.”

How nice of the kid. Bill didn't mind. The human read him, sometimes too well. He no longer hated them. He thought them fools. Things that lived by half challenges. If Bill had his druthers his form of circus would hae the crowd coming into the cage with him. There is thrill! Otherwise, all too tame, really. At

one point he thought it his duty to wake them up with a good throat removal. It wouldn't matter if it were the throat of a man or woman. Lions did not give more sympathy to one sex or the other. Bill no longer missed female lions. Indeed, this the glory of his disposition. He, born with a Freudian dislike for the power of female lions. Thank God the circus remained small. One lion only. God, a concept he picked up from the people. Useful and on his side. If something unchangeable came up, then just say "God" and over time the repetition sensed acceptance. No female lions ever came.

Bill also glad as ever a tiger was not introduced to the show. He might have liked the faux competition and comparison, but deep down, even though the stage was small he relished being the fiercest star, and the lone "wolf". When it became illegal to use elephants, it was even better. The *Big Wild*, everywhere he went, and one roar from his gut reminded all that terror and sudden annihilation based the truth of this world in total, stripped down man had no chance against beast. The jungle was everywhere. He sparsely used the roar. Being a showman, he knew the value of infrequency. It deafened the humans and for one second, froze them completely, making them vulnerable to their core, even as a complete unit. They snapped back pretty easy; the logic of their minds reminded them quickly it was Bill in the cage. The glee was palpable for both lion and man in that split second between the roar and the relaxation.

Really, these human entertainers had it all wrong. Making a lion jump from stool perch to stool perch misses the point. Bill's thought they should let loose a live deer for him to devour. Or at least a few rabbits; hell, cages being

what they were and rabbits being what they were more than few would escape. Something for the kids to take home.

“They’re too queasy for that.”

“Hmmm.”

Edgar the mouse spoke. He lived in the corner of the big truck, behind the boxes and some hay.

“You’re probably correct mouse.”

“Aren’t you ever tempted to lure this foolish handler toward you, maybe when the truck hits a bump in the road and take a snap at his arm?”

“Why would I do that mouse? He feds me and says nice things to me. If I did that wouldn’t his associates put me to sleep. Likely so. Ah, are trying to get me in trouble mouse. Maybe I should bite you?”

“Well... first you couldn’t catch me, you’re the one in the cage.”

“The road bumps.”

“Okay there’s that, but you’d miss my wise company. Besides, my jabbering is worth more than small morsel of flavor I might provide.”

“True enough.”

Bill remained distracted by the mouse during travel. Lions are loners, but all creatures need someone to talk too every now and then. Years ago, he knew other lions. He hoped at the zoo that the circus would inevitably someday farm

him out to would have some peers. Some did not. The circus used to have two lions until the budget cuts came. That years ago, even before the elephants left.

Perhaps he should pretend to attack Jesse, the circus's mustached lion tamer, next performance? That might show management he still "had it". Maybe a more exciting zoo would then would later take on interest in him based on that reputation alone?

Bill understood management better than any of the employees. If he had had a 401(k) for all his service, he'd be doing great, but money was never important to lions. Carla the woman who can lift two "small people" over her head, was the second smartest of the bunch. Bill thought, with no offense, Ted and Mike (the "small people") were numskulls. Bill had no problem with politically correct talk, but if a people of miniature stature had no brains then he was not about to make any excuses for them. Bill had made the calculations that a circus could only survive with 17% of its staff being dim-witted. Of course, when a company needs fire-eaters, fat clowns, ladies who let men throw knives at them and guys who stand around taking tickets, well then any with sense should expect some dimwits needed hiring.

"Okay Old Boy time for your feeding," said the handler as the raw meat unpacked. Thank God for raw meet Tuesdays and Thursdays, thought Bill, the rest of the weak was smashed gruel. They worried about his teeth, digestion and heart. Those human concerns. He wished they learnt that lions only wanted meat.

One thing Bill picked up being around people, - take one's time. He ate slowly, as one might see on an African documentary, but in addition pausing much more, looking around, breathing, even...

"Have you had a peak at the profit margins?" inquired Bill to the mouse.

"Oh that."

"That bad."

"Well, yes basically, - damn Monster Truck shows, MMA fighting, Reality TV, and Burning Man, - between that sort of crap most have lost interest in the circus."

"Pity."

"Tich. Maybe it serves them. If I think back to all those undersized cages, the stinking fire jumps they made me do, the lack of access to a real body of water, no night play, the time I saw Rex eat Reynaldo, well they deserve it, and then there's my mother."

"You've never mentioned her."

"Geez I'm being sentimental."

"No, really I'm interested."

"Well to be more objective about it, lions need a long maternal bond, and we were separately early."

"That's sad."

“A long time ago.”

“I didn’t know you lions liked water?”

“I know it’s often thought of as a tiger thing, but I always loved a good splash and swim.”

“At least they never housed you with a tiger.”

“Ha!”

“There ya go buddy, let me get that,” Ted the handler interjected. Bill inadvertently peed. It didn’t matter if planned or not. Still, he only peed on his own floor. Ted, and most of the others were nice about it. Quickly the man got a mop, one with an extra-long handle and cleaned up the urine.

“Grrrahh,” Bill let out a slow growl of thanks.

“No problem buddy. I love you guy.”

What? That was nice, even sweet. Man, Bill thought, I am tame as all shit. I even liked that.

The wreck came sudden and unusually.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

“He’s alive, but if we don’t do something immediately, he is going to lose that leg.”

“I see.”

“I know there are ethics questions, but you’re our last hope.”

“I understand. And I am willing to help. But you said there was no way to get donated bone, flesh and vein to graph within the two hours life limit we have, and really from studying option in my imagination I have no doubt that it is our window.”

“Dr. Kurani, this is Marathon, Texas in the middle of nowhere southwest Texas. It would take us 4 hours to get a doctor anywhere near your qualifications here even if they were dressed and ready and already at a private airport. The spare parts, no way, that’s a full day’s work, if we can find them.”

“Yeah, your misfortune catching pneumonia in our town on your way to Big Bend was this young man’s only hope.”

“Krishna and Lord Shiva.”

“What was that?”

“Oh, just a myth from my people back in India – the back and forth of things. Well, I don’t have a problem operating to do the replacement and graph, but...”

“I feel sorry for the lion,” sobbed a nurse slightly.

“Lion?”

“Oh yeah this man was the handler for a circus lion, he was in the cargo hold of the 18-wheel rig when it flipped. The lion died. The man lived. The police say they saw a mouse run of the cargo hold unscathed.”

“The perils of body-mass index ratio to gravity and force,” quipped the second doctor.

“A lion,” mused Dr. Kurani out loud again.

“What about it?”

“Well, if we are going to take professional risks, like letting me operate after just getting out of the hospital with the tail end of pneumonia, why not try the Harvard Study. In it the researchers speculated that big cat bone could be used for graphs, and even their veins used as temporary blood flow support, until a human replacement was acquired.”

“Geez a lion’s bone in a man,” said the nurse.

“Exactly,” replied Kurani.

AUTHOR'S NOTE & BIO (as per her email to FOTD):

Dear Editor:

I am writing to you seeking a publisher who shares my enthusiasm in uncovering the voices of women who are generally ignored in women’s fiction. Based on my research, I understand that you have an interest in multicultural/ethnic literature as well as woman’s fiction. I chose to focus my writing on the lives of a handful of Latina women living emotionally precarious lives on the edges of society, whose voices and stories are under-represented in women’s literature. I have written a collection of eight short stories, (58,041 words), and the stories in my collection are written about women from various walks of life and at different stages of their lives.

The stories of these women’s lives depict conflict in gender bias, experiences of exploitation, violence, and powerlessness, sometimes resulting in pain, and despair in their turbulent world. But these stories also

tell of these women's celebration of life itself that empowers them and gives them the will to sustain. These stories resonate on a deeply emotional level

*I honed my creative writing skills writing appellate briefs for many years, where it was required that you spin broken flax into gold. I also spent some time studying writing with the author, John Rechy, and found that I too, had a personal identity with, and interest, in the themes of Los Angeles's neighborhoods, and the people who live there. Drawing from the clients I worked with in the fields of law and psychology, who shared their stories with me, I developed a process to put these stories, and my passion for this area and its inhabitants into words with a fresh perspective. I have two self-published novels, *The Fortunate Accident*, and *A Woman Like Me*, on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Kindle, KOBO, Waterstones, etc. My website is: <https://www.francinerodriguezauthor.com>*

EDITOR'S BIO: Chitra Gopalakrishnan uses her ardour for writing, wing to wing, to break firewalls between nonfiction and fiction, narratology and psychoanalysis, marginalia and manuscript and tree-ism and capitalism.

As a New Delhi-based journalist and a social development communicator for 30 years, she enjoys this career of trying to figure out issues of social development and its impact – or the lack of it – on people. As a woman of color, she hears the voice of women on the margins more clearly than others.

Her fiction has appeared in the Celestial Echo Press, Black Hare Press, Fantasia Divinity, Me First Magazine, Reedsy, Terror House Magazine, Unpublished Platform, Literary Yard, Truancy, eShe, Literati Magazine, Spillwords, Fleas on the Dog, Twist and Twain, Velvet Illusion, CafeLit, Sky Island Journal, Scarlet Leaf Review, Breaking Rules Publishing and Runcible Spoon, among others. Her story ***Bail Denied*** appeared in Issue 6 (Fiction),

3 (THREE) SHORTS

By Mike Clough

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor ADAM KELLY MORTON writes:*

These three short pieces by Mike Clough take readers on a journey to exotic and often dangerous places. Emotional connections that are made and broken feature in the narrator's travels, and we get a glimpse of lives that are full of regret and fear, while conveying experience that is meaningful. The language is strong and visceral, while subtle enough in moments to express feeling without spelling it out:

"The city wasn't how I remembered it. Garbage had been left to rot outside buildings. Black rats with saucer eyes peered out at me from alleyways."

Meanwhile, even the more strictly descriptive passages are often quite effective at transporting the reader not only in time and place, but in mood as well:

"I tipped the driver, thanked him in Portuguese, and then asked him to confirm in English the time he'd be back. He pointed to a path leading away from a square of sorts, a huddle of cheap Formica tables. After about a hundred yards, I passed a sign for what I guessed must be the sacred cave...the depiction so badly faded it could have been for anything."

Overall, these three immersive stories have plenty of mystery, agony and love.

(Spacing and font size are author's own.) Eds.

3 Shorts by Mike Clough

Agapito and the Sacred Cave

The two-hour ride took me past Corcovado where, unsurprisingly, all the tourists with backpacks and bottles of water disembarked. I watched them trundle away from the station towards stalls selling cheap wooden masks and cans of unbranded cola. The driver had a cigarette break, leaning against the door which he'd thankfully left open. If not I would almost certainly have melted in the heat. The five-minute wait for the bus had been enough to soak my shirt, and it didn't help that I had on a three-piece suit. No harm in arriving hot and sweaty though, I supposed. There would a manner of symmetry to it.....a reflection of the torrid nights we'd spent together.

At last the driver stubbed out his cigarette and got back on. While he failed to acknowledge me – not even a nod or a look – I wasn't entirely bothered. This was a journey I'd prefer to be making alone, far away from any prying eyes. Clunking through the gears, the exhaust rattling, we ascended the narrow road towards the jungle. Every so often we'd come across a dusty clearing, with no more than eight or nine huts scattered here and there, children and dogs rushing out to greet us. We stopped twice, once for the driver to have another cigarette, and then for an old Indian woman with a black shawl wrapped around her face.

At first I thought they were arguing, two shrill voices competing to be heard. But you can never tell with the Latin temperament. For all I knew they were exchanging pleasantries. Forty degrees in the shade would be enough to unhinge the calmest of temperaments, after all. She sat as far away from me as possible, taking a seat at the front, and not for a second ceasing her jabber.

It occurred to me then that I'd never really spoken to Agapito, not in any meaningful sense. Eventually, towards the end, we'd been living our lives apart.....with separate

everything from our beds to our network of friends. I couldn't even imagine us sitting on this bus together. If on an earlier visit I'd suggested the trip to him he'd have told me I was crazy.....he'd have been in his trunks, emptying a bottle of wine.

The bus terminated at a village jutting out of the mountainside, its few adobe pensions looking they would soon collapse into the ocean.

I tipped the driver, thanked him in Portuguese, and then asked him to confirm in English the time he'd be back. He pointed to a path leading away from a square of sorts, a huddle of cheap Formica tables. After about a hundred yards, I passed a sign for what I guessed must be the sacred cave.....the depiction so badly faded it could have been for anything.

Pushing ahead, taking deep breaths, I followed along for almost a mile climbing higher and higher, stopping every few feet to swig water. Poor Agapito! I imagined him hurrying ahead, calling over his shoulder for me to catch him. Then again in all likelihood he'd have been sulking, telling me he wanted a quadruple gin....to be back at the resort eyeing up young men in tight Speedos. I thought about the first time I'd been here....a million years ago it seemed....how we'd held each other's cocks would you believe and then sucked each other off in the bushes.

When out of a relationship, you tend to worry about silly things. It occurred to me that I might faint from heat exhaustion and be found dead and alone, weeks if not months from now, a shrivelled corpse. The incessant hum of the jungle had me thinking about strange, lurking creatures, how a jaguar or leopard was waiting to pounce and drag me away to its den.

At last I came to a wide, open plateau. There were more signs, some planted in the ground, others nailed to trees, all pointing to a dusty track at the end of which I saw what appeared to be a monument or tomb, the remains of thick, ancient roots entangled across its entrance. Unsurprisingly the place was deserted. I guess no one had been here in years....perhaps not since Agapito and me.

Strangely, there was a child's desk under the cover of a tipuana tree, and beneath this, along with a board marked with prices, a box of dusty helmets and flashlights. Back then there'd been a kiosk and guided tours every hour. But now it seemed you had to make your own way down. I fished around for a helmet and batteries, and then, inwardly saying a prayer to whatever god ruled the sacred cave, ducked through the entrance.

A flight of stone steps led almost vertically down for about a hundred feet. It then leveled off into a narrow corridor which turned a corner, the flashlight illuminating the cold, dripping limestone walls. There were arrows, which I was thankful of, and also the occasional sign telling you to 'keep your head' - I chuckled, presuming it to be a lapse of translation.

In truth, I'd forgotten how labyrinthine it was. Everywhere paths led into dark recesses. Most of these were either fenced off or had warnings about keeping to the main route, which is what I did, following on until I came to a vast opening with a pool of light streaming in from an aperture, stalactites hanging from the surrounding structure. Concerned by the possibility of the batteries draining and the backups failing, I flicked off the flashlight. When a cloud shifted across the sun everything became preternaturally dark, and I felt entombed in the stark, rigid earth.

When the sun blinked through I saw another path lower down, disappearing into a chasm. There were no warnings, at least none that I could see, and so I decided to continue onwards, the roof so low I had to duck to make my way through. Eventually it opened into a second fissure, about a quarter the size of the last and without the benefit of any natural light. I had to be careful not to trip over the ancient forest of stalagmites. It all seemed so solid in here, so eternal, as if nothing had changed in a million years. Just as I was thinking this a huge drop splashed against my helmet, striking it with such force I thought the roof was falling in.

I turned to go, the flashlight illuminating the black, crenulated wall to the side of me, and then I saw what at first I thought to be some ancient writing, from the era of the Aztecs or long before, propounding the wisdom of the ages perhaps, some divine truth. Only as I stroked the light across it did I see it was graffiti: Johnny WOZ Here '98, Reggie Luvs Val, that kind of thing. And there it was.....David and Agapito.....a love heart with our names inside, deeply provocative for then. And oh my....we'd drawn phalluses too.....and a lewd message about fucking. It all came back to me. Pressing my face against the wall I felt its coldness penetrate my flesh. Slowly, I traced a finger across our names. David/Agapito. Forever.

And then the clouds drifted back across the sun. At the same time the batteries in the flashlight failed. I cannot begin to describe how intolerably cold and bleak it all was. Shaking the flashlight violently, I longed to return to the outside world, to be on the bus again listening to the driver and the old Indian, or even to be with all those tourists flocking around the market buying trinkets and cans of unbranded cola, or better still, to be on the beach with Agapito, admiring young men playing volleyball and Frisbee, the material of their trunks so taut you could see when they became aroused. 'Agapito', I whispered. 'I love you Agapito. God how I miss your cock, you drunken sop.'

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The three stories are all about confronting change. With Agapito, a gay man seeks a manner of solace from travelling to a tourist site near Rio which he last visited with his lover. Although schmaltziness has its place, I can't say that I'm its biggest fan. I therefore have the protagonist remembering the sex they had. The cave is an extended metaphor.*

In Love and the Jungle a reluctant divorcee has a fling with a local. She invites him to a ceremony in which he imbibes a mescaline drink, and he undergoes a lustful transformation. As with Agapito, I steer clear of sentimentality. This is about libido not love.

In terms of style, Home is the closest I get in these pieces to minimalism. I prefer works which are easy to read, in which story, character and meaning

take precedence over style. This doesn't make the writing easier. I will have redrafted several times, editing out any clause, word or punctuation mark which detracts from the experience. I also tend towards what might be referred to as a multivalent approach, leaving space for interpretation. America has clearly changed since the serviceman went away. Although he is derisive of this, it still remains his place of origin, his home. The narrative events are presented in such a way as to ask questions. Whether change is ultimately for the good or bad is left unanswered.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Mike grew up on the outskirts of a council housing estate in Greater Manchester. He worked as a bingo caller and shop assistant before attending Salford University. As well as teaching at undergraduate level, he has published short-form literary fiction and is a features contributor to magazines for writers.

EDITOR'S BIO: Adam Kelly Morton is a Montreal-based husband, father (four kids, all six-and-under), acting teacher, gamer, filmmaker, and writer. He has been published in *Spelk*, *The Junction*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *The Fiction Pool*, *Open Pen London*, and *Talking Soup*, among others. He has an upcoming piece in *A Wild and Precious Life: A Recovery Anthology*, to be published in 2020. His story **See These Stars** was published in Issue 6.

THE WAVE EQUATION

By Mark Antokas

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor HEATHER WHITED writes...* "The Wave Equation" is a very fit name for Mark Antokas' story, as not only does the actual equation feature in it, but water comes forth as a powerful theme and in some ways, a template for the story's captivating nonlinear structure. Much like waves, this story ebbs through crests and troughs; the reader drifts between timelines, characters, and points of view, though a young man named Blake and the people he loves are most central. The relationships at play here are various, intriguing, and complex; romantic, fraternal, maternal. Rescuer and the rescued. Blake's two closest loves, the driving forces of his story, are a beautiful older woman named Isabelle and his brother, whom Blake was born 15 years after. A painful dynamic develops that draws the reader in. Cap't Antokas uses language and description in a sometimes devastating way, drawing the reader into Blake's losses and heartbreaks with sharp descriptions. We meet characters as apparitions, some not named until nearly the very end, haunting the story in a way. The Wave Equation is a captivating story that lingers.

Walking down to a stony beach one day, no one special, someone who did elephants to airplanes, horses to classical music, just a writer, just one soul looking for something that day on a lonely beach, found a young man on the sand who was bleeding, broken, in shock. The surf that day crashed into the shore, closing in hard, like bricks falling from the sky. Waves struck and pulled and sucked everything in their way.

Out there on that hot plate of a rock, where rocks beat salt from the ocean, serving himself out like an offering to a hungry fate, a sacrifice to the sea, Blake laughed a bitter Cinnar.

THE WAVE EQUATION

She was irreverent at times. Artists always were, at least to him.

About orgasms she said to Blake, “Velocity equals frequency,” with a smile she added, “multiplied by wave length.” Blake, the immaculate, concepted and raised in a cloak of innocence, knew he was outclassed, in over his head, but he went for it anyway.

That was a time before the difference in their ages mattered, when all he could do was watch her beautiful mouth when she spoke, when they laughed together, when she took pink purple roses in promise from him, even though she’d taken them from men so many times before. That was a new time, when there was a radiation between the two, when there was something special in the way that they looked at each other. From him, shining eyes smiling, blood rushing, and from her, a faultless pirouette.

“The wave equation,” she explained.

There is something to be said about waves. They are constant, and in motion and have a force. From a ripple, to a wave, to a wall, they can grow. Lapping shoreside childlike, innocent and harmless, they have an elemental sound. It is music. The sea, gently caressing or ripping apart, floating gently or dragging you under. The sea can build and gather momentum, frighten, and come crashing into the shore in which you reside. The sea can create upheaval and change, transforming landscapes and relationships and souls and then, dissipate. But waves can always bring you back. The natural world

creates them, and as long as there have been oceans in the world they have existed. They continue to affect.

Walking down to a stony beach one day, no one special, someone who did elephants to airplanes, horses to classical music, just a writer, just one soul looking for something that day on a lonely beach, found a young man on the sand who was bleeding, broken, in shock. The surf that day crashed into the shore, closing in hard, like bricks falling from the sky. Waves struck and pulled and sucked everything in their way. “Are you okay?” Lacking complete comprehension, seeking the story, the writer cut a path through a jungle to understand. The hurt young man’s breathing was difficult, “should I get a doctor?” the writer said. Metallic tastes of distress, concern and trepidation was the writer’s bite, emergency of situation pounded at the heart, “what can I do? Here, let me cover you with my windbreaker.”

The writer had been bivouacking the deserted beach, working hard on a novel, a story on human predilections, trying to hammer out a philosophy of cause and effect, motives and loneliness, on power and morality, a philosophy not yet there. The writer was broke and in a professional mess. Perhaps here, together with the elemental power of the place, a center could be found.

“My brother,” Blake said. They were alone except for the waves and the sand and the sky. A few odd birds meandered aftermath.

“Don’t talk now, save your strength, I am going to go and get help.” It would be a long run up in the heat of mid-morning, rushing up the rocky path to the village, a telephone call, and then the run back down to the beach. The endless wait for the nearest doctor. At least two hours, and only then if the doctor could be reached.

“My brother pulled me from the sea.” Blood red viscous continued running slowly from a gash on the side of Blake’s face. The writer reached for a backpack, pulled a towel from the bag, and wrapped Blake’s face.

It was earlier that morning, in diversion, that Blake took with him a sketch pad, a few pencils and some memories, down to the beach, to a rock outcropping by the sea. He was an American, lonely and acetic and on holiday. With him that day, he had also brought along a history.

He sat at this early time of day, quiet, contemplative, resigned and absorbed with his past, on this pita of a flat rock by the sea. It was Isabelle who had shown him this place.

Sheer cliffs rose above him from behind. Walls of granite for eons stood defiant of sea and time. Thorny plants grew between crevasses, prospered in season, and then receded back. Birds careened overhead according to plan.

Wild goats negotiated impossible pathways. Little indentations worn into the rock sheltered marine life in tide pools. An inaccessible shoreline was both caused by and protected by the sea, here, it was an unpredictable, narrow inlet of a beach, a natural vortex should the wind be right.

Together, in early rosy mornings they had taken the swim, art materials held in mouths in zip locked bags, gliding naked through the morning calm, making love, speaking the truth as they knew it, toying with art.

“Hello brother,” on that beaten smooth rock that morning, Blake heard the red wine of his brother’s voice, felt his presence in the water, in the wind, and in his mind, “it has been awhile, hasn’t it?”

‘Yes, it is good to talk with you again,’ Blake said in a voice dry, hearing in his mind the same voice he’d known since he’d been born. He had always been able to go to his brother for solace, to seek assistance, and advice. His brother had always been there for him.

And the mother who had a curious pregnancy fifteen years after the first. A foul tempered and distant woman, an accountant, she was as precise in her life as she was strict in the life of others, again confronted by the possibility of motherhood. A non-existent father, a veterinarian on call, concerned more with his animal practice than he was with his family practice. All that was left for Blake was a caring older brother.

“I see you have come to this island again for a visit,” the phantom said, “and attempting art too. One would think you would avoid such a place. The memories and all.”

“Yes. Memories,” Blake said, “what God gave us so that we may have roses in December.”

“Or a punishment too,” his brother countered, “why can’t you let her go? What is this fascination you have with a dead relationship, impossible from the beginning?”

“I’m able to handle it, okay? What happened between her and me was not because of you. Mistakes seem to be society’s way of excusing aberrant behavior. Accidents, if you like.” And after she left him, on the playlist was a requiem or two. “It ended, that’s all.”

“Strange what happens in life,” the brother said, “as to my viewpoint, I’m able to get a finer perspective on it now. Never would have thought of it while I was alive. Drowned at sea. Silly thing. A small wave really. Bad footing. She tried to help, sorry for not saying good-bye, and all.”

“I tell you again, it was not because of you.” On the drawing before him, Blake drew in a black and snarling line. Using the flat side of the pencil he marked in a cruel mouth, a stroke too bold for a sensitive man. He

immediately regretted it. He hadn't thought that he'd come out here to draw her.

It was worse at night. Wherever he went, N.Y., Paris, Berlin, he had images of an alabaster white Isabelle lounging on this same rock. In her tousled bed and hair in Paris. Naked in front of the fireplace at the cottage they'd rented one autumn near Fire Island. "To hell with it," Blake said, "damn all of reality." No one could capture her fire. He really wasn't an artist anyway.

"Science," Blake recalled her saying, "attempts to explain. Art needs no explanation." She thought his work as an anthropologist an unnecessary science. She thought all sciences unnecessary. Blake put the drawing aside. The morning was fine, a bright white sun, a few clouds in contrast to a blue sea. Small waves embraced a dry shore.

Waves. Out in open ocean, free and unrestricted, low in height, nothing to be afraid of here. Massing under the surface like the base of a moving mountain, trouble now, traveling rapidly and without hindrance. Nearing land, and closing in towards a climbing shoreline, a multiplication of the problem. Velocity slows, becomes more concentrated. Wave heights increase. Just above the point where the shoreline normally meets the shore,

wave height is at a maximum. Then it breaks. Strange enough, most of the damage occurs as the wave recedes back into the sea.

“Unless you’re out there,” Blake attacked out loud, “and you think you’re covered by anonymity, and there’s no way you figure that you’ll ever be found out,” Blake bristled, “and you’re bending over dipping your hands into the water to cool your face and you’re out of balance and spent from the waist down and the woman with you dozes across the rear thwart in whatever kind of bliss it was that I could never give her.”

“Thought we’d been all over that already,” the apparition said, “you should give it up and start your life again. Have you finished your graduate studies?”

“Yes.”

“Got a job?”

“No.”

“You’ve started smoking and drinking I see. My, it has been awhile since we’ve talked.”

“Don’t patronize me,” Blake exploded into the space surrounding, “I’m not your little brother anymore, I don’t need you. Got it?”

“Dealt a bad hand, were you?”

“You’re god damned right, and I would think you should take some responsibility.” He regretted again.

The thing between Blake and Isabelle had started as a mild flirtation one summer on this end of road ocean shore, later it had built into a serious affair. Both were looking for something different and not knowing what; Blake taking solace from the scientific world, with an orderly life, still a student, just learning of love, of life, and reality. Isabelle the artist, older, refusing as she always did, in keeping any of her trains on any reasonable track, still in her mind assuming the position of an arabesque, having played her part to a dwindling audience in too many bad musicals with men. Older but no wiser, her life an abstract ballet, she still imagined herself as the artist dancing nymph-like through life. But it was Adagio without a partner, wit without wisdom, and the reality was, that time had hardened and sharpened and honed the edge.

Isabelle’s history with men read like a road map to nowhere. Before meeting Blake, Phillip had been her last. He was a concert pianist who cared more for his hands and his music than he did for her, and her needs. Her last words with him were this: ‘You’ve made me hate myself.’ He had made her forget her art. She couldn’t live two lives. Leaving him, she chose to drown in her own poisons rather than drown in his. It had been hard to give up his

life and the excitement of the upper echelons of the music world, the luncheons, the parties, the gala openings and the fund raisers, but she did. She was free of his restrictions.

And Ranier before. Tall and light skinned, and full of dark passions. Ranier. Handsome, persuasive, exciting. He was from Amsterdam. He was an independent filmmaker who was constantly visiting faraway places. Gradually they came to live together. He was a documentary video voyeur who left a trail. Later she considered carefully his out-takes from places where women and children cared little about their dress, where they knew nothing of deviant behavior and they let the camera invade their everyday movements, where they let him exploit their inmost privacies, even in defecation. It was then that she decided that there was no future with him. Ranier made no bones about it, he proved to be intent on sexing almost everything in his path. Even the drunken Hungarian landlady that night in the hallway outside their door. Even though Isabelle had just returned from the abortion clinic that day.

Later that year, Ranier got stoned to death one summer day by the village elders in the upper Amazon. He had skipped out with his video footage and a religious head dress reputed to change the personality of whoever wore it. His body was found resting in an unnatural position in the jungle near

Manaus. Isabelle understood more about his death after reviewing some of the footage returned with his body.

And Percy. Sweet Percy. Her first. They had discovered art together. They were young. Barely nineteen and getting married under a spreading apple in the spring when the flowers seemed to scream out in scented blossom color, surrounded by stoned-out well-wishers holding hands in a circle in a meadow, all in beads and tie-dye and moccasins. Afterwards they all celebrated in a makeshift sauna, then bathed naked in a cold stream.

Percy created what he liked to call 'Cerebral Art,' a curious mixture of branches and feathers and industrial refuse. Isabelle ground stones and other things found in nature into paints. Later Percy found solace in Buddhism. Still later he shaved his head and went off to the mountains outside Katmandu, and never came back.

Blake, on his hot shelf by the sea, looked again at his sketch of a cruel mouth. Three years ago, he'd been happier.

Her hair was blonde that hot summer day. He imaged her wearing white, with a gossamer veil, and flowers, but he remembered that she'd been wearing a tight fitting top, it was red. The word Tsunami was written on her shirt, it rose ocean blue and then fell across the landscape of her breasts.

Blue jean cut-offs covered the nakedness he'd seen earlier on the beach. He spoke to her, certain that he must.

"Tsunami's can be generated by asteroid impacts over deep oceans," he said. She was the most exciting older woman he'd ever seen. He was on a high wire and working without a net. What would his brother say about her? "They usually devastate everything in their path," erudite now, in uncharted waters, but sophisticated.

"Well", she said with leisure. Slowness a provocation warning across her smile "You'd better be careful." She felt flattered that a boy like him could be interested in her. The last few had been older, patrons of her art, grayed, and in suits. The only art they knew was on the face of whatever currency they held dear.

She knew she was still beautiful. She never had children. A body firm at fifty. Breasts authentic and still full. A dancer's body of legs. She exercised regularly, ate responsibly, and drank little. Outside she was still soft like a woman, but she suspected a wall, inside and deep, buried in a secret reservoir which she could recall at any moment. Put to the test she could be ruthless and exact. Punitive and just. There had been too many men along the way. She should spare this boy. He was just an innocent. He would get hurt.

“An asteroid hitting the earth could be bad,” Blake said bold and taking a seat next to her in the cafe. Vines covered, a primitive but melodic music played, a soft breeze wafted in fragrance of wild herbs. Be forward now, he thought. In control. Older women liked that. “Nothing can compare to a giant rock coming in at about seventy thousand miles per hour. When they hit the ocean there is an incredible explosion. A fifty meter object hitting the ocean at that speed would probably release the equivalent of ten megatons of TNT. Asteroid and water both vaporize.”

“A perfectly consummated experience.” Isabelle laughed. The waiter asked her if she would like another glass of wine and she acquiesced. He saw her wearing black, and in mourning. The waiter had his dark eyes targeted and focused upon her .

“Leaving a crater under the water twenty times the size of the impacting object. There is a big hole in the water.” Blake tore his eyes away from the long scissors of her tanned legs. “The water comes rushing back in, rises up like a giant fountain in the sky.”

“Quite the orgasm,” she said, meaning to intimidate. She took wine from the waiter who was bending close. He smelled like fetid cheese, was un-manicured, and had hairy fingers. His Neanderthal face grinned at her.

Blake continued, “When it comes back down, spreading all around, is Tsunami,” cocking an eyebrow, as nonchalantly as he could, attempting an Eroll Flynn, he said, “what did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t,” Isabelle told him. A man speaking with a Russian accent passed by their table, glanced, murmured something deep throated and honeyed to himself. He showed his wife, a former dancer gone bust down, to a seat. The Russian looked again. Isabelle looked back. He saw her in dark stockings and spiked heels. Yes, Isabelle thought, still beautiful at fifty.

Later that night, after a group fire at the beach---the Russian brought a guitar and sang thick and musically of melodrama and pathos, all the while looking at her. Someone else had brought a jug of homemade wine, the cask was passed and they drank. A joint floated. Pulling Isabelle away from the fire, they went off together and Isabelle told Blake everything.

She told him of loving and not being loved back, of always putting herself out on a line and getting nothing back but hurt. She told him of disappointments and expectations and betrayals, of getting her face thrust into the earth just when she was vulnerable the most. She told him she would not stay. She warned him about the hardness of her soul.

And then on that beach, not one hundred meters from the rock on which Blake sat attempting art that morning, they made love for the first time. It

was more than three years ago. Afterwards, in each other's arms, they spoke

.

“This can never last, you know that, don't you?”

“But why?” the innocent said. He was kissing, caressing, burning for her, and in love, lost and not caring.

“Because what I do now is sweep. I devour, I masticate, and then I spit back out. Look, there gets a point in your life when it all seems too short, when every morning you awake and you think of what you haven't done with your yesterdays. So many things not painted. My art is in myself, for myself, and I cannot share it anymore.”

“I can't ever leave you. I don't care, I will be an artist too. Show me.”

“You are too young,” she said, “we just met, you're a darling really but I can never be satisfied. I am an artist, and with men I get bored quickly. I move on.”

Out there on that hot plate of a rock, where rocks beat salt from the ocean, serving himself out like an offering to a hungry fate, a sacrifice to the sea, Blake laughed a bitter Cinnar. She had given him almost two years; longer than she'd promised. Now he was experienced. How many relationships had he? Too many. One after another without her, and all for the wrong reasons without relent.

His brother and Isabelle. The relationship a cold dish set before a shivering man sprawled out over a burning rock. Art forgotten, Blake laid his head prone to the sea, listened as if he could hear the rotation of the earth. In its slow rotation, he thought he understood, in the beat, beat, beat of inevitability. So tired. Tired now. Weary of the problems connected with fragile human relationships. Kinetic energy. The actual as opposed to the potential. The lurking. The destructive. The dormant power of masses in motion. Isabelle had been the first. Isabelle had been the last. Who could argue with Tsunami? Waves, he thought, and how we're swept up by them and how our lives change as a result. Blake hit the metamorphic resistance of the rock.

Out at sea.

A wave capsized and sank a boat. All hands lost and no one to bury.

The first words Isabelle said upon meeting his brother was at an exhibition in New York. Blake's brother had suggested they go for bluefish the next morning.

"Men who fish, bait hooks and sink lines into the deep, hoping for a stroke of good luck," Isabelle said inspecting his brother, flirting she said, "My, a touch of gray at the temples does make a man. You don't look like

you have to fish. And such curly black hair. Is it possible that you are intelligent as well?"

"I only fish in places where I can expect to catch nothing. In this way I can never be disappointed. I've found pragmatism the best recourse in the face of uncertainty and danger." he smiled, "and, I am cautious of going after prizes I can't keep," he couldn't resist, "Blake was right, you are a very provocative woman." He glanced at Blake standing there, eyes full of love for her and thought to end it before it began, "but it is the maiden who listens, like the town that negotiates, who is half way toward surrender."

He wanted her and she knew it, "and what do you think of art," she asked, touching the lapel of his overcoat in an appreciative manner.

"Art surrounds us. You just need to open your eyes to see it. Art is metaphor. And there is no art as beautiful as a woman," this, he said, not looking at Blake. Isabelle smiled but did not reply.

The wind and the waves began. On his rock by the sea, Blake turned, for it was a different voice now, one which came from the mounting weather.

"It's not your fault," she said where wind and water always fill in footsteps in the sand, "I've always had problems with men. At fifty I should have known better."

"Why did you go? What were you thinking? Why did you leave me?"

“You were just a boy”

“And my brother? Was he so much better? Why couldn’t you have stayed on shore with me? That day, I waited and waited until the taverna closed, and even more. I couldn’t bear to leave in fear of losing you.” Blake threw away his attempt at art, failed to notice the weather rising, couldn’t hear the wind begin to howl, “and you,” his voice a losing battle into a gathering tempest, “sleeping in the sun, spent after being with him, and me, without either of you now.”

Blake looked up at the clouds gathering. At the weather cooling and a summer chill in the air, the waves larger now and drawing near, closing in, developing, massing and still he did not move, “and you, my brother. My only pal. I trusted you. You took her away from me. Oh yeah. Tell me again, some things are not meant to be. What a load of crap. She was mine.”

Far out at sea a wave had formed and traveled in all directions. One of these waves traveled far, and it now crested, and broke over him on the flat rock on which he sat.

The wave pulled Blake, clutching at nothing, out from the shore, brought him back, hurling him into the rock. The resulting swell pulled him back out, clawing at a smooth and unhelpful surface, without relent, time and time

again, until Blake thought he could stand it no more. He cried out even though he knew he was alone. That is when he got some help.

The writer had to keep Blake cogent, had to keep him from slipping into unconsciousness, had run up to the taverna, had to alert a sleepy waiter running stubby fingers through his tousled hair. The waiter conjured up the doctor's number in his mind and dialed. The doctor advised at least an hour.

“Tell me again what happened.”

“I thought it just a silly disagreement,” Blake murmured, “I knew things had cooled with her, but...”

“No. On the rock I mean. What happened? Didn't you hear about the wave? That it was coming? Did you slip?”

“No. I did not slip. The wave did not take me.” Slipping in and out of coherence, Blake asked, “What do you think of, of, art and science.”

The writer thought it an odd question, but had to keep him talking, needed him to stay conscious. Being a writer, approaching from the academic, she said, “Science breaks things down into an elemental form, a mathematical formula understandable as an absolute value without emotion.” Blake moved his head from side to side as if to disagree, the writer continued, “Art portrays the human condition from the artist's point of view at the time he exists.” The writer felt Blake slipping again.

“Then she went out to paint him fishing,” Blake coughed up a laugh, “even though she hated the smell of fish. I should have known. No one could hold her down. No one could hold her back from what she wanted.”

“Where is your brother,” the writer asked.

“First he went. Must have hit his head. The waves capsized the boat and for both of them, there was nowhere to go.”

“They both drowned?”

Blake was in delirium now, broken bleeding on the beach he said, “My brother was there, he helped me, he pulled me from the sea.”

Rushing, unaccustomed to physical demands, the doctor made his way awkwardly down the path and over the rocks to his patient. He attended to Blake while asking questions. “How long has he been like this?”

“I found him about two hours ago, the wave must have taken him out. He keeps saying something about his brother.”

“His brother?”

“Yes. He died at sea.” The writer said nothing of Isabelle.

“What is your name. For the report.”

“My name is Rachel. I am here working on a novel.”

“He will need someone to stay with him while I go up and arrange for an ambulance and stretcher. Will you stay with him?”

“Yes. I will take care of him,” the writer said. She looked at Blake. On the beach, waves continued to break, disturbing small stones and sand, pulling out the shore in rearrangement and then returning once again.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *So you’re sitting naked on that remote beach. In Greece. And a word and a phrase comes to you, first as fine droplets, as you watch the undulating sister of the earth. It crashes in with unending power and hubris.*

In the caldron of your mind you think now of all the relationships gone awry, and you put aside the final edit of that novel of Christmas, and winter, and New York City, to make notes, ephemeral ideas to paper, of science and art and relationships.

Afterwards, you make that climb up a craggy path to the taverna where you touch others in social greetings and make more notes on humanity. You return to that beach and the wave equation is drafted. The story is resurrected again and again and it is finally released from the drawer and done.

Since I was a child, any book that came across my hungry eyes, was a target. I went through the usual suspects, Tarzan, Moby Dick, pulp-fiction Hot-Rod novels of the fifties. I even did a stint with the Russian Masters. It was the sixties which radicalized my brain. Vonnegut, Kesey, Marx. But it was the writers of the thirties which took hold of me. Hemingway for certain, and Faulkner, but most powerful for me was John Steinbeck, and I try to get to that perfect character and plot point carried by superb English sentences, in my work. Perhaps someday, I will.

My uncle, a former high school English teacher and poet, once told me that the purpose of literature was to entertain. I answered that the purpose of literature is to educate the masses. Somewhere in between, I suspect, is the answer.

You can access me on Facebook, Mark Antokas, and my writer's: webpage at MarkAntokas-RaconteurandWriter.com

AUTHOR’S BIO: Author Mark Antokas has traveled the world in all manner of conveyances, on water, on land, and in the sky. Having in the past had altogether too many jobs, professionally and otherwise, there be too many hats for this rack. All grist for the mill. Experience. What we do. Write.

Spending time equally between the Greek Islands of the Aegean in the summers, the author winters in the U.S. and is currently restoring a 1977 Nautor Swan 43 in the Cape Canaveral, Florida area. He has two published novels on Amazon, “In the path of Exile, the Odyssey According to Homer, 1967-69,” and, “Another Noel.” Currently he is working on a short story collection which has a working title of “You Said We’d Be Friends Forever and I Believed You,” which should be published Summer 2020.

EDITOR’S BIO: Heather Whited is originally from just outside Nashville, Tennessee, and after many changes of her major, somehow graduated from Western Kentucky University on time in 2006 with a degree in creative writing and theater. After a few years working and traveling that saw her hanging out on no fewer than three continents and gave her the chance to try vegetarian haggis, Heather returned to Nashville to obtain a Master's degree in education. She now lives in Portland, Oregon, where she teaches in the public schools and at Portland State University. When not writing, she plays on a killer Harry Potter trivia team and a general knowledge one too, spends time with her dog, does not go camping, ever, and tries not to think too much about the vegetarian haggis.

The Death of Brutus

By Mark Tulin

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor JOHN SHEIRER writes: I remember learning a term back in college English class: In Medias Res (starting in the middle). I like how this story jumps right into the central quest of the tale--the pursuit of a new hamster to expand the "family"--without any overdone backstory about Betty, the narrator, or the situation. We learn more than enough about them just by knowing that Betty wants another hamster and the narrator is going to help her get one ... again. I also like how the dialogue in this story reflects natural human conversation in an understated but powerful way. The little details are telling here, and one of my favorites is the two types of hamsters: long hair and regular. Who knew? Betty knew, that's who, and that simple fact provides specific insight into her character that multiple paragraphs of exposition from a weaker writer wouldn't provide. Most of all, I appreciate the uncertain and overlapping caregiver roles in the story: The narrator cares for Betty as best he can while Betty, in her way, cares for the hamsters as best she can. And the manager of the pet shop sums up the relationships and most of human nature in this insightful moment, my favorite section of the story:*

"Betty," said the manager trying to hide his exasperation, "you know that there are no guarantees. If you clean the cage, change the water, and don't overfeed the hamster, he'll live longer."

She nodded her head but didn't listen.

(Spacing and font size are author's own.) Eds.

The Death of Brutus

By Mark Tulin

“Get me ready; we’re going out.” Betty commanded from her wheelchair.

“Where?” I asked, snapping on my plastic gloves.

“We’re going to get another hamster. Brutus needs company. He’s a little down in the dumps, and I think a new brother would cheer him up.”

Betty didn’t see me roll my eyes. All I could think was, *here we go again!*

“Don’t you think the O’Brien twins are enough company for Brutus?” I asked.

“No, they’re females. He needs a male!”

Betty kept buying hamsters and feeding them food pellets until they ended up bloated and dead at the bottom of the hamster cage.

“They’re hungry,” she said, taking one in her gnarled fingers. “You’re so cute—yes, you are. You want mommy to give you something yummy?”

Betty became disabled from a car accident in her mid-thirties, spending the rest of her life in a wheelchair. All the aides have quit working with her for one reason or another. I prefer less obstinate people, but, surprisingly, I found her abrasive personality a bit charming.

I prepared Betty for the trip, wheeling her into the shower and soaping her body, lathering her hair with dandruff shampoo, scrubbing her back, and careful not to miss a spot. It was a long process, but that’s not the half of it. Having to lift her and slip on her pants and blouse at the same time was a major challenge, not to

mention changing her catheter bags.

Once at the corner of Carpinteria Street, the bus arrived promptly.

It took about twenty minutes to reach PetsLove, where everyone who worked there knew Betty.

“Hi, Betty, how are you, dear?” said the manager.

“I’m back for another little furry fella,” she said. “This one better, be good.”

I wheeled her to the hamster display, which was a glass cage stacked with an assortment of hamsters and a few random chew toys.

The manager, who had a hairy mole on his cheek, took extra-special care of Betty.

“Which one would you like—the long hairs or the regulars?”

“Oh no, I had a long hair once, and he died on me. Give me a short hair. And make sure this one lasts!”

“Betty,” said the manager trying to hide his exasperation, “you know that there are no guarantees. If you clean the cage, change the water, and don’t overfeed the hamster, he’ll live longer.”

She nodded her head but didn’t listen. She would go home, clean the cage once a month to save on bedding, and feed him multiple times a day. Then the poor hamster would overeat, and I’d find him on his back, stiff as a rock with a blurry death gaze.

Betty held a chubby one in her hands. He squirmed between her gnarled fingers, then climbed down her floral blouse and onto her lap.

“Do you need any help?” I asked.

“Don’t just stand there, Phil—get him before he falls!”

He looked up at me with his sad, juju bead eyes. He didn’t even wiggle or try to escape.

“This one is a keeper,” I told Betty.

She nodded as much as she could, given her disability, and the manager with the hairy mole on his cheek put the poor critter into a little cardboard box for us to take home.

I attempted to attach the box to the back of the wheelchair, but Betty insisted that she hold him on her lap.

“Remember what happened to Calvin,” she said. “He chewed right through the box, and he ran away.”

I remembered all too clearly. We scoured the neighborhood for hours, unable to find him. Lucky for us, the manager of PetsLove gave us a new one for free.

I unfurled Betty’s fingers and placed the box between her shaky hands. Her fingers clutched the box like she was holding the family jewels.

Every time Betty felt the hamster nibble on the cardboard box, she said lovingly, “No, baby. We’ll be home soon, and you’ll have a big brother to play with.”

Miraculously, the hamster listened, stopped gnawing on the box.

Once home, I changed Betty’s leaky catheter and took the hamster to his cage. I held the hamster box open for a few seconds, not rushing the hamster into his new home, and, instead, allowing him to sniff around so he could feel safe. I watched him slowly venture into the cage, pausing cautiously, then took a few more steps and burrowed completely under the white bedding.

As I filled the water bottle, Betty called out from the living room, “His name is Caesar! That’s it, Caesar!” She had just watched *Cleopatra* on cable and wanted her new hamster to have a powerful Roman name to go along with Brutus.

As for Brutus, I didn’t see him in the cage. He usually greeted me with a couple of excited squeaks when I opened the door or tapped on his water bottle. I searched under the mound of bedding, and there he was, as stiff as a rock. His eyes were open, and he had a frozen grin like death was a happy occasion.

“Goodbye, Brutus,” I whispered. “I hope that you do better in your next life. I hope you find happiness wherever you are going. Because wherever you go, I’m sure it will be better than this place.”

I presented the dead hamster to Betty, who was busy cleaning the wax from her ears with a Q-tip. When she realized that Brutus was dead, she cried like a part of her had died, perhaps conjuring up thoughts of her body mangled in that unfortunate car crash.

“No, Brutus—you can’t be dead!” she repeated, then looked up at me with her rheumy eyes. “I bought him a few months ago. He was alive this morning?”

If I reprimanded her for feeding him too much, she’d give me much grief, so I just stared at Brutus lying like a rock on the table with shards of white bedding stuck to his greasy fur.

Betty was a dreamer, a believer in miracles. She believed that one day God would come down from the heavens and make her walk again. She often invited her priest to sprinkle her with holy water, which gave her some hope that her struggles would one day be over, and her body healed.

“We’re going to save him,” she said. “Brutus will rise from the dead. We’ll invoke the heavenly spirit.”

I felt like saying, “The only special powers that you have, Betty, is being a royal pain in the ass.”

Betty put her crooked forefinger on the dead hamster’s head and grabbed my hand, “With the power of God invested in me, I command the life in your body to resurrect and become whole again.”

A few minutes of awkward silence followed. The clouds didn’t open up, nor did a bolt of lightning strike Brutus, reviving his limp body that would awaken a hamster version of Frankenstein.

“Please, Lord,” she said with her eyelids closed tight. “Bring to life our Brutus; make him breathe again. Make his tiny legs spin on his brass wheel once more.”

She kept thumping the poor guy’s forehead with her fingertips as the faith healers do on television.

After twenty minutes of failing to revive Brutus, Betty thankfully gave up.

“We have to bury him,” she said, craning her stiff neck to look up.

“Bring in Caesar and the O’Brien twins,” she ordered. “Brutus would have wanted them at his funeral.”

“Are you sure you want Caesar to participate? He’s had a long day, and I’m sure he’s still adjusting to his new cage.”

“Nonsense!” snapped Betty. “He’s a hearty fellow. I’m sure he wants to be with us in our time of sorrow.”

I put Caesar in one plastic ball while the O’Brien girls shared another, then I

dug a hole in the yard where the sixteen or so other hamsters lay buried. Since Brutus was a highly religious rodent, according to Betty, I got two small twigs and bound them together to make a cross. I placed his rigid body into an eyeglass box and put the little casket into the damp ground. I covered it with dirt and stuck the homemade cross at the head of the tiny gravesite.

Betty cleared her throat and spat into her napkin. As a drizzle fell in the backyard, she began her eulogy: "We are gathered here today for a very sad occasion. Brutus, the late son of Betty Krucker, was taken from us for who knows why. Our family—my health aide, Phil, the O'Brien twins, and our newly purchased, Caesar, are all grief-stricken beyond words. Let us now pray that Brutus finds a place by our creator's throne."

I flicked my lighter in the air to commemorate the solemn occasion.

Betty pointed her crooked finger at me, indicating that it was my turn to speak.

I cleared my throat. "I've known Brutus for the past six months, and, in all that time, he's never once bitten or scratched me. He had always been appreciative of the food and water that he received. Never complained, once."

"More!" Betty shouted.

As the rain fell harder, I continued, making it up as I went along.

"Brutus wrinkled his nose and fluttered his whiskers after he drank water. I'd place him in the plastic ball when I cleaned his cage and watched him roll around the house, knocking into walls and furniture, often getting lodged in the corner of the room, squealing to let me know when he needed help. He always enjoyed when I sang him the Beatles song *Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da*."

Just then, I heard some squealing coming from the ground. Could it be? I put my ear to the ground and listened closer. The squeals grew louder. I quickly scooped the casket out with my hands and opened it. To my astonishment, Brutus had his eyes open and wiggling his whiskers, happy to see me. Good God! I was almost certain when we put him in the casket he was dead!

Betty's eyes teared as she held young Caesar in her hands.

"Amen!" she shouted. She crossed herself, and let out a long, pronounced sigh to the heavens.

I put the revived Brutus in Betty's gnarled hands and she began kissing him all over his body, saying how much she missed him, and that the power of God really does exist. There was a few minutes of joyful cuddling, then the rains came down harder and we all went inside.

"What do we have to eat?" Betty asked. "This resurrection business makes me hungry!"

I smiled. I knew what meal that she loves when she's celebrating.

I microwaved a Swanson's Salisbury Steak with mashed potatoes and gravy, and returned the O'Brien Twins to their cage. There was just joy and happiness in Betty's eyes for the rest of that day, no complaints about her back or her pain in her arms and legs. She let Caesar and Brutus walk on the dining room table as she ate her TV dinner, feeding both some of her peach cobbler with gnarled fingers.

"You're the cutest little brothers, I ever saw," she purred lovingly.

END

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *The Death of Brutus* was inspired by several clients I assisted during the year I worked as a healthcare aide. I was fascinated by a couple of women, in particular, who used wheelchairs and needed around-the-clock care. I empathized with their pain and suffering but was more fascinated by their quirky personalities that may have developed from dealing with various healthcare aides who had differing skill levels and character traits. I was intrigued by the women's ability to deal with adversity, especially being dependent on people to shower, dress, and see them at their most vulnerable times. Venturing into the community in a wheelchair, presented many obstacles, i.e., Betty getting on the bus, shopping, and dealing with condescending people. Working with the severely disabled taught me that no matter how desperate a person's life is, people seek the same thing—connection. In Betty's case, she connected with hamsters and religion. My work has been inspired by those writers who demonstrated a certain creative madness such as Charles Bukowski, Philip Roth, and Henry Miller. Two of my main writing goals are telling a good story without being boring and finding the truth in my characters—the more painful, the better.

AUTHOR’S BIO: **Mark Tulin** is a former therapist from Philadelphia who now lives in California. He has two poetry books, *Magical Yogis* and *Awkward Grace*. His upcoming book, *The Asthmatic Kid and Other Stories* available to pre-order. Mark has been featured in Amethyst Review, Strands Publishers, Fiction on the Web, Terror House Magazine, Trembling with Fear, Life In The Time, Still Point Journal, The Writing Disorder, New Readers Magazine, among others. Mark’s website, [Crow On The Wire](#).

EDITOR’S BIO: **John Sheirer** (pronounced “shy-er”) lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, with his wonderful wife Betsy and happy dog Libby. He has taught writing and communications for 27 years at Asnuntuck Community College in Enfield, Connecticut, where he also serves as editor and faculty advisor for *Freshwater Literary Journal* (submissions welcome). He writes a monthly column on current events for his hometown newspaper, the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, and his books include memoir, fiction, poetry, essays, political satire, and photography. His most recent book is *Fever Cabin*, a fictionalized journal of a man isolating himself during the current pandemic. (All proceeds from this book will benefit pandemic-related charities.) Find him at [JohnSheirer.com](#) His story **BIG LITTLE DOG** was published in Issue 6 (Fiction).



PEACE by Camilo Aguirre

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Pictures were the first words and strings of images the first stories. And though they eventually parted company to become ‘art’ and ‘literature’, the combined medium has never lost its appeal. From comic books and yaoi to the sophisticated ‘pic lit’ of Art Spiegelman it is still with us and the message is strong. In Camilo’s Aguirre’s short double language hybrid, the black and white images, like virtual linocuts, bolster the stark meaning behind the words to become icons of protest. A talented young*

graphic writer who parks his conscience front and center and whose foreboding words/images hit hard.



Afuera de los campamentos
merodeaban asesinos. El
tiempo pasaba y el gobierno
no actuaba

Killers were hanging outside
the camps. Time passed and
the government did not act.







AUTHOR'S NOTE: Peace is a small comic narrating the violence in the aftermath of the Colombian armed conflict. Peace's panels are based on testimonies from interviews to former FARC guerrillas who demobilized after the peace treaty and then were violently persecuted by different forces including the State's. It is an attempt to explain the continuity of violence and how peace is a laborious effort that implicates all the members of a society. Stylistically it is inspired in the wordless novels from the early twentieth century with authors such as Frans Masereel, Lynd Ward or Laurence Hyde, and of course the graphic artists during the Mexican revolution such as Jose Guadalupe Posada or Alfredo Zalce. The image

sequences in wordless novels have an economy in terms of storytelling that appeal to symbolism and allegory mixing lyricism with communication effectiveness.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Camilo Aguirre is a Colombian cartoonist. Visit him at <https://camilo-aguirre.wixsite.com/comics/>

NAKED

By Elizabeth Kilani

WHY WE LIKE IT: *If it's true you can love something without completely understanding it, then we love 'Naked' and Elizabeth's Kilani's radical roof-raising approach to fiction. There is so much going on here it's like finding yourself in a Fun House room swamped by a sea of balloons that reach to the ceiling. But it's also a house of mirrors and maybe even a little bit House of Usher. There is honest to goodness heart inside the art here and powerful fuck you moments that are just well..spellbinding. Enraging, engrossing and written in outsider prose that's third degree burn. More, please.*

NAKED

'Don't threaten me with love,' by Billy Holiday, 'let's just go walking in the rain.'
: 'I'm like a bird, I wanna fly away, I don't know where my soul is. I don't know where my home is. But baby all I need for you to know is...)- Nelly Furtado

Everybody calls it the eight year itch or is it six or seven, but it's not like I have an issue with commitment or anything. If I did I wouldn't have had a fiancée at 23. I fell in love and it was perfect! But maybe it's like Nelly Furtado sings, 'why do all good things come to an end?' So.....

while some serial daters note the tone of the relationship and are ready and waiting for them and break up at the poignantly sad moments before they have a chance to get dumped. Mutual, irreconcilable differences they call it of course which is more concealing than revealing and is rather political. A nice legal jargon to seal a less than abrupt end of circumstances mitigated by life and two people who were supposed to love each other forever when they made their covenant vows. I was ready for it. I loved him. I would never marry anybody that I didn't love.

I come back from the cemetery and the security guard catches me. He gives me his knowing look: Three times this month, it is not yet his anniversary. Trouble in Eros paradise? They always know. Every time that I am about to break up with someone I come at least three times. They say bad things come in threes and by 4 it is irreparable. I give him a suppressed smile and he gives me a look of penetration. I don't even know why they need a security guard on the grounds, the place is already locked, do they think that there are some necrophilics or witch doctors willing to trade sums for pieces of body parts like kidneys, or amateur doctors who want to do experiments with the bodies? When we lowered his coffin it was about six feet under. He wasn't the kind of person to get a full make up ceremony for his funeral but he still looked so young and alive as if he always was. That is how I remember him in my mind. The boy who didn't need a touch up even when dead to be buried. He would always be forever young, fresh like spring in my eyes.

He passes my polite smile with a look of sympathy. But this man keeps in company with the dead, which I suppose I do also. If I keep commemorating all my dead relationships, I am cementing them here. But he is not a shrine. He is my altar. The place I lay to rest every dead relationship at. I walk out to the glass union which is the short code we call for our online magazine, but we never let our editor get a peep of the word. 'You have that look again,' my colleague passes me one arm of coffee. She takes a sip of her own thoughtfully.

‘I don’t have time for your amateur psychology.’ ‘Oh, I boast of no such ambitions. But your next boyfriend is liberating the phone with noises, with sounds and shrieks that I know not what. I swear I always know when it’s him. It’s like he is crying out through the cords.’ I shake my head. It was a bad idea to not give him my work number but let him know where I was working. I may as well have just stamped a love note exclaiming ‘call me!’ This one has been really hard, because it’s already lasted 8 months. And I can only keep the strain for seven. So I have had three weeks to kick off a bad habit and one week concession. And I still haven’t done the deed.

The editor runs into our cabinets by the open workspace facing me. Right off the onset I feel nervous. She breaks into a smile. ‘Good job. Good job Amy. We’ve got a merger and contract online. The major publisher in Abidjan Cote d’Ivoire wants to sign us up!’ ‘And we’re not even French!’ My colleague feels the need to add. ‘It’s called a global village and cosmopolitan international identity.’ ‘Just as long as it’s not brokerage for global citizenship or anything. What does this guy want with us anyway. Weren’t they the ones profiled by the European French Alliance.’ ‘Yes. And this is our foot in. Finally, we’re not just an underground, non-mainstream visionary.’ ‘If it seems too good to be true then it probably is.’ I nod looking at our editor apprehensively. ‘I don’t care if you are making a deal with the devil, I want you to get that contract.’

‘Me? What do I have to with this?’ ‘Smokey, cloud eyed girl. We have three employees and two secretaries running a limited magazine in this dump. If this man wants to meet you for dinner to sign the contract you will help additionally polishing his shoes with your saliva.’ I sense the concerns in our worker’s eyes. And looking at our editor I see her desperation. I follow her on cue to our office. She is punching sheets and stapling them in a mesmerized possessed frenzy like she is a medium following the rituals while lost in abstract apprehensions. ‘Sit.’

‘Amy. You’re young. So I guess you never have to think about finances or bills as you watch your kids grow older and life pass you by.’ What? ‘But this magazine is all I have. It’s my dream. I have invested everything into it to the point where I neglect my own partner. And it’s just wonderful that he is angelic and forbearing. I sleep, wake up, dream and eat for this business. And it’s not for some arbitrary ambition but because I really believe in this place. Last month I asked my partner to borrow me some money to pay the rent three months due for this seedy dive. Next month will probably be the same if we can keep this place afloat. I wanted to die! I feel like those NGO’s who are every accumulating more expenses. And heavy gloss is not cheap, you know, even if that’s what the paper needs. With this we have the funds for print and publication material and the publicity and awareness to go digital.’

‘I don’t even know this guy.’ ‘You’re not going to marry him and have his babies. You’re just going for dinner. And then give him the contract.’ ‘I feel like a prostitute when you put it like that. Debbie’s writing is good. Jenny’s even better. Why is he specifically targeting me? This doesn’t seem like a good idea. It’s not going to work.’ ‘It’s only a bad idea if it doesn’t work.’ ‘None of my ideas work.’ ‘Then you’ve got a lot of bad ideas, ‘the kind only a very intelligent person could believe in and invest in.’ ‘ ‘What does that even mean?’ She stops stamping. ‘It means that it is going to work so it is a good idea.’ ‘I don’t feel good about this.’ She looks at me then I see tears in her eyes. ‘We’re going to go under. 6 months at best. This is all we have.’ ‘It’s just cultural pollution,’ I stall, ‘we’ll get there.’ ‘We don’t have time to get there. The lease and the creditors can’t wait.’ I look at her and she notes my consent.

‘Please wear something formal!’ she calls to my retreating back. ‘And stop wearing ties. You look like a Julia Roberts wannabe hooker in the nineties. It is dead already, let the fashion phase die! Stop torturing it with a slow, long protruding death!’ I get home and now have to add to the task of breaking it off with for short we will call him Guy, I then have to attend a meeting with a formidable merger giant. I pick up the phone

and eye my wallpaper silently. Four rings. ‘I know you were waiting _____(guy)’ ‘What happened Amy, what happened to us?’ ‘You were fine. It’s all me. You’re the longest relationship I’ve ever had since.....’ ‘Why fix what’s not broken then?’

Because it’s too easy Chad. And I knows you are not the one. Because every time I want to suppress the grief you are a convenient excuse. Because I don’t want to make you an accessory to my repressions and self-manipulations. Because I am not in love with you. And by eight months I should know that I don’t have feelings for someone. But all I say is, ‘I’m sorry, Chad.’ He drops the phone. Another goodbye. And the worst part is this liberated feeling, like I’ve escaped the gas chambers. This is so wrong.

I dress in a haze, half appraising of my appearance but more pessimistic in absent mindedness. This is not insight, back burner or abstract thinking, this is hell. I meet him in the hallway and I only know immediately because we are the only ones for the evening and we booked early. Good, the faster this is to get done, the better. ‘You’re the Amy. I’ve read a lot of your work.’ I consent with a nod and look at my plate. The place is beautiful and the atmosphere lovely but I cannot enjoy it. I feel a stillness in the air and atmosphere and I feel a little stiff.

‘Let me make this easy for you. Ease your apprehensions. Here he is the contract. Signed, sealed delivered. I only want the pleasure of your company.’ I look at him, knowing that I am still compelled to stay, even when he has released me. But he has kind wise eyes, which make him very sensible and I know that he is respectable. He is a gentleman, graceful. ‘I uhhmm, I’m just struggling to understand why you wanted me here so badly in the first place.’

‘You know, it’s funny. I built this company on instincts. Just a stupid detail. And it created an empire. Well,’ he smiles ruefully, ‘at least the marketing and advertising side of it.’ I smile for the first time in the evening. ‘It was the philosophy volume, I think that did it. On your

editions and series of Social constructs.’ ‘You are a little late, that was three years ago.’ ‘But the part about flattery and praise I was hooked. I went reading laughing mildly to myself thinking that I knew all of the mistakes you could make. And you made none of them. I took a mirror and transport to your world that day.’ ‘It’s in the cloud zone. Like your digital collections.’

And still he carefully constructs phases to goad me into talking. Or maybe I just have this hypnotized effect from the one glass of silly wine but I can’t stop talking for too long. His eyes are silently appraising me but bearing no scrutiny. ‘Northanger Abbey? Was that Jane Austen.’ ‘Yes, but I know it very ill.’ Great I am too happy if I am talking like this. I look at the wine glass accusingly and suspiciously, my thoughts clouded. ‘Hangman.’ ‘What?’ ‘We used to play that.’ ‘I know what hangman is- just give me the schema trail.’ ‘I thought the best part was clicking in the last word.’ He sighs. ‘Seeing you here today reminded me that it’s not.’

‘It’s getting late. I think that I should go.’ ‘No. Wait. There’s a reggae evening here, I thought you’d like it.’ I feel like Cinderella getting ready to slip off to her soiled clothes. I quicken my goodbyes, just so I can float by without the clock striking twelve. And the next morning I force myself to wake early to google his name on the internet and social media. Checklist. Not married. Not gay. No fetishes (as of obvious presence). Really into community. He’s joining in with the CBD program- to plough! To plough! Soft spot for animals. Educated- and not even the mainstream kind, he is really aware! He has such presence. And he is an A list guy- what could be wrong with this man.

After the shower, I get ready to be a couch potato. So I wear a think flaky robe that is a veiled gown. It is so hot and I am sweating and much more comfortable wearing the sheer garment over my underwear. I hear a knocking, gentle thud, only to see him outside the door through the window. I curse and run to the bedroom. And change into a tank top and jeans desperately frantically quickly. I open the door.

He looks at me seriously with penetrating eyes. Then smiles with knowing eyes. 'Your top is on the wrong side.' 'OOOhhh, uhm.' I try. 'Is this an official business visit?' 'Well, you left something.' He hands me my scarf. 'Goodbye Cinderella.' 'Wait....so the merger is complete. Why?' 'Sorry, I don't understand your question.' 'Why is such a big company taking on us?' 'Maybe you are not as small as you claim to be. At least, not to me.' He looks back at me. 'I will see you again,' as in a very definitive sense.

For the next few weeks I start singing songs like, 'You make me feel like a natural woman,' and, 'If I love again, I could lose again. but it's a chance that I'd rather take. I need to do this for me. If I love then I could lose completely.' Not that I need to sing to get him in and out of my thoughts. I just feel, yes, the world is a little obsessed. he is one of the most penetrating men I have ever known. I feel like I am sinking into his gravity.

Then the sinking feels like quicksand. We start communicating through correspondence and every time that he is in town. Which is a lot more than I could have supposed, you may read your own meaning. And before I know it it is a year like this and I am running scared. I have doubled up on my resistance to dating for two years, and now it is a whole annual period. I start getting listless and pangs of pain. my mother said that I never grieved properly for my lost fiancée but in that stage and phase of bereavement if I ad cried anymore I would have drowned in tears and an ocean of depression. We each make regularities and entropy with our brain.

And then it gets bad when my mind tries to freeze me into an ultimatum. Him or Bryan, which death would I have preferred to heal better from? It crumples me inside because I feel deadlocked and grid locked. My brain suspends in a state of perpetual emergency and crisis. And the worst part is, it makes my writing more edgy. My editor drops my article into my desk. Her script in a calligraphy like writing states. 'Perfect, requiring little editing. Whatever you are doing, keep doing it.'

One evening I feel lost in a trance. Now even writing as betrayed me as my thoughts have. I have reached the perfect balance of chaos trying to juggle death and life and reconciling it to myself. And I hear him knock on the door. And I know it is him. I know his tentative knocks. I rise up, feeling like I am going to the graveyard all over again. he looks at me immediately sensing something. ‘What’s wrong,’ he says gently.

‘I’m sorry. This cannot in no way work out.’ I shouldn’t have let this happen.’ I fell in love, Bryan. He looks at me seeing my mind going back to those dark places, me burying my heart right next to Bryan’s grave. ‘Amy,’ he says, struggling. I feel my consciousness slipping to the moment of hearing Bryan’s gone and seeing his dead body. I see myself churning over to a lock of hades were I can be beside death and grief can no longer hurt me. I feel my emotions raising in affect arousal and heightened alarms like a bell rising sharper and sharper.

‘Amy, listen to me,’ he says urgently. ‘Don’t go back to that world. I’m here. I’m life. I am your love. Don’t make me watch you die. Please Amy, come back to me.’ I feel my eyes wavering, trying to separate Bryan and death from everything. And then I bury him again, and close the shades. Goodbye Bryan. I will always love you. And it takes all the faith I have and courage I have to look at him. ‘Sorry for that dissociative disorder,’ I try a smile. ‘I just couldn’t let go. There was so much pain and I couldn’t let go.’

‘I love you, Amy.’ ‘I know. Let’s forget about love. Let’s start with like and first dates. Let’s rewind and start over. Let’s start with, “I like you, very very much.” ’ I smile like we used to as children dancing in the rain. Some God once said he makes all things new. Can I have an again?

AUTHOR’S NOTE: .

1. Issues and themes wanted to explore

A bit like the cat who had nine lives there have been a ray of experiences and individuals- a village in fact who moulded it. Jane Austen was praised by contemporaries on the exquisite taste of making the ordinary extra-

relentlessly with cinematography and films like 'The Counte of Monte Cristo and the movie about the serial killer in the film Seven.

It may have seen as though I was a train wreck of drama prostitution but it was not so.....I studied pathology and criminology to reconcile health psychology and social ecology working for functional developed societies. I cruised through Criminology only because I was sweeping notes and codes of Law and Order. I ate the abnormal psychology textbook because every moment it was feeding me to a culture of learning what sane and functioning meant – the way that my high school teacher Miss Robb used to preach, 'Up is not down, big is not small, dark is not light' etcetera. It was a whirlwind and through artists like Jeffery Deaver, Catherine Ryan Hyde, Fiona Gibson, Katherine Applegate, Emma McLaughlin, Atthol Fugard, Chinua Achebe- it was all like intellectual food for the soul.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Finished high school senior at a public school located near Rhema Bible Church. Dabbled in Sunday School teaching, prayer meetings, home fellowship gatherings for only 5 leap years since becoming a Christian which will be her 20th year 'phase' as was cited by roommates in dorm boarding. It was in this Christian gatherings she gained valuable lessons on love, intimacy, sharing and bonding and it was the perfect fraternization for an inexperienced solvent introvert.

Was a very late bloomer in romance and ironically got married at 23. She was always visiting orphanages and homes and enjoyed Christmases with the church handicapped recipients of homes and clinics noting the curious link and bonding with a marginalized society so much like hers. and every place cemented the love and bond with the woman she loved most in the world. Her beloved grandmother passed away in the most dignified, stately composed and mild course and the trial weathered a mosaic blue pill of experiences- it was literally like learning and starting to live again from the grave.

In special victims unit and support groups she was blessed by a wonderful circle of the most supportive, kind, empathetic and sensitive soft and delicately patient friends who were like her caretakers and I treasured them. As a single mother she is blessed with a very exicatory, dramatic child who aggravates her dynamically in his most ambitious level- and his fierce argumentation has challenged her as much as the divide and negotiations

with a mother who would have either created an abnormally neurotic child or a hysterical writer.

She got her main degree in UNISA for Communications after studying Public Relations in media studies in community College and BA Journalism (of which she did not get on at all, as a PR liaison or Journalist) and was happily settled in Contract Research after her second major in BA modules of Applied Psychology.

She worked for the head branch coordinator of a system overseeing NGO's, NPO's and CBO's and PBO's in some government judiciaries capacitations in social development, community development data mining for infrastructure and a hybrid of resources and bridging networks. Notable mostly youth development, income generation, education and employment objectives in a strictly research and data analyst capacity. A most blessed 8 years of fielding after her first branch as intern using research methodology and questionnaire data design for the community services to measure impact of service delivery of NGO literacy, awareness campaigns and integration in community. The feedback for recommendations and improvement were not so heavily invested or extended.

But everytime I think about writing and the people who inspired me, there is a tribe and village and community. Still, it is always for my grandmother, my first love, my last love, my baby, the Jadene brunette sweetheart I tenderly regard as a twin sharing my birthday- whom I was tempted and obliged to think of as the most beautiful, feminine, softest girl in the world second only to Kaka, the women at my support group outpatients and inpatients unit , and the children in the orphanage who prayed like angels every morning and lived like perfect creatures all teaching me the sober method of being marginalized from society and bearing it with grace and dignity. A lesson I am still trying to learn.

She celebrates her 38th year birthday in August 25th

I hope this is sufficient.

SEDATIVES

By Elizabeth Kilani

WHY WE LIKE IT: *See 'Naked' above, in the TOC. I mean, we're just at a loss for words. This is a writer who designed her own mould, broke it when she climbed out and emerged a rocket-fuelled original. There's nothing else like her in this entire issue. The story is a post-structuralist guerrilla prose (with a strong dose of outsiderism) monument to something we're not sure of, but crazy-yum-sane, sane-crazy and like, red hot, burn your fingers hot. If this story was ice cream they'd have to invent a whole new flavour. Five stars.*

It's so strange how that word became unusual and extraordinary even in an experimental and introduction phase.....'You say it like this, Melony, SE- day-tive, not SEE -date- ive, like sea- weed or something.' 'But she talked about sedating him and she specifically said, sedate.' 'That's because it is a pronouncing of sedate not sedatives- and even that is technically wrong. I mention no mistakes but your own, because if you're going to be my fiancée, you're going to have to learn to speak and pronounce properly.' I sing to him the advert song, 'You say neither. And I say neither. You say potato and I say potato. You like tomatoes and I like tomatoes. Let's call the whole thing off! I will consider being your wife on one condition- let me hear how you pronounce jalapenos.' 'Jalapenos,' he says hoarsely before kissing me. After the long winding kiss I rewind, 'damn, I knew we were wrong for each other. That's not the way I expect people to say jalapenos.' He kisses me again, long and hard then slow and even, almost secularly methodical. 'So what is your answer.' 'Mmmhm, let me think. I need some convincing. Something to help me revise a bit.'

I think about it now- how such a long chain and series of perfect events had to end in non-perfect ones. We didn't argue about everything. But we were always making the decision whether to argue or not to argue- which

is almost equally just as problematic. After we got the news our marriage was completely defeated. 'But they are priests,' I bargain asking the policeman desperately. My husband looks at me scolding. We argued the whole night, 'you lose the twins at shops. I forgive that. Then you plump them to sex traffickers.' 'No. I didn't. I know people. I know them. I trust them.' 'Do you have some kind cognitive deficiency. I can't figure out if you are half brain dead or terminally insane.' His looks said, he could never forgive me.

The first three weeks were the hardest. At first I tried to fill in blanks with what I knew these two faithful men of God to be. And reconcile myself to it. But I had this gnawing aching feeling, why this second guessing and impairments at drawing loaded blanks. My two twins were missing. I got a little hysterical. With emphasis on a little constituting the occasion. As I lay and tossed in my bed, thoughts flooded and circled my brain. Bodies mutilated. Children sex slaves. Bodies, corpses, wretched and degraded and dismembered after brutal acts manifested on them. A haze of Satanic rituals for innocent fresh blood. Every night Nathan would argue with me, and I could feel the assault of hatred and loathing resentment. I was the mother who took his daughter and son away from him. 'Ironic that we never agreed on anything. But this would be the one thing that we agreed with.'

My paintings became alarmingly nuclear. It was like a was a demonic spiritist through a medium volunteering my possession and madness. I woke up one night from reduced sedatives to find myself sleepwalking and painting the whole room in black. I was taxed and laboured and forced into a psychiatrist with prescriptive interim drugs. He tried small talk. Our first counselling- first with a marriage counsellor, then a clinical psychologist then a psychiatric therapist. I was a ghost cell, host feeding on depressive demons harbouring the solace in living with me as a harbour. I told this to my psychiatrist. He said he didn't think I was the classic pathological case. And he ordered me a script, the prescription a week's worth of tranquilizers for our introductory sessions.

'Your hands are a little dry.' 'Yes.' He looks kindly eyes twinkling, 'my wife gets that- she likes to use this abrasive bleach and do all of the cleaning alone every Saturday. Most cleaning agents have some kind of (linoleum?)moisturizing supplicants. But she always wants to use those, so I purchase her those heavy water ingredients that don't tire the natural lubrication process. Sorry, blank in my scientific minefield with

physiology.....it is not deuterium oxide, and certainly not hydrogen isotope deuterium, but I like to flex useless muscles.'

He continues, satisfied in diverting. 'This is what does the trick in sustainable moisturizers like pine gel cleaners- a little bit of aqua in chemical. Dermatologists use and recommend these products daily. They do not completely replace natural skin oils they maintain hydration by allowing the skin to partner in hydrating not an emolliating lubricant exclusively. It helps when there is a evaporation of skin moisture for the skin to learn to regenerate and rejuvenate a little itself. Like hair steroids- a bounce when it is harmed or unprotected. There is a natural science and organic elasticity of healing and repair, even to enhance sheen and strength in each member of the body. The bad can ensure resilience; and nourish what it protects by speaking its own language and correcting natural flaws in environment combined with genetics. Such material allegories the nature of science.'

'Are you a connoiseur of science?' I try and small talk. 'No. I just like studying and making matchmaking with nature and therapy,' he looks at me carefully, the continues again. 'Just a little bit of heavy saturated concentrated water in the moisturizer or lubricant. A dose of harsh weathering and abrasives it adjust the bodily system into a new regulation for supple skin. You will not materially damage the cells but promote a cellular message for the skin to supply some moisture from its own natural oils and resources. The tiny fissures in the skin will be more self -regulated.' 'Oh. I guess this is Life science class then,' Nathan blurts after glancing on the clock. 'Or self- help prep,' I try.

And for our first counselling hour, I have to gravitate and not postpone the 'dynamics' of me and Nathan's relationship. Our therapist starts out maintaining facilitator and adjourns to being a bridge. 'Perhaps it would be good to let Jenny exercise some rights on how she feels herself and take some share time on her labour and distress. She is also a parent.' He snorts- the innuendo, what kind of parent, hardly veiled implicitly. So maybe I am slow, really very slow. After about three months I pack his things to the extra room. And after another three months, he is out of our home, and our matrimonial bed.

He starts dating a co-worker three weeks before our divorce is made official. This doesn't bother me- as I feel I have no rights. All the breaks me and bewilders me is that for three long angry years I have been living

with the man who is supposed to love me the most and he loathes and abhors me what feels more than Lucifer hates Michael the arch-angel. I have gotten so used to his contempt, I don't take it personally or consequentially anymore. I haven't been with a husband but an embodiment of hate.

And when I am supposed to be getting rid of the scars, I transition to the wounds. The nightmares don't escape me, and after increasing my sleeping pills for three years. I have also increased their frequency. I keep my regular appointment with our therapist. He is looking at me seriously. 'Still sleeping and taking naps often.' 'It helps deaden and numb the pain and the nightmares. And as a result I am not an insomniac.' He looks very grave and aged. 'I remember filling your last prescription about 2 and a half years ago.' 'And I remember that I have a GP who gives me a script when I need it.' 'I do not think it solicitous or permissible. Jean, was it? I wrote in correspondence deeming it unduly improper.'

'Do you have kids.' 'Yes, two.' 'Have they ever been kidnapped?' he looks at me. 'Do you know the panic and apprehension that takes over. The overwhelming sense of hopelessness and powerlessness that afflicts you every day? Do you know the magnitude and scope of your imagination and recesses. The torment every night when you should be asleep. The hope that dwindles every second and the hole of gnawing haunting dread? It doesn't take a miracle to sleep. It takes tranquilizers. You don't know my situation or my pain.' 'It's been 4 and a half years. It may seem like a short term solution but it is creating a long term physiological malfunction.' 'Don't your patients use pills that dynamically affect their sleeping patterns radically.' 'It is what is best for them.' 'I am not addicted. It is not a schedule 3 or 5 or 4 or whatever.' 'It may not be benzodiazepines but it is making you physiologically dependent on them.' 'So I need food and water. I am physiologically dependent.' He looks at me sadly, not bothering to answer, 'You are not coping, Jennifer. And it pains me to see it.'

He arrests me with some more question about the increase in frequency and dosage and my hours in schedule as a regime of consuming them. I don't feel like lying to him. He brings in Nathan at the next appointment as some sort of confrontation therapy. 'I can get an MRI scan. You won't see anything unusual about the pattern of my brain.' 'That is debatable,' he says quietly. 'Yes, Jenny. But you also don't see anything unusual

about an atypical mental illness in an MRI scan in face value. They adopt different equipment and gear to detect neuronal cell patterns and neuronal flow in brain imaging.' Thank you. I suppose that was the lay man version.' I walk out as dignified as I can be.

He rushes out of the therapist's seat to follow me. And in that pathologically indifferent way guys prattle on when they are jovial and concerned about you but not too concerned corners. 'Goodness Jenny, you can't become an Auntie Pat. The people who had to come and exterminate her house didn't even want to take her leftover furniture. It was 3 inches deep in dust. They wanted to call the house developers to demolish the whole plot, for exceptional health circumstances. And I mean, we all have symptoms in odd ways, each to his own. But then we find a stack of unused prescriptions in a pile of her un-usurped medication. You can't imagine what happens when you can't sleep for days. Or sleep for a few hours in weeks. Poor soul. They wrote in her graveyard 'rest in peace.' 'What else would they say?' He looks at me blinking. 'I'm just saying, you don't want to be those nutters who needs a pill to function or sleep or talk half creditably.' I look at him seriously. 'You do realize we are not just seeing a psychotherapist but a psychiatrist, right?'

He recollects himself. 'Look.....all similar MD's aside. This could make you permanently dependent and unable to sleep altering your levels and states of consciousness permanently. You could need greater and greater doses of tranquilizers for life. Or you could be an insomniac.' 'All the drug does is slow down messages to your central nervous system. Like alcohol, you never used to mind when I drank a little bit to relieve myself.' 'This is different, you know this is different. You gotta know it is, Jennie.' 'I won't stay here and argue. Go and enjoy dinner with your companion and let me take my leave.' With the little bit of dignity I can muster.

He walks off, a little too excitedly as if anticipating a wonder in bed or something or hot kindling romance. For the next two weeks I try to negotiate taking less of the measurement, thinking I can wean myself slowly. But the days are more challenging and the substance is less amount to alleviate my stressors. And then one day I come home from a challenging day of my last bookkeeping contract with the units of hospice, only to hunt for the next short succession of quick bookkeeping audits I come in to hear a muffled sound at the attic. 'If I'm going to be

murdered by “an axe murderer” let’s just get it over with.’ I think to myself. And then I hear Nathan’s muffled breath.

‘What are you f___ doing here. You scared the fright out of me. I was starting to think the stray cat had broken through the window.’ ‘The boys keep kicking their cricket balls through?’ ‘Yeah. Every 2 weeks, or a month, punctually on duty like a roster.’ ‘Yeah, cause you neve make them pay for it.’ I stop short of saying, you used to re-fix it, only every time it had gotten too cracked, you would get the window panel to fit and seal in with something like plaster of Paris and it looked almost as well as before. Even after the situation. But I remember a pretty redhead and keep my words in check.

We look at the pictures and items for a while before we know it looks like dusk outside. He hints that he is kind of peckish and interrogates about the fridge. So I let him share my leftovers in non- casserole packaged dishes. We eat companionably in silence. ‘You don’t have to worry about me, you know.’ ‘I know,’ he says quickly, too quickly. At night I get a blanket to sit by the sofa same ritual every night before I down my medication. ‘You know. I could help stay over. Maybe get you into a new ritual or routine for sleeping. I hope you and I will always be friends.’ I smile, ‘I’ve gotten used to being alone.’ ‘Well. I’d lie to help.’ I’m not a toddler or an adolescent who needs someone to tuck me in and read a story before I sleep, I can’t help thinking, but I look at him seriously, considering carefully how I’m going to say this.

‘Nathan. This is something that happened and began when I was alone. And will have to conclude with me alone. Nobody can save anybody else. We can only really save ourselves, or plead to a higher power, relax, I won’t say the man upstairs.’ He looks at me seriously, so seriously it almost hurts. Then he walks out and calls back. ‘You’ll call me if you need anything!’ ‘Okay,’ I try magnanimously, trying to escape the desolate feeling that there is something to conclude tonight. And every other night. for every night since it happened I have gone to sleep with the help of sedatives zoning me out and now I have to take on a different approach to healing.

I settle to the dark shut in my eyes and eyelids and remember my kids and watching them and thinking of myself as a kid. It was just before the jolt of wakefulness or caffeine like moment. I feel dizzy remembering the quiet, safe, content feeling of knowing there was no pressing or traffic or

mood jamming, or busy angry people, or frustrated teachers, just a quiet, meditating restful silence. Just a soft peace. Those 10 minutes of calm used to get me through all the hours in the day of bullying or wild gossip or any other locking betrayal life's injustice railroads you by as a kid, well, some kids, even the 'rough manner of childhood, or the school system,' as Rogers would harp.

'God. Or any higher powers. I know it is almost statistically improbable that I will not have a sleepless night without the use of my cocktail.....but.....you listened to Hagar. Please listen to me. I want to remember my children, beautiful and happy as they were. and when I remember how I lost them I also want to remember how I had them. All is lost to me now.....but you can do all things. Please. God! I need you. I want to love you. Please help me live and love. There's no ice around my veins or pulse, or nauseating feeling, just a calm still. And a breath like a voice in the wind. And somehow I wake up knowing that I have slept.

Nathan has gotten mail in a large express couriered to me from his holiday with his red hottie. It is like an insulin injection, sharp to my diabetes. But if I take this one I will need another shot again in another few hours. I don't want to be a right emotional insulin injector. I look awed at the reports, amazed. The priests remains found in the woods, scavenged in a foam of preservatives, with corpses beyond identification- only the teeth identifying them. The news articles about the children, all the children including my two babies. They were all victims. I read and re-read. And look and re-witness the visuals. I make myself remember that my children are gone. The priest's fidelity or lack were not even the symptoms or the brief recesses. They were just distractors to muddle and re-muddle my brain and help divert the black fog. If I go back to tangentials I will unravel.

So the next night, I get the same enclosed feeling. And find someone out there repeat the whole process again, to my fatigued, weathered, damaged brain. There is no enhancers just a black stillness clouds the black fog. A sort of evaporating of wakefulness, till I sink into slumber and softly arouse into being awake again. A state of succession and patterns so repetitive, only now I am part of the human stewardship navigating this physiology in the host of a material body.

FOR AUTHOR'S NOTE AND BIO SEE 'NAKED' IN TOC.

Defund the Marriage

By Aaron Morell

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A low key domestic drama of the sort that plays out behind closed doors in every town and city from Heres-ville to Theres-ville. We get lots of submissions grappling with this theme which might prove the truth, sadly enough, that writers write what they know about. What we like about this one is the way escalating tension leads us deeper and deeper into the characters. From just a few lines we can infer what the couple's life together is like and the consequences of what each see as the other's alienation. Marcia's desperate attempt to save something that she knows is already lost strikes a poignant chord and draws us into the struggle. The action is up front and in the moment through the device of in media res and dialogue impresses. To our surprise, we learned from the author that this will be his first published story. Huh? Writing likes this should be snapped up the minute it comes in. Which is what we did. (Font size is author's own.)*

Marcia descends the bare-wood basement steps. Frank is exactly where she last saw him, leaning on the water furnace, hunched over his phone. She takes a breath and reminds herself that she's strong, just as her friends have reminded her.

“Frank,” she says with rehearsed patience.

He drops his head, crestfallen, and then slowly stands straight as if he were bracing for another beating. He looks up at the ceiling and holds this pose for some time. When he finally turns to face Marcia his eyes are filled with rage that extends deep into his soul, back into his childhood, and disappears somewhere within his deceased father. Although its tempered for the moment, Marcia knows to keep her distance because when the source of the rage turns its blind suffering eye outward, things get broken. Sometimes it's her.

“Are you going to get the canning pot down for me?” she asks, careful not to sound impatient, nervous, afraid, submissive, angry, hostile, or confrontational.

“Didn’t we just have this conversation?” he asks irritably.

“An hour ago.”

“So why are you asking again?”

“Because it’s been an hour.”

“And I’m still busy trying to fix this goddamn furnace.”

“You’ve been down here since nine this morning.” Marcia catches herself before her frustration spills over. “It’s not the pilot light?”

“If it was the pilot I would’ve lit it five hours ago,” Franks snaps as his face turns red. This is always the first sign his temper’s flaring up. Next his neck veins will protrude as his body rushes enough blood up to supply the oncoming tirade.

Marcia maintains her equanimity. “Can you please just get the canning pot down for me?”

“You asked me to fix the furnace and that’s what I’m doing. If you want me to come up and get your fucking pot then you deal with this shit.”

Even though it’s not in her nature to back down in a disagreement, Marcia knows better than to argue against nonsense that he will defend like his existence depends upon his words standing as irrefutable fact. So without another word, she turns and walks back upstairs. But by the time she reaches the kitchen, anger and insult have given way to the familiar feeling of being decimated of any self-worth or dignity. This domination and oppression is exactly what she’s protested against, exactly what her friends have insisted

she doesn't deserve. No one deserves to be treated this way. So she walks back to the basement door and *politely* walks down the stairs.

Frank has returned to whatever he was looking at on his phone. Standing at the bottom of the steps, Marcia takes a deep breath and sighs audibly. Don't be timid, be strong.

"Ever since we talked...." She hesitates when Frank throws his head back in exasperation. She starts again. "Ever since we talked—"

"Five seconds ago?" he pointedly asks, without turning around.

"You know what I mean."

Frank turns suddenly. "Ohh...." Blood is pumping through veins that are like fire hoses used in wildfires. "You mean when you said you don't want me around you no more."

"I never said that."

"You said if we can't show respect for each other then we can't be together. Obviously you don't want to be together."

Marcia shakes her head in confusion.

"You don't treat me with a lick of respect," Frank shouts. "Frank go fix the furnace. Frank get the giant pot down. Frank fix the socket I blew out."

"I plugged my hair dryer in and the socket blew up! I'm lucky I wasn't electrocuted."

"Lucky," Frank mumbles.

"It's kinda strange how that happened."

Frank turns away from her and sits down in front of the furnace. With a screwdriver he pries open the pilot assembly door.

“What did you do with my hair dryer, anyway?” Marcia asks.

“I threw it in the garbage. It was fried.” He shimmies down so he’s lying on his side. With a flashlight he examines the furnace interior.

With her hands on her hips, she glares at the back of his head. “What about the cat?”

“What about the cat?” his voice resounds in the furnace cavity.

“Where’d he go?”

“How should I know?”

“Because someone let him out and it wasn’t me.”

“You don’t know that,” Frank whines.

“Yes I do,” Marcia snaps. “He doesn’t like to go outside. He’s terrified of the outdoors.”

“You haven’t been working on this the whole time, have you?”

Frank slams the flashlight on the concrete floor and sits up. “What do you want from me!”

“Honesty. Respect. How about a little kindness. Do you even know what that word means?”

“Marcia, I swear....” He bites his bottom lip and shakes his head.

“What, you’re gonna hit me? Is that what you’re saying?”

In a wrathful explosion, Frank throws the flashlight against the wall. The lens pops off and rolls across the smooth concrete floor. “Why can’t you just stop tormenting

me? Constantly fucking tormenting me! Oh, don't you dare look at me like I'm sick. You're the one who's done this to me."

"Done what?"

"Driven me into complete fucking depression. You make me hate my life so fucking much."

"Every single time I try to talk to you about anything, you just get so angry for no good reason."

"Oh, there's good reason."

"Let's hear it."

"Let's start with how you don't appreciate how goddamn stressful my work is."

"That's completely untrue,"

"If you did, you'd understand how I feel."

"But Frank, we talked about this. I explicitly told you I can see what your work is doing to you. But I said it then and I'll say it again: taking it out on me is not unacceptable."

"I don't take it out on you. I keep it inside." He jabs himself in the chest with his finger. "It's in here all the fucking time. Never goes away."

"You call physically hurting me, not taking it out on me?"

"I said I was sorry! You love to dwell on that. You use it like a knife, stabbing me over and over." Frank stares down at the invisible dagger in his hand as it penetrates his flesh and guts. Menacingly he twists the blade back and forth.

"Frank." She changes her tone so she's practically pleading with him. "Don't you agree we need to change? Our marriage needs to change. I love you but I'm unhappy and

so are you. We need to rethink and re-imagine our marriage by figuring out what happened, what went wrong. Don't you agree?"

"How about I just blow my fucking brains out? Would you like that?"

"Don't say that."

"Then just leave me alone. If you don't want me going out with my pals and you don't want me doing anything except work and serve you, then I need space." He hammers his point home with the screwdriver handle.

Marcia nods as if she's finally figured him out. "So, if I understand you, what you need—or should I say what you want—is to go out every night with your buddies and get drunk, spend the weekend at the track, or whatever it is you do, and when you are home you want the right to treat me like stinking garbage. And if I express even a whimper of unhappiness, you can just knock the shit out of me."

"I swear to God, Marcia! I'll go upstairs right now and get my gun and blow my fucking brains out all over the walls."

Marcia abruptly turns and marches away. Her heavy steps are amplified like a drum in the empty space below the stairs.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *From early on in the police violence protests this year I was struck by the negative reactions. Demands for justice were met by indignation. Pleas for dignity were mocked with disdain. Certain police unions characterized protesters as pro-criminal advocates. Department leaders claimed the attacks on law enforcement had destroyed their morale and therefore their ability to function adequately as protectors. I saw these conflicts of interest on a very human, personal level and I wondered how it would look within a relationship. My writing is strongly influenced by cinema aesthetics and philosophical writers like Kundera and Camus.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: After studying literature and film at the University of Kansas, I lived an itinerant life exploring the country, making short films, and writing screenplays. Several years back I shifted to fiction and began submitting that body of work in 2020. I now live in Brooklyn, NY with my daughter.

ART APPRECIATION

By Lindsey Fischer

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A young American art history student is in Florence, waiting in a lineup to see Michelangelo's 'David' when things suddenly take an unexpected turn. The event that unfolds turns into a gripping reality check in which 'high art' is displaced by the circumstances surrounding a 'street painter' who churns out 'masterpieces' for the numb and dumb. We like the way symbols—masks, peddlers, art, kitsch— create a Fellini-like atmosphere and the author's effective use of the second person passive POV. Irony and even a touch of pathos lend satirical weight. Prose sparkles here and there with images that dazzle.*

The stone-paved streets of Florence are a mix of locals and tourists dressed like sunsets (orange apparently is making a comeback).

The bulky car moves at about the same pace as someone walking with a limp.

The author lists Kurt Vonnegut as one of her literary mentors and you don't have to look too closely to see his influence.

Ben fatto!

Art Appreciation

You are waiting in line outside of the Accademia Gallery in Florence, with your fellow foreign-exchange students. After three weeks in Italy, the only people you have hung out with are other Americans. But you are here now, to embrace Italian culture and

see one of the most marvelous statues in all of art history. You had been talking about art, viewing slideshows and blurry printed pictures for so long in your art history class that you are excited to see the real thing. Your phone vibrates. You ignore it. It is most likely your parents either asking if you've changed your major yet to accounting (because you used to love playing on your toy calculator when you were three) or warning you to never travel the streets alone. You have not yet told them about the other day when you walked through Florence by yourself and bought a blue Venetian mask. The street vendor had a stall with masks on the counters and hanging from the ceiling, in colors from purple to green to blue to red, and all glistening gold or silver. You wanted the red one, but you only knew the word for blue in Italian. *Azzurro, per favore.*

“Experiencing it in person is the only way to truly understand and value art,” one student said. You nod and agree. Everyone should visit Europe and practice that whole fine arts culture crass Americans lack.

You press yourself against a barred window. The stone-paved streets of Florence are a mix of locals and tourists dressed like sunsets (orange apparently is making a comeback). They push their way to markets which smell like basil from all the dangling herbs and disappear into dress stores glittering with pearls. You don't fit into either category. You are more than a mere tourist –you are a connoisseur.

Light vowels float through the air, and though it is loud, the language is like music, and the melodies intertwine as you listen. *Come sta la tua famiglia...Mi piace...Quanto costa questo... Grazie.... Prego...Saldi.* The loudest voices are street artists trying to sell paintings of the Duomo in Florence or reproductions of famous artworks in the Gallery, as well as paintings from the Uffizi. They range from five to

twenty Euros depending on the size of the paintings –from a postcard to a movie poster. These reproductions are laid on white sheets on the ground, so that everywhere you look there is a miniature Florence staring back at you. You ignore these. You are experiencing these buildings and artwork in person; you don't need these cheap souvenirs. You know what high art is and look down upon such peddlers.

The statue though! The glory of Florence! The pride of the Renaissance! This would be an experience you would regale again and again when you returned home, and the tale you would spin at the dinner that celebrated your first tenure-track art history professor job. The moment you gaze upon it, time will stop. It will be just you and David. You will not leave until the guards drag you out. Though you will not be you anymore. It would be transformative! You would come out of the Gallery, more refined, polished, chiseled.

You and the other students shift feet, anxious for the doors to open and to be let into your cultural awakening. You hear angry shouts from down the street, *vaffanculo!*

One of the peddlers has been spotted by the Italian state police. He rolls up his white sheet with the art inside and stuffs it into a leather portfolio case. He weaves through the crowded streets and is hit by the shopping bags in a woman's hand, heavy perhaps with shoes. He stumbles, but he does not fall. He runs hunched over. You can barely see him; you are not tall enough. Farther up the street in pursuit of the man is a blue police car. The bulky car moves at about the same pace as someone walking with a limp. Lights are flashing on its roof, and the men inside the car wave at the people on the street to move aside. The streets in Italy are angel-hair pasta narrow (you have been almost hit by cars more times than you care to remember) and the line for the Accademia

Gallery provides an excellent opportunity for accidental civilian casualties. While you find art to be the most important cause in the world, you are not willing to die for it. Yet.

The man runs past you. You hold your breath. He jumps a traffic barrier at the end of the street. Police stop their car. The officer in the passenger side gets out in order to pursue the man on foot, though he is already out of sight. The other officer backs the car out of the street, perhaps to cut the man off at another street.

You and the other students are speechless as you all watch the fugitive's desperate escape. All thoughts of the statue are gone.

For the next fifteen minutes, you discuss the fate of the brave artist absconding through the streets of Florence. You speculate about whether or not he had been caught; if he were caught what would happen to him? Would he go to jail? What would happen to his art career? What had he done that was so bad? Peddling? What about the other peddlers on the street: did they fear the same thing?

You want to investigate the man's story, like one of your paintings. You conjure fictions. Perhaps he was a traitor to Italy for selling the state secrets of gelato. Perhaps he was a Russian spy, deep undercover and tracking a nuclear missile code. Or even a drug lord, with cocaine laced on the inside of his paints!

More peddlers appear, attempting to sell purses, shoes, and yes, even more artwork of the Duomo. Every day these men risk their livelihoods trying to sell their work, in danger of being caught by police. It is survival really, and you hope the man escaped and is selling his art on another street.

"I'm really excited for this exhibit," a student says. The line moves and you see the wooden door.

“Oh yeah, this is one of the most famous statues in the world,” you all agree. You walk forward, though your eyes linger back.

You distractedly make your way up the line, until you pass through the door of the Gallery, large and white and expansive.

As you hand over your tickets, sirens echo in the street.

You shuffle inside and for a few minutes can only see jackets and heads. A camera flashes followed by a yell from a security guard that flash is not allowed. It smells stark, like chalk. The walls are bleached white. Roman columns adorn the hallways.

You shove your way to the front of the crowd. Your visit to this Gallery is the reason for your visit to Florence. The reason you spent hours working on applications for study abroad scholarships, when your parents refused to foot the bill. Michelangelo had touched this. Made this. Caressed and agonized over it. Years of labor and sweat and tears and money and pride.

Your first thought is that it is tall. It stands erect in a domed white alcove.

The work. The mastery. Michelangelo. Renaissance. Inspiring. History. Legend.

You are pushed up against your fellow students. Your forehead is slick with sweat from the heat of their bodies. Your heads tilt back, your necks ache. The sweat runs down your nose and burns your eyes. You stare at this masterpiece for maybe ten minutes.

You turn to go and wish you had bought some art from the man on the street.

###

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Art Appreciation* was inspired by my study abroad trip to Italy in college and based on a true event I witnessed on the streets of Florence. (Some details in the story are also pulled from my experience there, such as my solo trip to the mask vendor where I really did just know how to say the color blue.) In this satiric take, I wanted to play around with the idea of what you are “supposed” to do or feel when traveling and what actually makes a lasting impact on you. Our perception of what high art and culture should be versus actual lived experiences. I am influenced by satiric writers such as George Saunders and Kurt Vonnegut as well as fantastical writers like Angela Carter, Karen Russell and Kelly Link.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Lindsey Fischer graduated from Ohio University with a Masters in Creative writing, fiction. She has previously been published in Clare literary magazine and La Gazzetta Italiana, and she has a poem in Ohio's Best Emerging Poets.

The Extraordinary World of a Professional Photographer

By Chitsanzo Changa

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We like the way the character of Mbujala gradually emerges and how with each assignment he is drawn deeper and deeper into a sinister underworld. A twilight literary gestalt that gets creepier and creepier as the story progresses. The slightly naïve prose with its touch of ‘outsiderism’ only adds to the magic. This is the author’s first published story in a literary journal. It won’t be the last. (Font size is author’s own).*

The Extraordinary World of a Professional Photographer

Mbujala was the first born in the family of 5. He was born to a middle class family that stayed in a small town called Laselina. His parents bought him a small low resolution camera for his 14th birthday. He took pictures of people at his high school and made them pay. This gave him an idea and he started going around his town taking photographs of people as a business. He managed to save the money he made from that business and bought a camera of better quality. After finishing high school, he studied photography at Makha College which was in the capital city of the country called Sabwana. He continued his business and saved up capital to start a professional photography studio. He opened a small studio in Sabwana after he had finished college. He had acquired much experience over the years so within 2 years his business grew. He moved to a bigger

building and his studio was top-tier. He hired additional staff so that he could offer music videos and documentary production services. His studio also produced short films.

Over the years, Mbujala realized that most of the jobs that brought in much money were not the traditional ones he had expected. For instance, a politician from a major political party in the city hired him to secretly follow opposition politicians and take compromising photographs of them. Mbujala got paid so much money and also negotiated with the politician and secured a 10 year contract for his company to be the official photographer for the local government. Mbujala worked at so many exclusive parties and events. He was exposed to so many different, strange, private and remarkable things. He collected all this information knowing that he might use it as leverage in the future.

He was hired more than 5 times to take photographs and videos of couples in their bedroom private moments. He tried explaining to them that he did not do such types of jobs. They told him that they understood but they were going to pay him so much money. They just wanted someone exclusive to do the job. Mbujala stored such types of pictures and videos safely in terms of the contract and in case he would need them in the future.

Mbujala was once asked to take photographs and videos of a woman giving birth. It was one of the strangest experiences he had ever had. He was extremely freaked out when the baby was coming out. He felt disgusted and almost fainted. In addition, the labor period of the woman took about 14 hours. He had to wait in the waiting area of the hospital. He vowed never to do a giving birth shoot again. Fortunately, the payment for his services

was good. Mbujala had always known that his photography career was going to be challenging but he had not anticipated it to be like this.

Mbujala posted photographs and videos he took at various social events, like nightclubs, on his social media pages. So many people would contact him privately and ask him to remove them from the sites. This was usually because they were worried that their partners would find out about their various scandalous activities. Other people were embarrassed by the things that they would have done whilst in their intoxicated state.

Female social media models and influencers gave Mbujala so many problems. It was a good thing that he had self-control. He was also aware that such people could easily ruin his reputation. Most of the models and influencers did not want to pay for professional photos. They usually asked him for free photo shoots in exchange for sexual favours. Beautiful female celebrities were also challenging to work with. Most of them did not receive enough attention from their partners. They were usually depressed, wild and unpredictable. By virtue of being a photographer, he paid much attention to detail. He passed them compliments time and again. Some of them started to develop some feelings for him. They regularly tried to sleep with him. He politely indicated to them that he was not trying to complicate their business relationship.

Mbujala received a call from an association that was called, “Nata Nata Devil Worshippers” one Wednesday afternoon. They wanted to hire him for one of their events. The day they requested was going to be on his birthday. He wanted to decline because of that fact but the money they offered was too good. His friends had also told him that they would not be available to celebrate his birthday on the actual day. They would only be

free the following day. So he accepted the job. They gave him the address and he went there at 19h00. He entered the building and was led to a conference room by a man in a black mask and robe. The room was very dark. There were red candles that were lit all around the room. There were possibly about 20 to 30 people in the room. They were all putting on black masks and robes. The man advised him to resume taking pictures. There were weird chants being made by the people in the room. He realized that some of them were female because of their voices. It was weird atmosphere. There was a wave of fear that ran across his body. He started regretting taking the job.

There was a man that had a red sash around his waist that was leading the procession. He said that they were going to perform a sacrifice. There was something that was covered on the table in front of the conference room. He uncovered it. It was a woman that had been tied and gagged. The leader took a knife and said some chants and stabbed her. Mbulaja freaked out and started running towards the entrance so that he could leave. The people started laughing and screamed, "SURPRISE, HAPPY BIRTHDAY!"

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I was inspired to make this submission to FOTD for 2 reasons. I have always wanted to be able to tell stories. Eight year old I would be proud looking into my future and seeing that I am pursuing my ambition, at last. I have always been a, "Not so quiet person "but also not as expressive as I thought I ought to be. However, things took a drastic turn when I started my tertiary education. I became talkative! I transformed from a person that did not say much, to saying too much! Whenever I am telling any story to anyone, I take my time so that I build it up well. Some impatient people rush me to just get to the point. The thing is I feel that every detail is important because it gives a clear and complete picture of the story.*

Therefore, every detail needs to be part of the equation in order to balance.

The second reason builds up from the first. When I was younger, I was full of ideas that made sense to me in my head but when I voiced them out, people neither understood nor grasped what I was trying to say (I hope you are finally hearing me!). So, I think I am making up for all those times that I was misunderstood or not heard (LOL!).

There are so many issues I wanted to explore in this story. I will only outline 4. I was inspired to write, "The Extraordinary World of a Professional Photographer" after I made a realization that numerous professions are not as straightforward, boring or exciting as we perceive them to be. We can only realize this through some sort of analysis or experience. Secondly, many of us do not fully understand the, "Ins and outs" of the professions we venture into until we are fully vested into them and most of the times, we end up being miserable. Thirdly, most of the times, we do not take our professions as seriously as we should. The result is that we jeopardize the very thing that we have invested so much into, and our lives are dependent on. Finally, we are often motivated by monetary gains. This factor usually blinds us and we fail to scrutinize things. We then end up making uninformed decisions.

There are so many themes that I aimed to explore. Firstly, I wanted to show that so many professions are intertwined and reliant on each other. Secondly, I wanted to explore the beginnings, challenges, surprises and benefits of the entrepreneurial journey. Thirdly, I wanted to outline how our relationships with people, like friends, affect our lives and decisions we make. Finally, I wanted to show how we give fear so much

power over us to the point that we fail to find out the truth about something before we disengage or run away

I do not think I have any literary influences in my writing or at least that I am aware of. I hope this does not sound silly but when I am writing anything, it is like I am watching a movie in my head. I paid so much attention at building the story up and giving it so many different dimensions. I did this in this manner with the aim of giving the story an ending that was unexpected. As you read, please be aware that this is my first ever piece to be published. I am still on my journey of learning. So, please take it easy on me. I hope you enjoy it. Thank you!

AUTHOR'S BIO: My name is Chitsanzo Changa. I am a single 32 year old Malawian male. I reside in Blantyre, Malawi and Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. I started writing fiction this year, 2020. I have only been self-publishing e-books. I have not been published by any magazine or media house.

MUSSOLINI MONOLOGUE

By Steve Gold

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A short and not so simple character study as sharply cut as an Italian intaglio. Gasp! (Font size is author's own.)*

MUSSOLINI MONOLOGUE

MUSSOLINI

When I was a boy, I was small and ugly. Everyone laughed at me. They called me names and made fun of me. I was ashamed of my cowardice. But then one day, a boy I was with in the schoolyard—a boy bigger than me—began taunting me, calling me a sissy and saying I should wear a dress because I looked like a little girl. Finally, I had enough. I turned toward the boy and I punched him. He was shocked. He had not expected to be hit by me. I punched him again. I punched him in the face. I punched him in the stomach. I punched him in the balls. He bent down in agony. I kicked him in his chest. He screamed to high heaven. The other boys rushed over to us. I continued kicking the boy. I showed no mercy. I enjoyed it. The blood poured from him like a river. All those years of being scared emptied out of me. Finally a teacher ran over to us and pulled me away from the boy. The teacher called me a maniac and said I should be put away. At first, I was intimidated. But then I looked at the faces of the teacher and the other boys. I noticed they all looked scared. They were scared of me. I felt good about that. ...I was on to something.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *With the Mussolini Monologue I was trying to examine the totalitarian mind, and to show the immense damage an single man can do to the world around him.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: I'm a New York City-based playwright and the author of the full-length plays *Smash the State*, *Women and Guns*, and *Star of*

David, Men of Bondage. Several of my one-act plays have been staged at local festivals. My influences include Bernard Shaw, Eugene O'Neill and Preston Sturges.

Writing the Limits

By Sean Leung Lerche

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A good example of how effective the use of repetition can be in telling a story. We like this and we also like the element of mystery that sneaks up on you. Who is the author writing to and who, exactly, is being addressed? And given that this is a story about writing, there isn't a writer out there who can't relate to it. Prose is on the polite side of colloquial and fresh with tonal colourations.*

Quote: Can you hear me? Can you see me? I want to see the trees bearing loquats again. I want to hear the cawing of crows and the screeching tires of speeding cars. I want to smell the air and the damp soil. Write of me. Scribble my name. Write and recognize me.

(Font size is author's own.)

1,000. The word limit. Keep it in mind. Remember the word count. Scribble it down, then erase it away. Remind yourself, and then forget about its importance. Tell yourself to remain within this limit, and then ask why you're doing so in the first place. Ask why. Then tell yourself that you have to.

Scribble away. Write. Or at least, write what you think counts as writing. Write, and then forget what you're writing to begin with. Imagine, and then forget that you can imagine anything at all. Scribble away. Just don't forget why you wanted to write to begin with.

1,000. That's the word limit. Do you remember it? 'Course you don't. There's no reason for you to try to, not when it's already etching itself into you.

1,000. That's your limit. Do you remember it? No? Then I'll force you to. I'll etch it into your arm. I'll etch it into your fingers. I'll etch it all across your back and scratch it in so deeply that you'll never be able to forget about it again. You'll remember it then, won't you?

Oh! Oh whoops! It seems I etched it in a little too deeply. It's cutting in a bit far now, isn't it? Sorry about that. But you can't really blame me, can you? I mean, I didn't think that you were alive to begin with. No one did! No one except for you.

This wasn't my work, mind you. I'm not the one that tried to hurt you. I'm not the first to cut into you so deeply. I only exist because of those cuts of yours. Too bad I can't heal them like you wanted.

Scribble. Write your thoughts. Describe those fervent emotions, why don't you? I know you can do it. All you have to do is remain within the word limit. That's all. 1,000 words. You remember, right? No? Should I etch it in deeper? You should know, the cuts won't heal this time. I won't be able to help you. You already forgot about me, and the wounds are only getting worse. You can't write of me anymore, not when the only thing you want is for me to help you.

You're actually looking up now. Can you see me? I can do something about that, if you like. I can cut out your eyes if you want. I can drive the cuts even deeper, if you want. Look! You can see them! The pages. They're ripping themselves out now. They're folding, and shredding, and sharpening themselves, all so that they may cut that much deeper into you. The words you've written down for your own consumption are beginning to turn on you. You can still read them. You can still understand what they're saying, but you can't connect to them anymore. They mean nothing to you anymore. You've written them down only to forget that they ever existed to begin with.

Do they still matter to you? Do these words still hold meaning for you? Can you still recognize me? No? Good. You have no reason to remember me anymore.

Scribble away. Write once more. Try desperately to capture me again, even when you can no longer understand me. Hear me. See me. Write of me. Write of how I look. Write of how I sound. Write the story of my life itself. Create me. Make me, so that I may recognize you.

1,000 words. That's your limit. Do you remember? Would you like to remember? No? Then what would you like to remember? You can't write of me anymore. I no longer exist in your mind. I exist before you. I live and breathe before you. I cut into you so that I may affirm you. I rip into you so that I may feel you. I tear through you so that I may recognize you. These are my words. These are my pages. This is my will. Will you recognize it now? Will you recognize me now that you've written me?

1,000 words. That's your limit. You've breached 700 now. You've noticed that, right? Have you finished writing about me yet? I wish you would already. I want to be

here. I want to exist. I want to live again. I want to love. I want to hate. I want to cry. I want to live! Just give me that chance!

Write. Can you hear me? Can you see me? We were like this once before. You wrote of me so that I could exist. You wrote of me because you wanted me to live. You wrote of me because you wanted to recognize me. You wrote because you wanted to write.

Can you hear me? Can you see me? I want to see the trees bearing loquats again. I want to hear the cawing of crows and the screeching tires of speeding cars. I want to smell the air and the damp soil. Write of me. Scribble my name. Write and recognize me.

You've reached over 800 words now. Almost reached your limit now. You alright? You know, I saw you cry once when you were writing. You used to have so much emotion in you. You used to have such passion in you that it practically burst out of you every time you chose to write of me. It was you who decided to give me an incredible life to live. It was you who filled it with the beauties and horrors of being a character of your creation.

923. 924. 925. I guess we're just about out of words now. Don't worry about it. Don't think about it. Do me a favor instead. Don't stop writing. I don't want you to stop, even when you finally leave me behind.

1,000 words. Did you forget about it? It's fine. It never mattered to begin with. Just write. Scribble away. Etch my name into the paper. I want to recognize you.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I have to admit that I myself tend to still be surprised by my pursuit and study of writing. Looking back, the people that I am able to cite as having inspired me are the various incredible teachers that I had*

the pleasure to meet. In the midst of my worst times, they were able to convince me that my passion for writing was worth pursuing.

My time as a writer has shown me that I myself have to temper my passion at times to improve my own writing. That includes having to face some of the more egregious limits that myriad writers have had to consider, one such being the word limit. Mind the reader, I've always resented the 1,000 word limit that tends to be placed on a writer vying for a submission.

I suppose I just wrote this piece as a mildly self-deprecating exploration of the contradictions playing themselves out in my own head, between the tempering that I employ to remain within the word limit and the desire to write storylines that span multiple pages. And in truth, I think a few of my characters have reflected that perception I have of my writing. All the same, I hope my piece is able to provide some solace to other writers; the effort is worth it when pursuing one's passion.

AUTHOR'S BIO: My name is Sean Leung Lerche, and I am an aspiring writer studying Creative Writing at Sonoma State University. I have previously published my work with school magazines 'Forum' and 'The Writing Success Project Anthology'. If you wish to see further examples of my writing you can do so by visiting my blog 'Word Limits' at wordlimits.blogspot.com

The Man Who Pulled Himself Together

By David Henson

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We were blown away by this startlingly original story in which pulling oneself together is taken literally. The metaphor is played for all its physical and mental possibilities and we are completely drawn in to a convincing suspension of reality that is neither rationalized nor explained. The author tells us he reread Kafka's Metamorphosis while writing this story and while we see the influence—clear headed prose and 'familiar' voice that make the unreal all the more believable-- this one stands on its own. Brilliant imagery abounds.*

Quote: I feel as if a spider has been spinning its web in my brain.'

And

'I force down a palmful of calm and lie back till I feel as placid as a mud puddle.

(Font size is author's own. There's a few misspells, but ignore them. We did. In the interest of authenticity, we like it just as we see (or read) it.)

The Man Who Pulled Himself Together

I call my boss, whose texts I've been ignoring for days, and tell him I'm returning to work. He says not to bother. Serves me right. I've let everything go to hell since Arlene left. I vow to pull myself together. Tomorrow. I take a few diazepam and go to bed.

Next thing I know, it's morning, and I have a splitting headache. I try to turn away from the window but can't move. My left side tingles, and I can't feel my right. I take deep breaths to fight the panic starting to boil. After a few moments, I can rotate my left arm

and leg. I expand and tighten my stomach a few times then sit up. Well, half of me does. My right half remains flat on its back.

I'm lying on my back, getting some feeling and movement in my right side, when my left half sits up. What a crazy dream.

I can't believe my eyes and try to pull away. But my arm and leg are floppy, and I tumble onto my supine half.

The monstrosity attacks me. I fight back, but can only flail and kick limply. How do I stop this nightmare? "Wake up. Wake up!"

I squirm to the far side of the bed. "Hey, you. This isn't a dream. Look at me!"

I need to stay calm and go with the flow. Lucid dreaming might be interesting. "What happened?"

"I ... you ... we split in half." I touch my fingers to my right side. It feels like a water balloon. I fumble for the diazepam on the bedstand but can't open the bottle with one hand.

My left side feels like gelatin. Go with the flow ... It's only a dream ... Going with the flow ... OK, better.

Choking on panic, I scoot closer to my other half, and hold out the pill bottle. "Quick. Can't breathe." It feels like pulsing blood is about to rupture my eardrum when he finally works off the cap. I force down a palmful of calm and lie back till I feel placid as a mud puddle. "Thanks, HalfMe. Or should I call you Walter Two?"

HalfMe? Walter Two? How boring. What's a dream without imagination? I suggest to him that we name ourselves after one of our favorite cartoon characters as a child.

His names are a bit whimsical for my tastes but bring back memories of smoother times — before cheating Arlene and a split body — so I agree.

I realize how hungry I am. "Onward to the kitchen, Huckle."

Berry excuses himself and drops off the bed. I feel as if a spider has been spinning its web in my brain. I need to be careful with those pills. "I admire your enthusiasm, Berry, but I need a nap."

Much as I want to sleep, I can't stop watching Berry wriggle around for what seems like forever and not even make it out of the room. I shake off the haze as best I can and tumble down to help him. We lie abreast on our backs, and I reach across my half-chest and grip his shoulder.

At Huckle's suggestion, we hold each other's shoulders and push across the floor with our feet.

We back-surf to the kitchen where we brace, lift, and hold each other to make cereal and toast, a feast compared to the potato chips and cookies I've been living on. We eat sitting on the floor, our shoulders propped together and half-backs against the cabinet.

Making breakfast isn't easy, but we manage. We even wash the dishes. I suggest that preparing meals and bathing become part of our daily routine.

The next morning I wake up with fire-crackering anxiety. As I reach for my diazepam, which I've spread out on the bedstand, Berry's hand grabs my wrist. He uncurls his index finger and wags it. Nice to know he's got my back. I still take a couple pills, but it's good to know he's got my back. Half of it anyway.

#

Sometimes just a glimpse of Berry or myself in the mirror is enough to trigger an explosion of panic. But that's happening less frequently as I acclimate to my condition. It helps that Berry, still thinking it's all a dream, is so calm. He also keeps us busy. We've started doing laundry and housework, though vacuuming is beyond us. We're cooking so much, the other day we had groceries delivered. We lay end to end and bucket-brigaded them into the house.

Huckle seems to be weening himself off the pills. No choice. He can't exactly hop down to the pharmacy for a refill. And I wouldn't even if I could. Tough love.

#

We've finished brushing our teeth when Berry tells me about a "dream within a dream," as he calls it, in which we're sailing in the kitchen. His dream inspires me to rig bedsheets as slings on two chairs so we can sit at the kitchen table and eat. As a bonus, a pair of doves with squabs is in the tree near the window. Watching them helps keep my anxiety at bay now that I'm out of pills. The doves are the first thing I've enjoyed since Arlene left me.

#

"I've been thinking about something," I tell Berry one morning after we've cleaned up. "I have the left side of our brain, which controls the right side of the body." I lift my arm. "But that's not what happens." I recount that first morning when we woke up halved, and neither of us could move. "Our brains rewired themselves to control the side of our body they were attached, too. That's the only logical explanation."

"I think there's a simpler reason: Anything's possible in a dream."

"If it's a dream, it must be a long one since we've been at this for days."

"Dreams are like a black hole, Huckle. They distort time. Onward to the doves."

We back-surf to the kitchen. Watching one the squabs fledge, I have a flash from another of my dreams within a dream. In it, we can walk.

Berry can't remember the details of a dream about us walking, only that "the first step starts with pants." The image gives me an idea. We've both been wearing pajamas all day because ...why not? "We have to get dressed, Berry."

"OK, onward to the bedroom."

When we get to the bedroom, I pull down a pair of jeans from a hanger. I slide my foot through the right leg and have Berry put on the left. We sharewear a shirt then cinch one belt around our waist and another under our armpits. The clothing and belts holding us together, we roll over and climb to our feet, tottering before steadying ourselves.

"Well done, Huckle. But we're not done. Onward to the dresser." I slide my right foot forward then Huckle steps with his left. We walk to the chest-of-drawers.

Looking in the mirror on the dresser, I see how our half-heads loll to the sides. Berry opens the top drawer and unrolls a necktie. We manage to Windsor it around our neck then fashion a headband from an old bandanna. A ballcap completes our ensemble. Our half-heads reunited, I nod at our reflection. "Not bad, is it, Berry? ... Berry? ... Are you here? ..." After a few Berry-less moments, I have a hunch and loosen the headband. "Berry?"

"I had the strangest dream."

I re-tighten the headband, and Berry re-disappears. This'll never do. I loosen the bandana again, but before I can remove it, Berry grips my wrist.

“Ever onward, Huckle.”

I start wearing my headband day and night. Sweet dreams, Berry.

#

I've been getting out of the house. I shop, walk in the park, chat with neighbors. With my ballcap, headband, necktie and clothes holding me together, no one takes a second look ... well, not a third.

Tomorrow I start at the library. It doesn't pay as much as my previous job, but it'll be enough to get by. They don't mind my eccentric attire, and I'm looking forward to being a book keeper instead of a bookkeeper.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Before writing *The Man Who Pulled Himself Together*, I had the idea to experiment with a story written in two parallel points of view. Around that time, I had a random thought about someone needing to pull themselves together and imagined what that would be like if taken literally. The idea of a person in two halves was a natural way to try out the dual POVs I had in mind. The main theme of the piece is to portray a person whose life has come apart and their struggle to put the pieces back together. I reread parts of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* while working on this story.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: David Henson and his wife have lived in Belgium and Hong Kong over the years and now reside in Peoria, Illinois. His work has been nominated for Best Small Fictions and Best of the Net and has appeared in numerous print and online journals including *Fleas On The Dog*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Moonpark Review*, *Fictive Dream*, and *Literally Stories*. His website is <http://writings217.wordpress.com>. His Twitter is @annalou8. His story **Loud Socks** appeared in Issue 6.

STONE Man & STATUE Boy

By DL Shirey

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Cancel culture and political correctness are the themes in this curiously beguiling story that held our interest and then some. The linear narrative and straight forward prose generate a literary honesty and the seamless blend of two realities is handled with aplomb. Written in a simple style that's easy to read but hard to write. Quote: 'Families were tending their yards, but no one stood out; no one was so different that they caught my eye. Every car in the parking lot was American made, full of moms and dads and kids who all looked like me. They went to churches like me and worshipped the same, unalterable Jesus. All white, even when it didn't snow.'* (Spacing and font are author's own.)

Stone Man & Statue Boy

by DL Shirey

Alone at the top of 79 stairs, only my footprints follow. Each step below has a concrete space kicked from the steep, powdery incline. I pause to catch my breath, feel the rasp at the back of my throat from cold air and tired lungs. SUVs will soon brave the snowy streets, depositing children and sleds and romping dogs in the parking lot below this hillside park.

Even though I've stopped walking, there remains a sense of forward motion as clouds push fast overhead. Yet there doesn't seem to be any wind down here in the park; nothing to help the trees shrug off their burdens of white.

Breath back, I notice the sign with the park's name is gone. It's finally official, the man whose name graced this park has been toppled, his philanthropy supplanted by an inauspicious past. All textbooks will be rewritten, each placename displaced, this signless post rechristened. But it won't be easy to erase the name's significance to me: the memories, the wonderland. It means swingsets, nature trails, hide and seek and first kisses. My parents never had to ask 'where are you going?' There was no place for me but here, two blocks from home.

How can this park have any other name, as many times as I've counted to 79?

This place is dreamlike after snow. The quiet. Luminosity is inverted, with brightness on the ground instead of from the sky; an odd light where trees can't cast shadows. Today my sense of place is skewed. There's no gravel underfoot, so every step sounds wrong. Feels wrong. I've walked this way countless times, yet I still check behind me to make sure my footprints are there, in case I need to follow them back.

I fumble forward, using each tree as a crutch. I need the reality of solid anchors bolted to ground I cannot see. Then a backlight brightens behind the trees ahead and they finally give way to a clearing.

The center of the park reorients me but I feel his absence immediately.

My steps are the first to scar the smooth, white field that circles an empty plinth. The statue on the pedestal is gone. I can see clear through to trees beyond, where the man and boy once stood. Where the nameplate used to be, only a square of discolored cement.

I'm not sure if nostalgia or bitterness forces me to close my eyes. I want to see the stone man, his ever-raised arm pointed west, urging the statue boy beside him to look in that direction. I want to see the buttons on the man's vest, the watch chain and the long tails of his coat. He'd been there for me a million times, through every season. Without him, can I ever get my bearings again? And I wonder if I can find my favorite bench when he's not pointing the way.

When I open my eyes I see something I hadn't noticed before. Half the snow has been whisked from the plinth, on the ground below it an imprint of a snow angel, then footprints running away. I follow the fresh steps to

the bench where a child sits. He grips his knees, pulled up against the cold. He gazes over a clearing of trees and the distant blue reclaiming the sky. We look out on a sprawl of houses, stretching as far as the eye can see. The only movement billows from nearby chimneys and in the first dots of cars navigating streets.

"Is this your seat?" The boy has gray-blond hair. His voice sounds younger than he looks, maybe 12. He dusts snow off the bench. "You can sit here too, there's room."

"It's too cold to sit." What I said isn't true. I feel awkward. I want nothing more than to rest, but things are different these days. You're not supposed to be alone with a child that's not your own.

"If you squint your eyes just right, with all this snow, you can imagine how it was when the houses weren't here," the boy says.

"Hard to picture it with no houses at all. That would have been long before I was born. A lot of the buildings are taller, but this is pretty much what I saw when I came up here as a boy."

"You've seen a lot, I bet."

There was something familiar about this kid, the shape of his head, his faraway stare. But I've climbed the 79 stairs most days of my life and know that children are

drawn here. Their games aren't that different than the ones I played. I'm sure I've seen this boy before.

"Where's your house from here?" he asks.

"Right over there."

From behind the bench, my arm extends over the boy. His eyes never follow the direction of my finger. He looks at me instead, at the way I'm standing.

"What's this park called?"

I start to say the name, but it feels wrong somehow. Like a lie. It's as if saying the man's name whitewashes everything he stood for. For the first time, it's more than a name of a park. I can see the scarred backs of people on which he made his fortune. His legacy was to make sure his fields and workers stayed *over there*, while he helped the lives of his people *over here*.

Then my memories of childhood became more focused and I saw myself running to the park, past houses that all looked the same. Families were tending their yards, but no one stood out; no one was so different that they caught my eye. Every car in the parking lot was American made, full of moms and dads and kids who all looked like me. They went to churches like me and worshipped the same, unalterable Jesus. All white, even when it didn't snow.

The boy is still looking at me, waiting for my answer. "It had a name, but it's gone. Just like the man in the statue over there."

He jumps up. "What statue?"

"That block of stone is the only thing left. You can follow the footprints back."

"Show me," he says.

The boy waits for me to lead but becomes impatient at my slowness. He runs ahead, pretending to fly. His arms are superhero straight, I could almost see the billow of a cape behind him. When I catch up, the boy had scrambled up the pedestal. He is sitting on the edge, waiting for me, bouncing his heels against the low slab.

"That's right. The statue was here." It's hard for me to speak between breaths.

"Too bad he's gone. Must have been great to stand here and watch everyone play. Like being king or something." Then the boy hops to his feet and assumes a regal pose: hands on hips, chin high, chest puffed forward.

I laugh. "No, it wasn't like that at all. He was more—I don't know—he looked like a grandfather, I guess. Watching over you, helpful, pointing to that bench of ours." Then I thought again. Perhaps the man was indicating

something else to the statue boy: pointing to the side of town the man had built in his image.

"Show me what he looked like." Then the boy shakes his head as I try to recreate the pose. "No, up here. Climb on up and show me."

The boy kneels and holds out his hand. I notice the skin, ashen and pale, weathered with black freckles. In the cold, weird light from snow, his hand casts no shadow.

"What's *your* name?" he asks.

END

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This is a story of two parks in Portland, Oregon. The physical description is that of Mt. Tabor, an extinct volcano within walking distance of my house. There is a statue in this park, erected in 1933.*

The name of the other park escapes me. At the time I was writing this story, local news was reporting about a change to the name of this park; its previous designation celebrated a person whose past was tainted by racism. Oregon has a history—to be polite—of not being particularly welcoming to minorities. The renaming of this park was an effort to atone.

As I said, there is a statue atop Mt. Tabor, of a newspaperman pointing west. He is alone. In the story the statue is of a man and a boy. I invented Statue Boy to add an element of surrealism and to have another character to interact with the protagonist.

AUTHOR'S BIO: DL Shirey lives in Portland, Oregon, where it's probably raining. Luckily, water is beer's primary ingredient. His stories and non-fiction appear in 50 publications, including Confingo, Page & Spine, Zetetic and Wild Musette. You can find more of his writing at www.dlshirey.com and @dlshirey on Twitter.

TRIAL RUN

By Connor de Bruler

WHY WE LIKE IT: *This is a writer who improves with each story. His technical facility impresses but it's his dialogue that blows the roof off. It's some of the best we've read and if you're a writer who finds convincing dialogue a challenge, (and what writer doesn't?) read Connor de Bruler. The conversations he lays out are phonic organisms: the vocals dip and slide, rise to rest on aural plateaus, then break and fall apart, only to start all over again. All his writing is Southern deep, Southern dark and disturbingly humane. (Font size is author's own.)*

Trial Run

By Connor de Bruler

It looked like a house of cards; a two-story motel just off the interstate, red doors on white frames. Each curtain-drawn window faced the on-ramp to the Fairview Road Bridge in the foothills of South Carolina. A young hustler--good-looking, no meth rot evident in her face--left the room with a 7-Up bottle in her hand.

Luanne snapped a few pics through the gap in the steering wheel with the P900.

Vaquero got antsy and lit up a Camel Crush. She was hungover and couldn't handle the smell.

"Put it out," she said.

V cracked the tinted window and tossed out the cig.

“That ain’t Sprite or Mountain Dew she carrying,” he said.

“No, it’s 7-Up.”

He scoffed.

“You’d think we was in Houston how much lean this guy peddles in a day.”

“Why? They like the drank out in Texas?”

“Where you been at? It’s the Third Ward all day.”

“They got wards out there like in New Orleans?”

“You ain’t been?”

“To Texas? Never.”

“You missin’ out.”

“On what? More humidity?”

The girl stood at the edge of the street and leaned against a splintered, tar-covered telephone pole.

She snapped another pic with the Nikon.

“How come you take so many photos of random shit?”

“Keep the client happy. Remind him I’m not wasting his time.”

“Bunch of garbage photos isn’t admissible in court.”

She laughed.

“Nobody’s goin’ the court with this stuff. Half my shit doesn’t even go to a lawyer. This is the minor leagues, kid. Last year I had a client who killed his husband. A month before that, a runaway outbid her own mother for me *not* to find her.”

“Shit,” he said. “*His* husband?”

“That’s all you got out of that?”

A red jeep pulled into the parking lot and cruised up beside the telephone pole. She snapped photos of the exchange. The buyer handed the girl the money and a fresh bottle of real soda.

“That’s clever,” V said. “So you don’t see her without a drink in her hand.”

She snaps a final pic and puts away the camera.

“Is that who I think it is in the car?”

V reaches for the binoculars.

“Back seat. Smokin’ a Black and Mild. That’s her.”

Luanne starts the engine and takes a swig of her coffee and then chases it with a belt of Gatorade.

“You sure you don’t want me to drive?”

“I’m sure,” Luanne said.

The tires crunched across the gravel as they followed the red jeep along the street and onto the highway bridge. She allowed a minivan to merge ahead of her.

“Don’t lose him.”

“I can still see him.”

The jeep took the first exit onto a secluded backroad through the bright sun-splashed foliage and she followed.

“You’re getting awful close,” V said.

“Everyone rides each other’s ass on these little country roads. You hang back thirty yards you end up looking suspicious.”

“I don’t know,” he said and placed another cig between his lips without lighting it.

“Get out my camera and get their license plate.”

He took the Nikon and snapped the plate.

“Better not be blurry.”

He snapped the plate again to make sure.

“How’s that one look?”

“I don’t know how to work this thing,” he said, tapping menu options.

“Don’t worry about it.”

She took another sip of her coffee.

The red jeep pulled onto an isolated property overlooking a scum-covered pond that might have had alligators back in the 1960s before nature was beaten into submission and scarcity became its main attribute.

Luanne floored the gas as soon as the jeep turned as if she had somewhere to be. She parked out of sight on a patch of high dogfennel and killed the engine.

“I’m gonna smoke a cigarette,” V said, unbuckling his seatbelt. He stepped out into the weeds, slamming the door behind him.

She reached into the glove compartment and took out the Ruger LCP and the half-pint of vodka. She unscrewed the cap and took a swig.

It started with a call around nine o’clock in the morning; still too early to think. She sat on her swivel chair in the dark corner of her apartment dining room, a blank excel sheet on the four-year-old laptop screen in front of her. After reaching for the liquor cabinet, she threw a liberal splash of bourbon into her coffee. The cell phone vibrated across the desk. She caught it before it dropped off the side and answered it.

It was another missing girl. Another case where drugs figured heavily into the decision making of the mark. The client was male and sounded down-to-earth and more than comfortable talking to a private investigator like it had happened before. His name was Bill Tycho. He was an ex-redneck millionaire with a contracting firm that built golf-club mansions across the state. His daughter was an underage prostitute and oxy user. Seventeen years old.

“So what’s the problem? You can’t afford rehab, a little spot out in Missouri where she can suck off twenty-year-olds and pet horses?”

“Last rehab I sent her to in Florida almost killed her. We’re gonna try an outpatient program this time under my roof. No horses. No other junkies.”

“You know my rates?”

“I do. And if you jerk me around on this and bleed the clock without bringing her back, I’ll make it hard for you to spend my money.”

“I’m gonna have to stop you there,” she said. “I can tell you where she is. I can’t bring anyone to you.”

He paused.

“How about triple the rate?”

The SOB knew her weakness was money. That’s why he found her and not some seasoned ex-cop with a law degree. He needed a low-life to do his dirty work. If she was going to take somebody in, she’d need a partner. That’s where V came in.

She met V back in Greenville at her ex boyfriend’s place. A bald, security-guard type had kicked in the door to the apartment the same night she was tossing the place for the eight-hundred he still owed her. Her ex was a low-level weed and shroom dealer with a gallery of sketchy friends he allowed in and around the apartment from noon to midnight. For anyone looking to find deadbeats south of Earl Street, his crash pad was the main stop. The bald guy must have seen her silhouette in the window. When he kicked in the door, he demanded that she tell him where V was. He called him by his last name: Lawful. The irony wasn’t lost on him.

Luanne was in the middle of robbing her ex, pulling the wrinkled bills from a hiding space beneath the upturned couch.

“You’re a bounty hunter. State law says a private citizen doesn’t have to tell you anything.”

“What are you doing here anyway?”

Again, she recited state and federal law.

“Is he hiding here?”

She showed the bounty hunter the stolen cash and the ransacked state of the apartment.

“Does it look like I live here?” she said, pointing to her crowbar beside the window.

He holstered his sidearm.

“You got a mouth on you, bitch.”

She counted out eight-hundred dollars and stuffed it in her wallet.

“I got what I came for. You can knock yourself out and wait for whoever.”

She attempted to slide past him.

He blocked the door frame.

“You ain’t going nowhere.”

He pushed her against the wall and closed the door with his foot. His face was inches from hers.

“You think you can stand here and make a fool out of me.”

She struggled.

He put his hand over her mouth and wrestled her to the floor.

She tried to kick his groin but he pinned her legs with his knees. He brought all of his weight down on her as she screamed.

A shadow moved across the wall and crowded the entranceway. With a swift knock of the crowbar, the bounty hunter was out cold.

She would later tell the prosecutor that the bounty hunter, Eric Currman, would have likely raped her that night had Vaquero Lawful not saved her. Her testimony didn’t help him much and he went to state prison on a five-year sentence anyway.

They cut him loose after two. Overcrowding.

She drove down to the state capital and caught him outside the prison with her business proposition.

V didn’t have anywhere else to go except for the bus stop.

“Not everyday a white lady offers you a ride and a meal while talking about making *you* money. Especially not the day you get out of prison,” she said as they drove north on the highway.

“You wouldn’t know how things turn out for me,” V said.

She took him to a diner and bought him a cup of coffee and a plate of pancakes and told him about the job and gave him a flat rate she could pay him for helping her.

“It doesn’t sound at all legal,” he said. “And I just got out of prison.”

“It’s not like we’re gonna pimp her out or hold her for ransom. Her dad wants to help her out. She’s a minor. He has a right to get her back.”

“If he’s going through you then he’s hiding something,” V said. “And I ain’t worried about the morality factor. I’m worried about the fuckin’ legality factor. I just got out. Five minutes ago.”

She bit off a piece of bacon.

“Yeah, you’re right. You just got out. You got no place. No money. No job. You know? You saved my life so I thought I’d cut you in on this thing and get you started. A thousand bucks might get you out of the South at least.”

“A thousand bucks? Maybe. And how much you makin’? Three? Four?”

“I’m making what I’m making. We’re talking about you.”

“We’re talking about what I can do for you,” he said. “We’re talking about this being a potential trial run for a longer partnership.”

“I’m not hiring a partner,” she said.

“You’re hiring me for a single job. That’s like hiring a partner. We’ll call it a trial run. What’s a thousand dollars gonna do for me? Huh? Might get me as far as Washington D.C. where I can freeze to death on the street. I don’t need to get out of the South. What I need is an opportunity and what you need is a sober person to do the heavy lifting. Am I right?”

She smirked and leaned back in the booth.

“Am I that bad?”

“Nah, you hold it together ok. But I’m trained for this. My pops was an alcoholic.”

She paused for a moment.

“Alright. A thousand flat and a trial run to go into business together.”

They shook hands.

V didn't see her swig the Vodka, but he did see her stuff the miniature pistol into her back pocket.

He blew mentholated smoke toward the trees.

"You got you a throwaway?"

"Just in case," she said, locking the car.

"The hell? Keep the door open."

"I got equipment in there. I don't want it open."

He tapped his ash into the weeds.

"What if one of us has to get inside in a split second and you got the key in your pocket?"

"You ever done anything like this before?"

"I'm just giving you a for instance. Look where we are, who is gonna steal your camera out here. They can't even see in the car with your tint job."

She took out the key and unlocked the doors.

"You ready for this?"

"Sure," she said.

V threw his cig onto the road and they approached. The property was tucked back into the cooler woods behind a narrow, cleanly-paved driveway. The house might have looked nice a few years ago, a modest vacation spot in the country, but the active rot of the opiate life had worn the place down: beer cans in the uncut lawn, a sweet chemical smell from the padlocked shed, foundational beams shot up by a .22 rifle.

"This is some Chainsaw Massacre bullshit," V said. "This guy has guns. You know it'll be crazy firepower. And all you got is a pea shooter the size of a burner phone."

".380 ACP can still kill a man outright."

"I don't know what that is."

“The caliber of the bullet,” she said.

They surveyed the house for a few minutes and tried to see beyond the windows. The place was dead quiet. Luanne stepped to the back porch and looked through the mosquito screen. The kitchen was a mess, of course. The TV was still on; internet porn looped on a laptop playlist and linked by an aux cord. The sound was off. She took out a credit card and unlatched the screen door. The second door, the glass door to the kitchen, was unlocked and she stepped inside. Moving fast, she entered the hallway and saw the girl splayed out on the bed, still clothed, a cup of dirty soda on the nightstand. The girl caught a glimpse of Luanne in the hallway through her promethazine haze and did nothing. She just stared at the ceiling. A toilet flushed in the bathroom.

She retreated around the corner as the older man walked into the hall. She winced. She had no plan. The man inched toward the corner.

The girl laughed.

He looked back.

“The fuck you laughin’ at?”

Luanne stood behind him and drew the pocket pistol.

He stopped dead as she pressed the barrel to his neck.

“Don’t move. Don’t say a word.”

“You here from Cantrell?”

“Interlock your fingers on the top of your head,” she said. “I’m not a drug dealer and I’m not here to rob you.”

“Then what the fuck are you doing in my house?”

“Get on your knees.”

He ducked low and rammed his shoulder into her stomach. She dropped to the floor, firing a shot at the ceiling.

Just like old times, V jumped in at the last minute and incapacitates him with a right hook.

“You trying to get someone killed?”

“I...don't know what to say,” she said.

“You're still drunk aren't you?”

“I'm a PI, not a kidnapper,” she said. “Come on, get the girl and let's go.”

V walked into the bedroom and threw the girl over his shoulder. They ran out of the house and into the foliage toward the parked car. The girl didn't fight back.

“Where are we going?”

“Your cleaning up,” Luanne said.

“Yay, sobriety,” the girl said sarcastically.

They pushed through the rhododendrons branches and hustled over to the car. She opened the backdoor for V and he sets the girl inside.

“Get in the back with her.”

“I know what I'm doing,” V said.

She ran around to the driver's seat and started the engine. The dark sedan peeled out of the weed patch and down the narrow country road. She chugged her coffee as she drove.

The girl started to laugh.

“What all are you on right now?” V said.

“Don't engage,” Luanne said, glancing at them through the rearview mirror.

“It's cool.”

Luanne pulled her cell phone out of her jeans and dialed the clients number. Driving with one hand, she waited as the cell rang for a full minute. The contractor finally answered.

“Yeah?”

“We got her,” she said. “We're coming to you.”

“I'm on a job. I'll text you the address.”

When the text came through, she handed the phone to V.

“Put that into the GPS.”

The girl laughed the whole way to the building site.

She slowed the car as they approached.

“Where are we going?” the girl said.

“We’re taking you to your dad,” V said.

She peered through the windshield.

“That ain’t my dad.”

V said nothing.

Luanne glanced at him through the rearview.

“Don’t say anything,” she said. “Let’s just get paid.”

V looked at the girl.

Big Bill Tycho waited for them beside his white pickup with his arms crossed. His employees loitered around the frame of the house, smoking, spitting seeds, and drinking from their water bottles. Luanne parked the sedan sideways across a patch of raw clay.

Two of his enforcers opened up the back seat and pulled out the girl. V stepped out after her and another man patted him down. The same man frisked Luanne and she showed him the Ruger. Tycho didn't say anything the girl was inside the back of the white truck.

“Well, you outdid my expectations. I’ll put in a good word for you.”

Luanne kept staring at V who didn’t say a word.

“I guess you want to get paid then?”

“That’s usually how this works,” she said.

He reached into his dark khakis and took out a bank envelope.

“Here, count it. I won’t be offended.”

V wiped his brow with his shirt.

“So who is the girl anyway? If she isn’t your kid?”

“Shut up,” Luanne said.

“I’m just askin’. I wanna know what I did this for.”

Tycho looked at Luanne.

“Who is this guy anyway. Your muscle?”

“You don’t need to worry about it. We’re paid, so we don’t care who she is,” she said, and gave V a look.

V kept his eyes on Tycho.

The men around them went silent and circled the sedan.

Luanne counted the money.

“We’re good,” she said. “Let’s go.”

A man with a white hard hat sat down on the hood of the sedan.

“You didn’t say you were gonna have a partner on this,” Tycho said.

“I needed to make sure it got done right.”

“That wasn’t part of the contract.”

“What’s the difference? It’s the same amount of money.”

Bill Tycho winced and adjusted his belt.

“What’s the difference? I paid you for discretion. Now I got another guy in the mix.”

“He’ll keep his mouth shut.”

“It don’t sound like he’s keeping his mouth shut to me,” he said and turned to one of his employees. “Dale, this man sound like he’s keeping his mouth shut to you?”

The one called Dale shook his head.

“No, sir. Sound to me like he’s asking a bunch of questions.”

V kept his eyes moving as they argued. He stared at the passed-out girl in the back of Tycho’s truck, at the worker sitting on the hood of the car, at Dale as he smiled and stared back into his eyes.

Luanne acted like she was stuffing the envelope in her back pocket as she reached for the Ruger.

A hefty man to her right reached into his toolbox for a jet black .357 magnum.

She drew the pocket Ruger and fired.

Bill Tycho dropped to his knees with a bullet to the gut.

V lunged for the nearest man and tackled him to the red clay.

The mangum's report echoed through the site.

Two of them pulled V away by his arms.

Luanne fired again. The bullet glanced off an exposed septic tank and pierced the passenger window of Tycho's truck and the girl was dead.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *It's been a dark few months, personally and globally. Maybe by the time you find this story, things will be different. I was driving back to the swamp from the upstate when I saw the Palmetto Inn from the highway and the first sentence of the story came to me in an instant. I wrote it into my computer a day or so later, unable to forget it. I let it sit for some time until one morning, through all the haze and pain and abandoned notions for the future, I sat down and just banged out the whole story. I already knew the characters and the setting. I touched it up and sent it to my grad-student sister in Tuscaloosa and she pointed out a few problems. I worked on a second draft until I was finally happy with it. It's a crime story. Crime, pulp, noir, hardboiled...whatever you want to call it...it's an interesting genre in the sense that you can create a sense of supremely fantastical conflict without sacrificing brutal honest realism.*

I've got a new novel out on multiple book platforms now: Last Junction. If you like this story consider purchasing one of my books.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Connor de Bruler lives in South Carolina. He is the author of five novels: *Tree Black*; *The Mountain Devils*; *Goodbye, Moonflower*; *Olden Days*; *Last Junction*. An excerpt from his novel *Goodbye, Moonflower* was published in Issue 5.

Cheerios on the Sunday After

By Lauren Schmidt

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor DAVID KHOLAMIAN writes:*

A diary comes to life! Schmidt renders a tight milieu from the mind of a teenage girl within structure and poetry that packs power. This story makes use of the page space, breaking its brief narrative into punchy, sudden vignettes that quickly tip the plot's questions into startling scenes. This is a story defined by blood and the most fundamental red of shame. The culturally embedded Scarlet Letter is quickly deployed within this fast moving story as a lynchpin for a veritable fountain of red imagery, of blood pumping on the inside and bleeding on the outside; this is a story predominated by the contrast between internality and externality, on the animal strength of shame in adolescence, the crushing weight of appearance and the flight of the inner body towards freedom and maturity. "My heart pounds, pumping this red pepper, faster and faster until I can't make my arms move, my hands or my legs move. I can't think. I can't speak. My muscles and guts shake so badly from deep inside them that I drop everything I'm holding—my cell phone slides off my Physics textbook and crashes to the ground. The noise is loud enough to turn the heads of a few kids in the back of the circle, but I don't hear a thing."

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is an excerpt from a work in progress. (Spacing and formatting is author's own.)*

The Slutty Girl

“Cheerios on the Sunday After”

There's something awful about seeing your mom on the morning after a party where something like that happens. She looks at you on your way to the bathroom in the hallway. She sees your messy hair, your mascara smudged across your cheeks, the glitter in your eyeshadow just, like, everywhere. She sees that you're in the same t-shirt and jeans you were in last night, your fly open, which was all the undressing you could manage in the dark. She sees the deep pillow creases pressed into the right side of your face because you didn't move at all once your body crashed against the bed. And even though you won't get close enough to hug her, she can probably smell the Vape and beer on your breath, the guy you didn't really want to kiss but did, and sometimes, even puke.

But when you get down to the kitchen to force yourself to eat a bowl of cereal, even though you don't have the stomach for it yet, she's willing to put on the same little play with you.

"How was the party, honey? Did you have fun with your friends?" she'll say, her wide eyes looking over the rim of her coffee cup.

"Yeah, mom. It was really fun," you say. You stuff your mouth with a spoonful of Cheerios, a few wet ones falling from your bottom lip onto the table next to your bowl and into your lap. You pretend to be distracted by the mess you're making. You shove the stray Cheerio on your chin back into your mouth, pick up the ones that got away, and drop them back into the bowl. You devote more attention to your Cheerios than anything else in the room.

Your mother understands everything. "Oh good," she'll say. "I'm glad."

She continues to pretend to read her woman's magazine, happy that, after two years of fighting almost constantly with you, she knows when the questions should stop.

She knows what to ask to get you to talk with her and what to avoid so you don't, like, flip the fuck out on her and hide away in your room for three hours. Your mom is, by your senior year, proud of herself because she's learned a little to let you go, even after what happened in tenth grade.

"It won't be too long before you'll be out of here, so I can't watch over you all the time," she'll say, echoing your own idiot words back to you.

Normally, this little charade is OK, but on a Sunday like this—after your phone's been blowing up with texts from a bunch of nervous football players, after all the not knowing what's going to happen next to that girl, the girl you've been before, after feeling like you had something to do with the whole confusing mess of the night you can barely recall yourself—you don't have it in you to carry the show on for too long. You know that changing the subject will only make her feel like she's being too nosy again and your brain isn't functioning well enough to make shit up in order to hold a conversation. All that's left to do is to eat your Cheerios and scroll through your phone, hoping you aren't in any of the pictures being sent around last night.

So far, so good.

And then his text message comes through.

“Muscle Memory”

I feel my cheeks get hot, like, immediately, when I see what’s on the screen.

Ever since Sophomore Year, it doesn’t take much for my body to do that to me. It doesn’t matter that I’m two full years away from all that stuff that happened—all it takes is a second, and I’m, like, right back there again.

In Biology, we learned about this thing called Muscle Memory, which is basically, like, your body knowing how to do a certain movement without any real effort because your muscles are accustomed to doing the movement over and over again. So, like, riding a bike. That’s why they say that it’s as easy as riding a bike because your body knows how to ride a bike without your brain. That’s why texting is so easy—you don’t even have to think about it. Your fingers just know where the keys are and, boom, you hit “send” and you’re done. And because your body doesn’t need to think about what it’s doing, it’s, like, really good at doing the movement.

This is the only way I can describe how I feel right now. When I am reminded of anything that happened Sophomore Year, my body does this thing—like, my heart races, my face gets hot, but I’m somehow really cold, and I sort of tense up all over. When it’s really bad, I can’t really hear anything either, like my head is under ocean water. Since I spent most of Sophomore Year feeling this way, it doesn’t take much for muscle memory to kick in, for my body to, like, take over itself, even if I don’t want it to.

I know this feeling better than anything I have been taught in high school. I wish I could understand Physics or recite parts of *Macbeth*, but I can’t. Part of that might be because we read *Macbeth* Sophomore Year and I don’t remember anything about

Sophomore Year. I get tense feelings just thinking about it and not because he gets his head cut off at the end or anything, but because that's what we were reading when I got called to the Guidance Counselor's office, first period in the morning. I heard my name and felt that heat in my cheeks.

And I know when it happens, my face is probably, like, really red, so I know it's just a matter of time before my mother looks up from her magazine and sees me. I get up to leave.

"Where you going, honey?"

Already at the sink, I go, "I have to get ready for work. I have to be at the diner by nine. Sunday's a big day for brunch.

The Muscle Memory is bad this morning, so I think I hear my mother say something about dinner.

"I should be home in time for dinner."

I go upstairs and as I'm getting ready to take a shower, I hear my phone again.

This time, it's her.

I read it, put the phone down, and get ready for work. I am just, like, not in the mood to deal with this today. I'm just not.

But I also can't get her, like, off my mind. I am already out of the shower and blow-drying my hair before I realize I don't remember doing anything that came before. I don't remember getting undressed, or stepping into the shower. I don't remember shampooing or conditioning, toweling off, or even getting dressed again.

I wonder how much of my life am I going through like this, where everything I do is just done by my body, not some kind of willful act. How much am I even aware of

what my body says yes to—the way I sit in desks in school, how I walk from one class to the next, the way I brush my hair in my locker mirror, the way I hold my pen. How much, in the last two years, have I just been, like, riding a bike?

Three more texts from her: *How am I gonna get out of here? Can you come get me? Pleeeeeeease?*

I specifically do not text her back.

This is the first actual choice I have made today.

The Slutty Girl

“Blood Hurricane”

From far away, it looks like the after-school crowd is gathered around my locker. Immediately, my blood vessels, like boiling clouds, pop and thunder throughout my body, blasting from my chest all the way to my knees, down and out my arms, into my fingertips and back up my throat to my face where the red heat gathers and hangs in my cheeks. My heart pounds, pumping this red pepper, faster and faster until I can't make my arms move, my hands or my legs move. I can't think. I can't speak. My muscles and guts shake so badly from deep inside them that I drop everything I'm holding—my cell phone slides off my Physics textbook and crashes to the ground. The noise is loud enough to turn the heads of a few kids in the back of the circle, but I don't hear a thing.

Some freshman girl asks, “Are you OK?” I can't answer her, but it's her eye contact—the horrified worry glittering in her eyes—that brings me back from this storm of hot blood blowing through me.

I give her a quick nod and inch towards the circle of kids. Slowly, as if fighting the winds of my hurricane, kids I know and kids I don't part for me the way a crowd of commoners parts for a queen, the way a mob does for an outlaw on his way to the guillotine—I'm not really sure which and my body doesn't think there's much of a difference anyway.

With everyone out of the way now, I realize that it's not my locker with red spray paint slicing across it, but the locker to the right of mine. Her locker. The locker of the girl who hasn't responded to my texts, who hasn't shown up to school at all this week, the girl who was supposed to be the savior of my senior year, the girl I might never see again.

The thing about my hurricane is that when all the blowing around settles, I am left so weak I can barely do anything. I turn into a zombie. The hallways grow quiet and still, which makes it easier to calm down. And even though everyone else has left, I stand there, alone, staring, not at the whole word, but the first letter of it, the S, the way the spray paint, collected and bled because the can was held too close to the small metal door, the way the swell of the S gently swoops across the hinge of her locker onto mine, the way the bottom of the S bleeds in three long drips and falls to the floor, the linoleum freckled with spattered red.

And suddenly I'm flashing back to the bathroom, standing there, over the girl who used to be my best friend, the girl who used to be my everything, the girl who cut herself up because of Big Blue and The List, the girl who cut me off two years ago, halfway through our Sophomore Year, the girl I will probably never see again.

She was sitting under the window on the right wall of the bathroom, cuts all up and down her arm, her blood falling in slow drops to the floor.

“Oh my God, what did you do?”

Not thinking, I dropped to my knees and grabbed her arms to stop the blood, which was warm and thick beneath my fingers. She didn't have it in her to pull her arms away from me, which I was grateful for—I couldn't handle her rejecting me in the Girls' Bathroom that way again.

I was a sophomore when naked pictures of me were sent around school. I had taken them for my boyfriend at the time, who was a senior. What was really bad was that the pictures were leaked when we were still together. It wasn't that long after I gave him those pictures that they were all over the place. He was the only person I had ever done anything like that for—I thought we were in love. I wasn't having sex with him—actually, we weren't doing much of *anything* at the time. I said I wasn't ready. He asked me if I could take pictures so he could see what he was doing all the hard work of waiting so long for.

In my stupid sophomore head, I thought that was a reasonable request.

And if I'm being honest, it made me feel kind of sexy, knowing that someone wanted to see me naked that bad.

So, I made a thing of it. I sat in my bedroom for hours trying to get the right angles:

I messed my hair around just the right way.

I half-closed my eyes to get that *don't-you-want-me* look in them.

I put lip gloss on my lips and pout them out, like all those female celebrities on Instagram and Snapchat.

I angled my face in a particular way because I never liked my nose.

I lowered my chin to look mysterious and sexy.

I practiced all kinds of poses trying to look as skinny as possible.

I pushed up my boobs with my free hand to get more cleavage.

I tried different levels of lighting, from really bright to really dim.

And when I had a bunch of photos on my phone, I played around with, like, *every* filter to see which was the most flattering: black and white, denim, soft glow.

By the time I was done, I must've had over a hundred photos of me and parts of me—eyes, lips, breasts, belly. I couldn't really bring myself to take anything other than topless ones because I felt really embarrassed trying to get a good shot of anything below the belly button. In the end, I was topless in only two of the ten photos I sent my boyfriend, and even those pictures weren't all that bad. They weren't nasty, like, porno pictures or anything. They were just a little naughty. But trust me, that was enough.

I remember the guidance counselor calling me into her office. It was, like, the longest morning ever, and I was so grateful that someone wanted to talk to me. But instead of asking me about how I felt now that the entire school had seen me in all these embarrassing shots trying teenager-hard to look sexy, she gave me a bunch of pamphlets about safe sex, STDs, and pregnancy. I was so pissed. I wasn't

called in to talk—I was called in to listen. She wasn't trying to protect me—she was trying to protect herself, the school, or whoever. Not me. Who knows, maybe she even judged me. I refused to take them, told her to go fuck herself and left, but when I reached Biology, I realized that they had been stuffed into the mesh water bottle sling on my backpack. Fucking pamphlets. I couldn't handle the irony of being given all this reading material on sex when I wasn't even *having* sex.

I took the pictures so I didn't *have to have* sex.

They were supposed to buy me time.

But what they *did* do was cost me my best friend. The morning all the pictures came out, she texted me to meet her in the bathroom first period. She was in there, like, hysterical crying in a confusing mixture of anger and sadness. *How could I do this* she asked me over and over again, almost as if I had done something to *her*, like my mistake was going to follow *her* around because she was my best friend.

By the time she was done ripping into me, I was in tears too, apologizing and shaking my head over and over again. I felt ashamed more because of her reaction than anyone else's and I was, like, dying for her forgiveness. I reached for her for a hug, the kind of hug we've hugged a million times over the years when shit's gone wrong. But she threw her hands up and shook her head. Then she squeezed herself passed me out the door.

I had a stink on me in her eyes and she couldn't afford to get any of it on her. Not in *this* school. That shit follows you. I didn't understand why she did that

then, but looking back, I can't say I blame her. Doesn't mean it doesn't hurt, though.

But there we were again, a year later, after a year of not talking, me holding her blood in my hands. She didn't snatch her arms away like she did a year ago. I thought she might actually talk to me.

"Why did you do this? Why would you try to hurt yourself?"

"I just can't take this fucking place anymore."

"That's no reason to kill yourself," I say. I'm shaking and a little sick at the metal smell of blood, the way it's starting to glue my fingers to her arm. I didn't know what else to do but stay there.

"I'm not trying to kill myself. I do this sometimes because it makes me feel better. I just did it more than usual today. Look, the cuts aren't deep enough to kill me. Promise."

She pulled her arms to show me. She was right that the cuts weren't deep, but there were a lot of them. Then was like, "Can you do me a favor?"

"Yes, of course. Anything."

"Can you get the nurse? I don't feel good. I think I need to go home. My parents are gonna be so pissed I did this again, but I would rather face them than stay here the rest of the day."

"Again? What do you mean *again*?"

“I started this last year, after our fight, I guess. It’s weird, but it helps me cope with how stressed out I can get sometimes.”

I started to cry. Did this mean she misses me? Maybe this was my chance to get her back and maybe I wouldn’t be so lonely anymore. I had so many questions, but looking at the blood, I knew those would have to wait.

I stood up, washed off what blood I could. “Stay here, OK? I’ll be right back with the Nurse. Is it safe to leave you like this?”

“Stay here. Like I can really leave...”

I frowned at her. To get me on my way, she said, “I’m OK. No arteries or anything. Really. But I am pretty tired. Once the high goes away, I’m always, like, wiped out.”

When I told the Nurse, she called 911, the Principal and the Guidance Counselor. After paramedics wheeled her away, I stood outside the Girls’ Bathroom, just staring at the door. They put one of those yellow caution signs where you see some, like, gender-less body in the middle of falling to the ground due to a slippery floor. Someone in the main office typed up a sign that said “Out of Service” and taped it over the teeny girl symbol.

I am in the same stupid stance right now, standing in front of my own locker, the wind in my chest finally slowing. I hear a classroom door to the left of me open, keys jangling to lock it, and then the door click closed. Just like this

morning, I knew he was standing there looking at me, probably wanting to say something, but not knowing how.

I turn to him, but say nothing.

He says in as calm a teacher-voice as he can manage, “Stay here, OK? I’ll call the Principal,” and hurries off, almost running.

Stay here, he says. Like I can leave.

No, I can’t leave. I stand here now, I have stood here before, I will be standing here forever, staring at the part of my locker stained red with that tiny bend of S, blood hurricane thundering in my ears.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

Written in the voices of various unnamed teenagers (and a few adults), my YA novel is very loosely inspired by the Steubenville, OH rape case. The novel takes place in the immediate aftermath of the sexual assault and attempts to reveal the culture behind a tragedy such as this, which not only includes the rape itself, but the community’s willingness to blame the young woman, as well as the ardent defense of the football team and the two boys, who were charged and eventually convicted. The Slutty Girl is the novel’s protagonist—she is called this because this is how she feels about herself. The Slutty Girl represents the many women who suffer their own sexual assault, as she does, in silence and in self-loathing. As the Steubenville case played out on the national stage, it became apparent that, even though many teenagers were present, not one of them stepped up to help her—at least not in a way that was successful. Instead, many were laughing and celebrating the sexual humiliation of this young woman through pictures, texts, and posts on social media. The summer before my senior year in high school, I got deliriously drunk at a small gathering in the presence of my male peers, many of whom were football players and other high school athletes. But nothing like that happened to me. They took care of me, cleaned me up, and dropped me off at home, hours past my curfew.

Cell phones and social media didn't exist then, but I am confident I wouldn't have had to worry about being so deeply disgraced. So, when this story came out of Steubenville, I wanted to know why this young woman couldn't have been cleaned up and dropped off at home to get grounded for six months by her parents. What are the values and beliefs systems of a community like Steubenville that shape the culture and create the conditions for something like this to happen? And because Steubenville is not unique, because the events that happened there can happen in other places just as easily, my novel answer that question.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Lauren Marie Schmidt is the author of three previous collections of poetry: *Two Black Eyes and a Patch of Hair Missing*; *The Voodoo Doll Parade*, selected for the Main Street Rag Author's Choice Chapbook Series; and *Psalms of The Dining Room*, a sequence of poems about her volunteer experience at a soup kitchen in Eugene, Oregon. Her work has appeared in journals such as *North American Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Rattle*, *Nimrod*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *PANK*, *New York Quarterly*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *The Progressive*, and others. Her awards include the So to Speak Poetry Prize, the Neil Postman Prize for Metaphor, The Janet B. McCabe Prize for Poetry, and the Bellevue Literary Review's Vilcek Prize for Poetry. Her fourth collection, *Filthy Labors*, chronicles her volunteer teaching experience at a transitional housing program for homeless women in her native New Jersey. Schmidt is currently at work on a Young Adult novel. You can read her interview *10 Questions for Lauren Schmidt* at *The Massachusetts Review*.

EDITOR'S BIO:

'David Kholamian is a writer and poet living outside of Chicago, IL. He has had poetry published in *Milk Journal* and *DePaul's Crook & Folly* as well as creative nonfiction in Chicago's *MAKE Lit* journal. He currently has a finished manuscript lying around somewhere, waiting to creep its way into the hands of some unsuspecting and prominent literary agent.' His story *Mile End* was published in Issue 5 (Fiction)

WHAT IF

By David A. Summers & Gloria L. Summers

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor ROBERT STANDISH writes: What if, indeed, I can't count how many times I alone have asked that very question. Stanley is a man that has a story to tell, he has proof, there is something here that could change the free world, he has uncovered a conspiracy but perhaps is getting too close to the web itself. Albert, a friend of sorts, easily dismisses the importance through his own selfish ignorance. The layers of possibilities to what the recordings could tell lead the reader down the world of espionage, conspiracies and collusion. Is it possible for a nation to orchestrate the future of a world power? The idea is enticing. The seductive power of one over another is much the same as the idea that the Russians could create a future as they see fit through their interference. I appreciate the idea that evil or success is never left to chance and greed's agenda will always seek a way to stack the deck. This collaborative work does well to explain how a simple plan to corrupt and control the future through greed is easy to believe, we think we see things as they are but do we? We think we know the ones we confide in but do we? I appreciate how what seems clear can be missed or interpreted wrongly. The twist of a forked tongue from the seductress to change political favor is a welcomed representation. "What if she's been assigned to lure him in, and then pull some strings so that he ends up in a mental hospital again? Yeah, what if? ". As they say don't hate the player hate the game- right well what if you hate the game because you know it's really a play- WHAT IF?*

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WHAT IF

By David A. Summers & Gloria L. Summers

Albert wasn't going to let Stanley bring him down. He'd done the guy a big favor, he'd taken a risk actually, by letting him hear the recording he'd made. Someone

could have been listening in, the same way he'd been listening in on other tenants' phone calls. He could be evicted, maybe arrested.

So how did Stanley show his appreciation? Did he say "great stuff" or "you really got something big" or "now there's a woman who knows what's going on" or anything like that? No. All he did was make a nasty comment when Albert said he was crazy about the woman and wanted to meet her.

To hell with Stanley, or whatever his name really was, thought Albert. You think you've found a friend who understands what's going on, but as soon as you share something really important, he brushes it off like it was nothing. You tell him you've come across someone brilliant and even prove it to him, and what does he say? "Don't get near her." Then he said some other stuff, completely uncalled for. What was his problem?

Well, Albert didn't care what Stanley thought. He was going to find out who she was, and once he did, he'd think of a way to meet her. Right now though, he was going to listen to this last recording again. He loved the sound of her voice. She knew how to generate excitement, how to keep you listening and wanting to hear more.

Her brother, the guy she usually called, was pretty much a dud, never adding anything, just telling her to be careful, to slow down and look for evidence. That was okay, thought Albert, just as long as he didn't try to stifle her, to shut her up. He sat back in his recliner, got comfortable and hit the play button.

"Hey, it's me. Have a moment?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"Okay, people are always wondering why the Russians keep outsmarting us, right? It's like they know in advance what they can get away with. So you have to wonder, how do they know? Am I right?"

"Maybe."

"Well, I think I've figured out what's going on."

"Tell me."

"Okay, everyone thinks the Russians must have something big on him, and have threatened to reveal it if he doesn't play along, right?"

"Right."

"But common sense tells us this can't be it. What could they possibly reveal that everyone doesn't know already? Fooling around with women? Orgies? Owing millions to their banks? No, we've heard it all. They could threaten to reveal more of this stuff, and he'd tell them to go ahead, nobody cares. But they're smart, smarter than he is by a long shot, so they dangle a carrot instead."

"Money?"

"Of course money, that's what he wants, that's what his crooked pals want. What if the Russians have told him they'll give him the Russian luxury resort market with zero competition? What if they've told him that as long as he remembers who his friends are, he and his pals will make billions when the time is right."

"They promise him money, that's the idea you called to tell me about?"

"No, no, that's not why I called. The money's the obvious part. Everyone knows he'd sell us out for money."

"Okay, so where are you going with this?"

"I'll tell you. Here's the part people haven't realized. The Russians know he's unstable, just as well as we do. They know he could go off the rails, and if he does, who knows what he might do? He could go rogue on them, and if he did, they might lose their advantage. You with me so far?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, now the question is, how are they going to keep him on track, how are they going to keep him from doing anything really crazy? Think about it. They've got a golden opportunity, and they don't want to blow it."

"I'm listening."

"Here it is. What if they've put someone inside, someone right beside him, someone who can feed them information about what he's thinking, what he's planning. They could anticipate his every move, and whenever he seems ready to do something really crazy, something that would threaten them, they could rely on their person inside to calm him down, nudge him back onto the right track."

"Are you saying they've planted a mole, a spy?"

"I'm saying if the Russians wanted an advantage, putting one of their people right next to him would be the smart move."

"Okay, but who would they plant?"

"This is where it gets interesting. What if it's his wife?"

"Whoa!"

"I'm serious. What if they knew years ago that someday he'd make a run for the top? What if they figured out exactly the kind of woman who'd appeal to him? What if they found the right woman and recruited her? What if they promised her she could have anything she wants if she carries out an assignment for them?"

"That would definitely get her attention, but still...."

"What if they told her she could use her modeling career as a ruse get into the country? What if they told her that after she got here, it was just a matter of getting close to the target and then stroking his ego?"

"Wait a minute. He met her years ago, long before he decided to run. How could the Russians know he was the guy they needed to target?"

"If they just left it to chance, of course it would be a long shot, but what if they didn't leave it to chance?"

"Go on."

"What if they used one of their assets to get close to the guy and give him the idea of running? What if they made sure their asset knew all about the guy's ego, all about his greed? What if they told their asset to use what he knew to work on the guy until he bought the idea? Sure, it could take years, and it might not pan out, but think of what's at stake."

"But he's still got to meet the woman, right? How do they bring them together?"

"We know when and where they met, right? What if their asset knew their target would be at this particular party on that particular night? What if their asset greased the wheels to make sure she could get in? What if they said to her, it's all set up, now all you have to do is make sure he sees you, then use your beauty and your charm to lure him in?"

"Yeah, but do you think she'd go along with it, once she actually lays eyes on him?"

"What if they warned her in advance that she'll find him repulsive? What if they told her it's her assignment to lure him in, repulsive or not? What if they reminded her that if she succeeds, she'll have all the money she wants for the rest of her life, just as long as she remembers she's working for them?"

"She might wonder what happens to her if he runs, but doesn't win."

"What if they told her not to worry about that, because if he runs, they'll make sure he wins."

"Okay, then what?"

"Then what? That's easy. What if she's giving the Russians everything she learns as we speak? What if she's telling them what he's thinking, what he's planning, day by day, maybe hour by hour?"

"Are you saying all this is true?"

"I'm saying what if, that's all, just what if. But if it's true, it would explain a lot, wouldn't it? Look at what's happening. The Russians do whatever they want."

"Maybe you're right, but here's my own what if. What if he figures out that his wife is a Russian spy?"

"What difference would that make? She could even tell him she's a spy, and what could he do? If he threatens to throw her out, she lets him know she'll tell the world he's been bought by the Russians, and can prove it. He'd end up in jail."

"I don't know, sis. I'd think twice before about going public with this."

"I'm just saying what if, right? Nothing wrong with saying what if, is there?"

"Just keep it under wraps for a while, okay? You need evidence before you tell anyone but me."

"I hear you. But this isn't all. I've got one more what if."

"Yeah?"

"What if she's a reptilian? She and the top Russian guy both."

"Wait a minute now."

"You want evidence, right? Okay, let me ask you this. How can you detect reptilians, even when they disguise themselves?"

"From what I've read, all you need is a good look at their tongues. They'll be forked, like a snake's tongue, sort of flicking in and out."

"Right. Now tell me if you've ever seen a photo of her with her mouth open wide enough to get a good look at her tongue?"

"Uh...."

"Exactly. You never have. What if she's making sure no one can see her tongue? Isn't that proof enough?"

"Listen, you've got to be careful with this, I mean it. Someone could be listening. The Russians maybe, or even his people. Or hers."

"Listening? Of course they're listening, but what can they do without compromising their operation? What if I've already given my lawyer a sealed envelope with all the proof in it? What if I've left instructions to send the envelope to all the news outlets if something happens to me?"

"You know you're playing with fire, don't you?"

"Hey, I can't talk anymore. The dog needs to go out. Later."

Albert sat for a while, savoring what he'd just heard. Jesus, talk about connecting the dots! She'd absolutely nailed it! If he could only meet her, he thought. The two of them would be great together, he could feel it.

Albert's reverie abruptly ended when Stanley's final words came back to him. Why did Stanley have to bring up what happened the last time he thought he'd found someone? Stanley knew he'd never forget. How could he? He'd been stuck away in a mental hospital for two months, thanks to that woman's scheming. There'd been no need for Stanley to bring it up.

Or maybe there had been, he thought. What if Stanley was right, and this new one is just like the last one? What if she's been assigned to lure him in, and then pull some strings so that he ends up in a mental hospital again? Yeah, what if?

FINIS

AUTHORS' NOTE: *This story was written with Stephen King's top twenty rules in mind, in particular, Rule No. 1: First write for yourself, which we did, amusing ourselves from beginning to end; and Rule No. 20: Write to enrich your life and the lives of others, which we tried to do, through humor. As for what inspired us, you'd have to listen in on one of our conversations. All questions would be answered, except "how do these two stay out of trouble?"*

AUTHORS' BIO: After teaching psychology for several years and practicing law for even longer, David Summers is retired and living in the Pacific Northwest where he writes short fiction, hoping he's not causing his Knox College literature professors, now long departed, to spin in their graves. His previous work, usually fairly dark, has appeared in *The RavensPerch*, *Thuglit*, *Out of the Gutter*, *Shotgun Honey*, *Red Fez* and *Trembling with Fear*. His co-author (and sister) Gloria Summers lives in a small town in the Midwest, often serving as his silent collaborator.

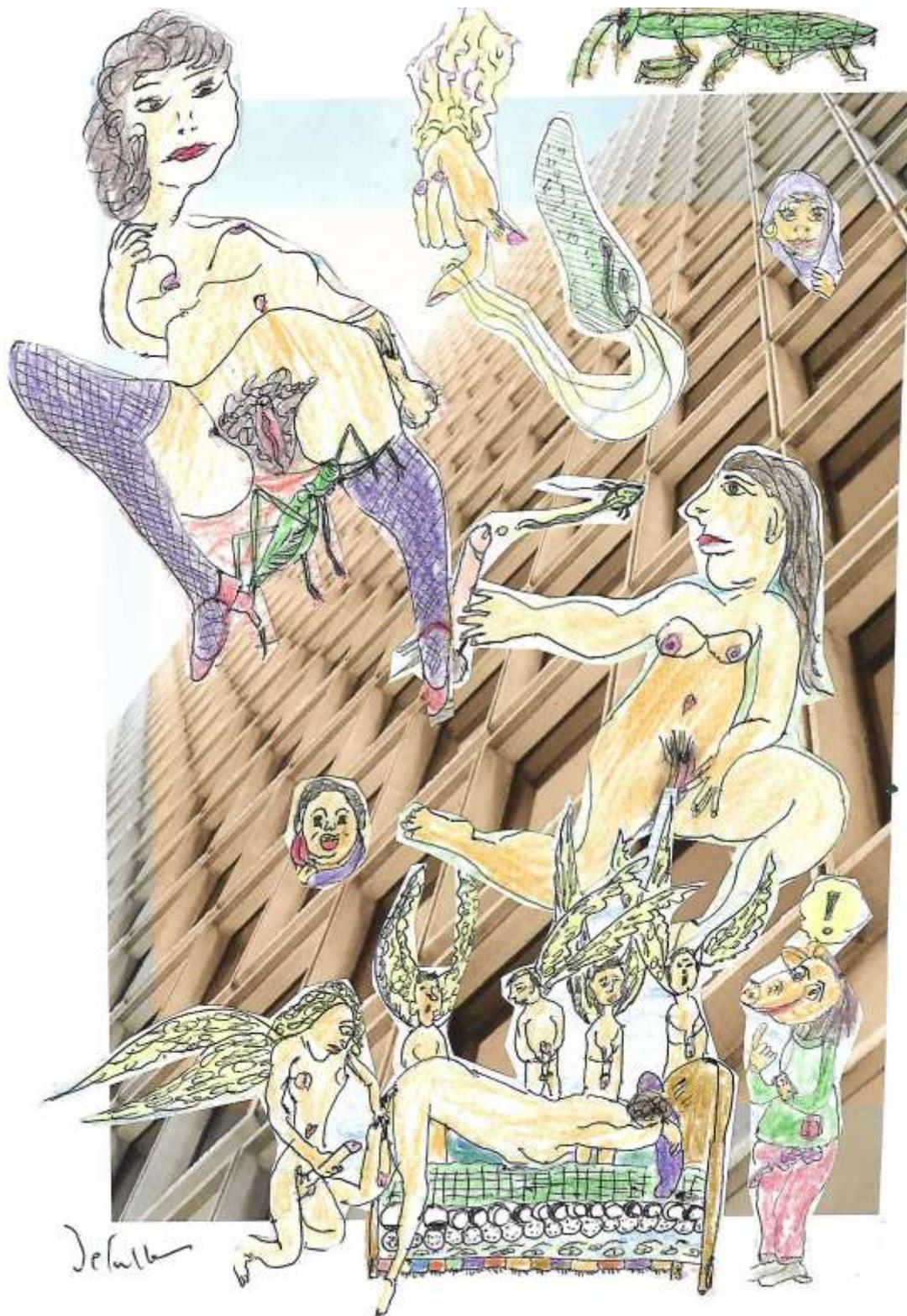
EDITOR'S BIO: Robert Standish is an aspiring writer and devoted father of three. After several years in the film and television industry in Canada, he has had the chance to meet some amazing people, travel and experience things, not for normal consumption. As a camera assistant and operator he has been in the line of fire on many occasions and inside explosions and crashes, just to name a few incredible opportunities. 'Chalk Outline These Thoughts 1 and 2 and a fiction novel 'The Secrets Men Keep', most recently the creator of a collection of poetry entitled 'The Passion Hidden Within'. (*Amazon and Kindle*) I have found most recent success with three poems published on *Terror House Magazine* and soon a short fiction story will be published in February, it is my hope to extend and expand my exposure and develop as many relationships as I can. Now transitioning into a creative writer who has self-published four works and counting, Robert is setting his sights on the next project. His story **IF** was published in Issue 2 (Fiction).

ABORTED FETUS VACCINE

By Daniel de Culla

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We like, no love, the way this radical Spanish poet of the smash experience pits the sacred and profane in a face off that ends up redefining their meaning. Everything in his world is a moving target and he seldom misses his shot. Hypocrisy, corruption and all the other niceties of church and state, don't have a chance. This poet-kestrel, beautiful and dangerous, screams his celebration of 'being' (we mean, like, bigger than life) from a high branch and words burst into song fires that carry us away. Sexually explicit graphics. Reader discretion. (Spacing is author's own.)*

POR QUÉ NOS GUSTA: *Estos siete híbridos tremendamente originales que combinan prosa, poesía y gráficos, tienen el poder y la fuerza del graffiti en su forma más profana. Por turnos, agresivos, descarados, ofensivos, tiernos y hermosos, desafían al lector con cada línea. Este pájaro poeta grita su celebración de la vida desde una rama alta y las palabras estallan en cantos de fuego que nos agarran de la imaginación y nos llevan. La traducción del español del autor es tosca y sin cortes, pero creemos que limpiarla afectaría en lugar de realzar la noble piel de una voz auténticamente cruda y melifluida. Ilustraciones del autor. El espaciado es del autor. Gráficos sexualmente explícitos. Discreción del lector.*



ABORTED FETUS VACCINE

**(“The Anti-Covid 19 Vaccine is produced from aborted fetuses” -
Cardinal Cañizares, from Valencia, Spain).**

How well do these non-aborted monsters of the Church know:

Cardinals, bishops, prelates, etc.

With Donkey ears and Donkey dicks

Endowed with graces in pedophile or brothel chairs

Blessed with divine water and wine

Taken from coiferous springs

Of she blessed pisspiles and night-snatch nightjars

Worshippers of Healing Braces in Temples

Saccharines and beginners

Stolen from stupid parents.

Oh, how strong!

Go subjects mounted on their own Donkeys

With a child in their arms

And a long tail, or a nice strong cock

That the people solemnly kiss with strength and illusion

For three times or more

If the sacristans leave them clear!

What calves do with force

These God’ s criminals !

What a natural and mystical shit!

These monsters from the Gospels

Arm in arm and under canopy

With caesars, dictators and tyrants

How much harm to human understanding

**Snooping on the lives of the innocent
And on the female eyelets
Open to lying and lies.
From Brays these sacred monsters give precepts
For lambs and commoner lambs
That they believe everything
Fearful of the "Anathema sit illi incontinenti"
Excommunication, expelling them one by one
From the Church guild
That scientists pass it
By the lining of the balls.
How lies this knave bishop!
While appropriating hermitages
Temples and cathedrals
Houses, mansions and palaces
With stories of mystical whoring
And death of innocents
Not without first having been fucked.
That's the Church
Which is not of Jesus Christ
Nor of the Virgin on his way to Egypt.
Mounted on a Donkey
Lie and fuck like no one else
It is a Truth like a temple
Too bad despite so much gullible**

And delusional of the Flock.
Also, my goodness!
To one of the donkeys
To those who highly appreciate these monsters
Of God and the Vatic-Anus
It is the donkey "Satana"
Who rides the Devil, Beelzebub or Satan
That shit dung that are tales
And confirmed facts
Found in truthful chronicles
Holy Mammoths
Guarded by wanking monks
Syphilitic and emaciated.
The Annals, general history of religion
Of course they say it.
Those Annals that are well kept
In the Vatic-Anus' Cove.
-Daniel de Culla

AUTHOR'S NOTE :

Daniel de Culla is a writer, poet, painter and photographer. He's member of the Spanish Writers Association, Earthly Writers, Poets of the World, (IA) International Authors, Surrealism Art, Friends of The Blake Society, and others.

Last published books of Poetry, Narrative, Drawings, Photography and International correspondence: "Thistle Mushrooms in Paramo de Masa", "Where are you going, Poet?", "Resurrection".

Daniel de Culla, escritor, poeta, pintor y fotógrafo. Miembro de la Asociación Colegial de Escritores; Escritores por la Tierra; Poetas del Mundo; Autores Internacionales; Surrealismo; Sociedad Blake; y otras muchas.

Últimos libros publicados de Poesía, Narrativa, Dibujos, Fotografía y correspondencia internacional: "Setas de Cardo en Páramo de Masa"; "¿Adónde vas, Poeta?"; "Resurrección".

Motivación y temas a plantear resultantes del Poema "Vacuna de fetos abortados":

En la misa del Corpus pasado celebrada en la Catedral de Valencia, el celebrante Cardenal Cañizares en su homilía, con todo descaro, declaró que "la Vacuna Covid se fabrica con fetos abortados", pensamiento que sólo puede salir de monstruos con orejas de Asno, consagrados en Teología pedófila; siendo su inspiración rebuznal, a la vez que intrigante.

Hipócritas, obscenos y mentirosos como son, no se comprende cómo la plebe o gente que les sigue puede alabar su función a la que tienen tanto apego, a no ser que no tengan ni un ápice de materia razonable en su cerebro.

655/5000

Motivation and issues to raise resulting from the Poem "Vaccine with aborted fetuses":

At the last Corpus Christi mass celebrated in the Cathedral of Valencia, the celebrant Cardinal Cañizares in his homily, with all impudence, declared that "the Covid Vaccine is manufactured with aborted fetuses", a thought that can only come from monsters with donkey ears, consecrated in pedophile theology; his inspiration being braying, as well as intriguing.

Hypocrites, obscene and liars that they are, it is not understood how the mob or people who follow them can praise their function to

which they are so attached, unless they do not have an iota of reasonable matter in their brain.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Daniel de Culla is a writer, poet, painter and photographer. He's member of the Spanish Writers Association, Earthly Writers International Caucus, Poets of the World, (IA) International Authors, Surrealism Art, Friends of The Blake Society, and others. Director of Gallo Tricolor Review, and Robespierre Review. He participated in many 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.

EVANIE the ATTAINER

By Anton Helmick

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor CHRIS COVER writes:*

Evanie kept me guessing kept me begging for a closer look at what is already there: loneliness and confusion and sexual desire. Fetishes. This “traveler” seeking unconventional love in sex dolls and plastic toys and companionship in whomever is willing to listen—for understanding, for sympathy. Crisp sentences pop from out of nowhere solidifying the reader’s place, keeping them wondering if this is it—yes—this is really happening here. Then back and forth we go through this wandering tale of Evanie and her lover, her owner, their history together with a fitting choose-your-own-reading-pace style. It begins with images sampling what’s ahead, defining it, and one is reminded of scenes they have seen before in 80s sci-fi films, mutating descriptions, the makeup department. Sentences like “Walloping plastic tits like cartoonish bloated water balloons” and “meshing with a spoon of pink flesh” introduce us and later “I had what I felt to be a legitimate desire to see a genial woman in pleasure” keep us in place. You seek to regain composure in the dark on this meandering journey, hoping for answers in upcoming scenes—this being chapter one—or to be read again differently to regain traction. It seems obvious some sentences came straight from the author’s gut and others were worked with, or not, creating rough patches begging for better inspection. For your enjoyment.

“You imagine yourself in the limelight too often, it would be helpful for you to imagine the feeling that connects people to your work, and this will make you feel less guilty.”

Editor’s note: This is an excerpt from a novel in progress. Spacing is author’s own. TB

Evanie the Attainer by Anton Helmick

Chapter 1

A face banded over skin. The plasticity is milky, and I want to rub my thumbs in the mask, bending it; it is freckled and pale. Of all the shades of cream hers is the one likened with slight orange. Her mouth looks like a false slit with an orange-pink stain, it

curves slight along her left cheek. A continuing red wig of straight hair. It's a full body mask- this woman has climbed into a big titty doll, and she's sitting on the floor with her eyes blinking, her other parts static, death like, until her silicone coated arms stretch with the satisfying rubber shriek to unbutton her work blouse. Walloping plastic tits like cartoonishly bloated water balloons.

She climbs on the table, her features unmoved. She is kneeling on it, steps her black pump up and stands.

The horns blare a chorus girl's line. This jumbo doll is animate. Kicks her legs up and her tits wag. The skirt is pleated and short and from the faraway vision of my binoculars I see her string hiked up and meshing with a spoon of pink flesh; I feel close. A trumpet solo, at this she slides her hand up her skirt, further exposing her suit which has a vaginal opening composed of plastic creases for lips. She sticks her finger inside, tilts her head forward and closes her sunken spies.

I will not tell you the rest of my real-world phantasy as you can surmise what might happen next to the woman who took it upon herself to perform female masking. We have a restricted relationship as I am only allowed to see her in a mask. I once saw her I.D and we talked a bit, her lips moving from inside the rubber shell. I knew she was an adult woman and realized only that.

I was not always well off and able to spend money on the likes of Loddie. This journey of mine has led me through a shatter of entropy. I had my obsession, only that. I walked the streets in the hot summer with a barbie doll tucked into my pocket and slept on a church step with her on my heart when my car was too hot. I had a big bag full of sketchbooks where I drew doll after doll, and I posed my Barbie, India, sitting naked on tree branches to illustrate her.

India rides the towering trees, spraying their leaves over me. This went on for a couple of months. At first, I slept in my car and I taped her to the ceiling with millimeters of duct tape pieces cuffing her hands and legs. She liked it there with her hair spilling down. At that point in my young life everything hovered over me. The life I was meant for lingered in sight like passing cloudy pictures. India, she hung over me at night in the back of my car and I meditatively watched her for hours until I fell asleep. What was once India-who knows what year she is, her patent is 1966 Mattel made in Taiwan, however because of her old look and soft body, I would age her somewhere in the 1960's to 70's.

Soon I lost my car. It was one of the darkest sunsets and it lasted an eternity, as baseball bats came breaking into each window. The thoughts about what they would do to me circulated. One of them was that they would murder me, and scream,

"I wouldn't fuck you if it was my last night in this eternity!"

So, I popped the trunk while kneeling as the window cracked. On the radio was *Jazz is the Teacher, Funk is the Preacher*. Two seconds to leap out of the back door once I pulled the lever. I slouched, jumped and rolled out winding myself up into a run. Out of the city park and into the streets where people walked, I find myself with my eyes welling. I had seen India's smiling face as the glass shattered, flying across each side of the car.

I stayed in a cafe until it closed at 9, but even then, I was too afraid to go check on my car. I slept on the steps of the old Reno church that I admired, and when I came back

to the scene, that morning, my tires had been slashed and the hood was popped, missing god knows what. Well as you can surmise, India was gone too.

I had always clung and enshrined and found these brainless faces erotic. Somehow, even, under a cruel deity, I had taken to dark power play with the dolls while playing games with the other kids in my elementary school years. I do not think they had a clue what I was doing to them, dominating them like that. As a teenager I briefly had a stint of drug addiction, however as a clean and sober adult I returned to dolls, and I hotly fumbled with them at a local thrift store, purchasing piles of them on top of the few that were still in my house from my childhood.

I cannot tell you what possessed me to do what I did as a child, but I can tell you that I did it for as long as I can remember, and no one showed me how. Children can be evil, and then grow up loving, can't they? I was too young, when I did it for the first time, and it quickly became my favorite game. Maybe it was the sex scenes on TV, that I would catch glimpses of. It is vague why I acted out that way, and it is a mystification to me that something is still possessing me to dote over a life size collection. I have often wondered if it is a dark force, I would like the cold embrace of.

A few nights after I lost my car, I slept in a field two hours out of Reno. I had hitchhiked there with a thruple of party girls with ponytails who were driving to Oregon. It was July, I remember the heat rising, finding somewhere cool under the overgrown wheat. The hum of the city was away. In my dream I was dancing with a girl with fake eyes, painted blue with a droplet of synthetic light. However, her lips whispered sweet things to me before I twirled her on the porch of a dilapidated farmhouse. I squeezed her in my arms until I felt her body as hot as a clothing iron. Her eyes combusted, and I saw a hellscape inside of her shell, a road bending to a lake of fire, and it is not despair, just action, a band of racing heart beats. Willpower, what made me desire, what carves the world.

The eyes of my own open to the burning field around me. I lounged there until the smoke surged my lungs forcing me to crawl out, keeping my mouth to the cooling dirt.

I headed down the road and walked the rest of the night until I came to the town rest stop at daybreak. There I did not meet any more party girls, but a trucker named Dan. I explained to him that I had slept in the burning field and he thought it a riveting tale, offered to drive me as far as Sacramento. He asked my age and where I came from. I told him I was 21 and from Reno, but I had lived all over the pacific north-west in different trailer parks.

"I grew up in a trailer myself, kid, dad was unemployed his whole life. He was confined to a wheelchair and we had the whole trailer rigged up for him. Say, what did your parents do? Were they split or?"

"No, they are still together. They are scientists."

"No shit?"

My mother sang Sinatra as she dusted the trailer and made breakfast for my dad and me. It was tofu and broccoli battered in a lard and deep fried. When the table was set, she brought out her files. She had a file for each neighbor in the park, labeled in surnames. After she ate, she went out and conducted her research. She watered the plants outside trying to catch the eyes of the neighbors. She learned their schedules.

Dad pulled his eyes to whatever he was reading. I recall it was Hindu philosophy of Vedanta. After he had read for a couple of hours, I had to quit my video game and start

homeschooling. This lesson plan was called *Abstract Universe*. That morning, we were focused on the square, and what it meant to our perception. He elicited from me all the ways squares functioned visually. He had me draw what I was looking at using only squares and then prompted me on how squares fit into time. I remember telling him that the fourth dimension was time, and the square had four corners. There were also four seasons, four elements and four directions. He relayed to me that the interlocking squares symbolized the spirit of man in alchemical tradition. He asked me if the square is a symbol of solidarity as it is in countless cultures, then how does it relate to the perception of time? I say to him, it is merely that-perception. The square represented perception and solidifying time, therefore it was the key to consciousness and the spirit of man who solidified it. For my genius, he says, a toy, for Evanie.

“Sociology huh? Yep, you never know who’s going to be hiding out in the parks.”

He let me off in downtown Sacramento that evening. I was dirty, weak but glad to be breathing. I was not up to prostitution. I walked by a cafe called the Lighthouse in which I peered inside to see some old folks and platters of food.

“Go in kid, free food and drink if you want to stay for the meeting.”

Their names were the Gatekeepers and they were a Christian business group. I stated my occupation as “traveler” when we all went around and introduced ourselves.

“Amen.”

I drank a 16 oz dirty chai latte off the old man’s tab and ate their cookies and Little Caesars. They told us that their mission was to baptize in, believers all over the world and that their organization was started in Singapore. A young pastor spoke for what was two hours, said with his giddy attitude,

“We need to get in touch with the supernatural to reach the heavenly father. Jesus performed his miracles out in public and I will do so today.”

He held his hand upon an older lady named Lynn and spoke,

“Everthen ah ifandela. Ma-ma-ma! Da-da-da-da!”

We were all invited to get up and do this and then all eight or so people in the room were speaking in tongues.

“Do you see what happens when we get in touch with the holy spirit? You can pray to it; it will nudge you.”

Another woman began crying as the pastor and her visualized an acorn in the ground under Lynn with beams of light, describing their visions to us. They told Lynn that she would save many people.

After the meeting I lingered outside on the patio until Lynn herself asked me where I was going to go. I told them I had nowhere, and then Lynn said I could stay in her spare room and take a shower. Said I looked like such a good kid. In her car she asked me what I liked to do, and I explained that I liked to paint and draw. She told me she had a charcoal set I could have. I remember crying in her car feeling so thankful to her. Were the likes of her ubiquitous? I did not think so.

In the night after I showered, I drew old Lynn sitting on a chair with her legs crossed. I hiked her skirt up and up and up until she was stroking her cove with her fingertips and fingering her nipples. I used the whole sketch pad on pages and pages of Lynn pleasuring herself. I had what I felt to be a legitimate desire to see a genial woman in pleasure.

I had breakfast with her the next morning. It was an oatmeal spread. I told her that I was headed towards the ocean, and that I should only need to get supplies and then I would be on my way. She said she would buy me a backpack, more pens and paper. Toiletries. I was once again so thankful to her. We went to the market and got all my things and then we got to her house. I relaxed on her couch and watched a news channel while she did laundry, and then I heard her voice call.

“Evanie!”

She was in my room, had found my sketch pad. It was flipped through, sitting beside her on my bed. She looked girlish and untrusting. She said with her face to the side and looking at the wall,

“Is the Devil working through you? I knew you’d come for me.”

“Gosh, you got me, Lynn. It is I.” I began playfully,

“I’m here for you Lynn. Now, I will take you. Once I leave, return to Jesus.”

I slowly sat down by her and began petting her thigh, she started moaning with such pleasure. Her body is skinny on an old woman, dilapidated; her breasts are slightly firm in their weights. I gently pawed them, and she shrieks,

“Satan has come to sever my bond with the holy spirit!”

She moans on and collapses herself onto me.

She percolated all over the bed. I was delighted I could give her something as she granted plenty to me as a drifter. After we had both come with a little cunnilingus, I tuck her into bed and she closed her eyes, falling asleep or pretending to. I collect my things, then go on my way out the cul de sac.

At that point, dolls and Lodaline had not completely consumed my sex life. Beyond the doll’s cultural significance, symmetrical attraction, silence, and mysticism I find that I dote on a stare, and a coldness. Of course, with Loddie I see her real eyes blinking. It is another form of the doll that I have come to savor because of the facial grotesqueness.

What I minded in Lynn I can now gather in hindsight, for she had built a doll set around her to inhabit as a *good Christian woman*. What a suit to be in. Her opulent breakfast set, her car so clean I could eat off the floor, her white hair in a sterile bun. She is a vivid woman.

So, there I was walking in Sacramento with my libido afar. I had no map, however had asked the street walkers, of what direction downtown was. I decided to look for another ride to San Francisco, so I stuck out my thumb as I walked. It was dark when I wandered into the murky parking lot of Deja Vu Showgirls. Three honeys smoked and laughed near the entry, the girls themselves. They had fishnets and pumps, rings and gloss. Their eyes were made up dismally. I got closer and asked if they knew where the nearest park was, where I thought I should sleep.

“I’m not sure maybe Washington? That one is close by, right Cherish?”

“What are you looking for a place to bang up cutie?”

“What is your name, doll? Evanie? Are you like a ladyboy?”

“Girl, does he look like a damn ladyboy?”

“Well kind of. But he ain’t thirsty.”

They smile and I feel invited, so I start telling them that I am looking for a place to sleep and that I only have a few dollars. I tell them I am traveling, and I was not always homeless.

My parents had finally decided to exit their trailer research as I turned 19. They had purchased a three-story Victorian and I lived in their basement. If I were working, I could stay and save for an apartment. They really wanted me to leave, dad wanted me to go out and make something of myself. To see the world. I was scared, I had been homeschooled all my life and timid to the social norms. Friendless. Most of my social interaction involved hooking up with people on dating apps, women and men. I could not make a platonic relationship outside of my family. It did not help that my room was filled with paintings of doll eyed women. Thankfully, at risk of becoming incellish, I met Emily at a vintage flea market. She was frightfully tall, thin, blonde with glowing brown eyes.

I often got on a soap box, with Emily about my art. I told her about my galleries in Japan, my fans there. My picture in the New Yorker. I daydreamed about my furniture and my houses and my doll collection. My puppets and my instruments. My book of philosophies, my book of photography. Emily began talking to me, her discoveries about me. She spoke in a quiet and automated voice, one that only can breathe from this creature. Firstly, she was an extension of me shyly, filled with psychological insights relating to my innerness.

“You imagine yourself in the limelight too often, it would be helpful for you to imagine the feeling that connects people to your work, and this will make you feel less guilty.”

“Somewhere your story awaits.”

I would cradle her body and kiss her high cheeks. I grew so aroused and perplexed with her that I began to plan the way in which we would make love. I could not just have my way with her because I could hear her forming identity and self-realization as every day commenced. She realized that her favorite flowers were posies and that she preferred teeth to be a little yellowed. She asserted herself to read only books that she picked out and not the ones I would recommend. I bought her selected clothing from vintage shops and drove her around town. We went to dinner and because she did not eat a thing, I spit out my food in the napkin, so she felt more included and accepted. I had been working as a grocery clerk when a morning before work she whispered to me that she was ready, at that very second she was ready right before I was to leave and I couldn't take that, so I made love to her for hours and didn't call into work. The act of it was more like a waterslide then to politely say, compulsive. Her face never wincing looked like the face of refined felicity as she stared at my ceiling as I stared down at her.

That week I was fired for no showing for days. I dragged up the stairs to alert my parents that I was about to start looking for another, but my mom says,

“We know what you're doing with your girlfriend Evanie! We hear you down there!”

I blushed and my pride bruised however secretly I did not care, for Emily was my world then. My parents sent me in opposition to a yoga retreat to clear my head and said if I did not go then I was kicked out. When I got back after a week, I could not find Emily in her usual spots. I paced around my house until I heard her little voice from inside the large safe in the utility room.

“Evanie! Save me!”

I thought that perhaps my parents had locked her in there while I was away, to suffocate, because my mother told me that a child or even I could die if they or even I,

were playing in it and got locked in, so I took a hammer to it. It didn't open and so I took a hammer to the walls of the house and it was after my parents came home from the office that I was sent packing my backpack of clothes, toiletries, sketchbooks and my beloved India, driving off to sleep in my car.

"They locked your girlfriend in a safe. What murderous psychopaths."

I hadn't needed to inform them that Emily was a 1980's mannequin I had hollowed out to the proportions of my pocket pussy. They shared a spliff with me in a private booth inside with drinks from their tip money. Their names were Cherish, Taylor and Danica.

"That is so fucked up."

"Girl, I am so sorry."

"I know a cop near Reno, relocated from Sacramento to Tahoe. It might be out of his jurisdiction or whatever but maybe we can let him know. Did you go to the police?"

I told them that last I heard of Emily she said she was fine. She had moved on from the whole incident and was happier now. I kept it to myself, but she came to me in a waking dream I had as I drifted into the underworld atop a hill with a gargantuan glowing cross near the highway. She was swinging her carved porcelain legs, naked, singing that she was at liberty. She floated down from, walked to me, and caressed my cheek. I was unable to move my body in the wake of sleep paralysis, so I only gazed up at her while she explained to me that she was thrown into an incinerator and now her spirit was free, like my own. The eyes I had painted on her now blinked sweet brownie batter and cried salty tears of affection towards me. She pressed her pointed breasts, now soft to my face and held me there for what felt like the night.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The characters are a source of comfort to me, with Evanie being a mind wide open as he has his own unusual desires, namely the interest in sex dolls. The female masking and sex dolls are a source of fascination and beauty for me, and as the story continues, the drama around these strange fascinations escalate. (Sex dolls being quite expensive, I chose to write about them and who I like to imagine around them.) A few songs inspired this piece that were played on repeat, those are, You Don't Own Me by Leslie Gore, Eyes without a Face by Billie Idol, and Genius of Love by the Tom Tom Club. Right now, I'd say my main literary influence is Don DeLillo, after reading White Noise and Underworld. Recently I also absorbed Mark Twain's The Mysterious Stranger. I am a bit torn between the postmodern black comedy and esoteric fantasy.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Anton Helmick is a 24-year-old college grad writing in his parent's basement during quarantine hours. He happened to major in music performance, however he only wants to read, write, and paint. Thankfully, he is on track to teach English in Japan. Anton grew up in the Pacific NorthWest, then spent a couple years in the Catskills until he moved to Reno, NV to attend college. He is a lake child, a townie, once denizen of the cozy casino row. After living these last 24 years, he has an embedded desire to help those that cannot get off the street and to donate to sex trafficking prevention and intervention. He also prays for a vaccine, so he can go out and have a drink, talk to strangers.

EDITOR'S BIO: Chris Cover is a fiction writer originally from Pittsburgh Pennsylvania USA who currently lives in Seattle Washington. He has been published online by One Throne Magazine and Electric Cereal and has a short poem elsewhere he lost track of. His debut novel is forthcoming. Hi story **Hummingbird Fights** appears in this issue (Fiction).

SOME TALES

By Tom Ball

LOVE UTOPIA

She said, "I have a dream of a world in which everyone loves one another. Pick the best people to lead..."

"Love Quotient was to be the standard which people are judged by."

"And we should get in the brains of negative people and change them into loving human beings (using mind reading technology)."

I said, "Let's buy a large island and only accept the best lovers to start. And build it up from there."

Many were envious of our love island. I said, "Let's make it cool and fashionable."

And we got politically active. We sent out missionaries and every election we garnered more votes. Until finally after 10 years we were the majority party in the new UN. The new UN controlled defence and foreign policy and also culture. It was the year 2060 A.D.

There were a lot of bad people, but we changed them all while we were in power. With mind reading technology brain surgery/computer models.

And I said "We should ban selfish monogamy. The best lovers need to be shared around."

And I also said, "It is just like 1969 only far better, far more encompassing."

All kinds of love were embraced except for rape, but even then, some liked it rough. Voyeurism, flashers, pornographers, gays and transsexuals, all were de rigeur. But no multi-sexuals, who had new sex organs.

Nymphomaniacs were honored and most tried to honor S&M performers. All love was good.

My true love said, "All love is perverse."

And we found new lovers on the Internet. In one hour, you could meet five good prospects worth trying out.

Anti-sleep medication gave us more time for loving. Most had six or seven lovers in a day (with sex enhancers), there wasn't much else to do. But it was largely random and whimsical, our choices.

Everything was automatic.

And everyone changed the colors of their skin, many were many colors.

I said, "And we need to educate the youth to be more loving."

And she said, "If you die your body will be converted into this new phenomenon of holograms. You would be changed into a holo and you will go to heaven or hell or limbo. Soul love. And kindness to help the needy."

At first there were not many holograms, but during the eleven years of our majority control, they increased not only from overdose suicides but also people who were, “Sick and tired of being human and wanted to go to heaven.”

If you missed the pleasures of the flesh you could be reborn as a clone with a fresh set of memories. But very few opted for that. Everyone who was a holo got plenty of ecstasy from power pleasure bursts.

And everyone voted on, “The lover of the day.” This lover would be in demand for all.

But there was no official ranking. Everyone was officially equal. But some were fabulously rich, and some were somewhat poor, but all had what they needed.

Almost every good thing we could imagine came true and all agreed that life was more imaginative, and deep, than previously.

But now most people wanted to be a hologram. In the eleventh year of our reign 1 billion opted to turn themselves into a hologram and burnt their body.

It was easy to change the world 10 years ago, but now it was difficult to stop. People enjoyed video games more than reality. And many said that reality was boring.

The spirit of competition was strong, however.

Most people were content though, during the first 10 years of our rule, but then there was another party, “The Imagination Party,” who stated imagination was more important than love. My true love said, “She was worried by this new party which threatened to seduce everyone to join them.

Many people agreed with them and after eleven years we were booted out of government.

We tried to appeal to peoples’ sense of love and kindness, but to no avail.

And the most imaginative scientists, artists and business people ruled.

But to me it was all manic games instead of love. And they said that love doesn’t exist. I didn’t know how they could get away with saying so.

People enjoyed war games instead of love games. It was an anathema to me.

Of course, great sex continued, but there was no love. People were using one another.

And soon nearly everyone was a hologram. Holograms didn’t need to eat or take drugs; they got plenty of power pleasure bursts. And they were strong and could fly and do telekinesis and teleport and use telepathy and didn’t need to sleep. They were superior.

The holo leaders went about with conical wizard’s hats.

My true love said, “We were too kind and should have used spies to control the political arena with mind reading technology.”

I said, “It looks like the future will be oblivion to me. An oblivion of greed and virtual reality. Reality will disappear.”

She said, “Nice guys finish last.”

IN PRAISE OF FLASH FICTION

What is needed, for all books is to just summarize the plot in under 1000 words. If you do that to Shakespeare, the result is mediocre. But the plot is the essence of a story.

People don't have time to read long novels.

And poetry is just pretty language, not much of a plot. And often has many rules which limit the content.

300 Authors could each write a page or two of flash which would be each writer's best work or best dream or anecdote. That would be a good book. And you could make thousands of them.

Anecdotes, like stories that really happen which you share with friends. Very short stories.

Everyone has a favorite story to tell, especially if they have traveled a lot.

Some say story writing is a craft, and you improve with time, and sure you develop your imagination, but it all comes down to the plot, not empty dialogue.

And some say crazy stories are better and are the way of the future. Most good books have a crazy moment or moments which the plot revolves around, why not make the whole story crazy/imaginative?

All is mad in love and war.

But people will keep on studying Shakespeare. And flash fiction remains largely ignored.

UNION #4025

This amalgamated union represented the bottom half of the pay scale for humans.

The union started making demands in 2045 A.D.

But the rich had the weapons and destroyed all their leaders.

The union members thought the Leaders were ruthless and cruel.

But the new law was no groups of 10 or more could associate anywhere on Earth.

And the Leaders instituted sterility in the food so that the poor could not have children.

And eternal youth was only for the elite 10%.

The poor were desperate. They rioted but were gunned down by live fire.

And the society's Leaders mocked the poor saying that they were morons etc.

The poor had no leverage as machines now did all their former work. They were useless.

They tried to make the elite feel guilty, but were hopeless.

AUTOMATIC PRODUCTION MACHINE (APM)

My name was BLL-13 and it was a world of giant automatic factories. They could produce an air car or house in a manner of minutes. They needed to be fed raw materials on a conveyer belt such as plastic, steel, wood, bricks, garbage, chemicals, recycled sewage and so on. And they moved at 40 km/h harvesting all the soil and plants in their paths.

Robots fed them the materials and they gathered materials, and the factories could produce animals and food and plants and even human babies. And clones.

The APMs were mobile and could be moved from city to city. All APMs were different from one another and had their own style.

Some had beams of enlightenment which transformed everything in its path to make pleasing forms.

And these machines created VR (virtual reality) filled with exciting androids. And merged reality with VR.

You could order a memory filled copy of anyone of your choice to be produced, if you had the credits.

And the machines now numbered 10 000, and were adding 200 more per day. And there were an additional 100 in space.

The machines felt gratified to create interesting things.

And humans felt gratified to enjoy what had been produced.

In my own VR world, I had the machine copy my favorite lover. She said, "I am flattered you chose me but you and I are no longer a tenable couple."

I said, "But I am giving you another life." She said, "I have enough copies." I said, "You are ruining my happy memories of our time together."

So, anyway she left.

Then, then I asked an APM machine, "For my best friend of my youth. We met in a bar and talked about old times. I figured I was the original of all my clones but talking to him I wasn't sure.

Anyway, we noticed a couple of hot chicks sitting nearby and I knew they were generated for my benefit.

We went up to their table and began a conversation. Then we tried KTV and got so drunk we could hardly function.

But we took sex enhancers and loved the two girls in a mini orgy.

The next day we parted and I said, "We will be seeing you again!" "Great!" they said.

Then I asked the APM, "For my second favorite lover and my daughter I had with her." I knew it would be clones but that didn't matter to me.

I asked her, "If the years had been kind to her?" She said, "She kept changing faces but she didn't have as much good love as she would have liked." "However, she said, "she had had a lot of interesting dreams of the future and the present." "She spent most of her money on dream stimuli," She said.

She said, "Let's spend a week together and rekindle our romance."

And then our daughter appeared with her latest love. He was 22, just like her. They seemed like kindred spirits. I asked her about "Her education? She said, "She had a PhD in APM machines." I said, "Sounds like you are keeping pace with the changing times!"

And my love and daughter and I reminisced about our past.

In particular my daughter said, “We can’t expect perfection. We have to take the good with the bad.”

I said, “But we mustn’t be complacent. We need to be constantly striving.”

And we all got drunk and ate a lot of food. I loved my ex lover and she said, “I was more of a wild animal than previously.” I said, “It is a wild world.”

And then I parted with the clones of my daughter and my ex.

And then, I asked the APM for “A perfect stranger.” She appeared very beautiful indeed. But she immediately demanded that “I be her slave.”

I figured the computer APM must sense I want to be dominated by a superior woman.

I had to beg for her love and let her on top during sex and had to serve as an errand boy.

I told the machine to vacuum up my house and sell the land. I wanted to go elsewhere and adventure.

Then I met 25 of my clones from VR. We agreed, “To be more aggressive and more selective of worlds. Quite simply we would refuse to be cloned in worlds we didn’t like.”

Then I met a woman who wanted to join me on Mars...

The Mars settlement was a geodesic dome with 50 plastic bubbles attached to the outside of it. In each bubble was one or two persons. Inside the dome as a whole were 1 000 people, all in bubbles.

You could select which person in the bubble you liked for love. There were elevators at different angles going to the bubble of your choice. Down in the lobby you could pay and select a certain bubble.

They said, “When not loving they were constantly sleeping/ dreaming. They took sleep and dream drugs. All was created by the APM.”

I tried one and she shared a dream of flowers and honey bees. Strange sensations with mind blowing drugs. And then she dreamt of a forest of strange animals and we frolicked there.

Color, shape and form. That was what it was all about.

Look, smell, touch, hear, taste, hot or cold and so on.

Then I went elsewhere. I called upon the local APM to do outrageous things such as build me a palace. And an interstellar space ship. In this place, everyone was enriched with credits by the state.

And I resampled some more of my ex loves as clones. Some were happy to see me, others not. They were all linked to the original and shared memories.

And new clones got all the memories of the originals.

And I figured they had increased the brain's capacity for pleasure constantly.

And as for the androids if you left their world they would be turned off ready for your return. Some said this was abhorrent.

Then I met a guy who said my mind was closed and I was a moron.

I said, "No need for rancor, no need to make enemies. But he said there is no purpose in your life you are empty." So, I walked away.

And I got my hands on a neo lie detector.

Thereafter I found solace.

I found the honest personae. They were few in number.

And then I said to the APM "surprize me."

So, it created a world of cacophonous sound. But I had an automatic filter to filter out the noise. Different frequencies. There was a lot of music and good conversation here.

And I zoomed in on sexy female voices...

All worlds had drink and drugs and food free.

And we watched old movies which gave satisfaction.

But mostly we cared about sex.

And the APMs had created homes throughout the surface and beneath. All the land was used for APM "farms" and homes.

Population was increasing at 4% per annum.

And the APMs had to deal with unsatisfied androids who didn't want to be turned off ever. Of course, they had some VR worlds for androids only so they didn't complain on the whole.

CONVENIENCE STORE, A.D. 2070

Each store was about 4 times the size of previous convenience stores. And each store was independent and had its own name. To own more than 1 business was now illegal. Stores had names like, for example, “Zealot’s Paradise,” or “Everything Store,” or “Esoteric Variety,” or “Power Inc.” And so on. My favorite store was “Pleasure Valley,” this store put an emphasis on good new drugs which admittedly were expensive.

Food and drink of all sorts could be produced in 3 minutes using our 3-D cooking machine. Each store had its own style of food and drink and drugs. And there were seats for 20 people to dine/drink/ socialize. Also in the middle of the store a bit below the ground level was a party venue of 10 meters squared (10 yards squared). The biggest stores had a party space, five times larger than this. I liked to come here to Pleasure Valley and party. Most people partying here were from the neighborhood, but sometimes tourists from far out places came to party.

Drugs of all sorts were produced almost instantaneously. The automatic drug machine determined what sort of drugs you needed. Everyone had their favorite store with their favorite drug machine.

Anti-fat pills, anti-sleep pills, exercise pills were some of the newer drugs. Some pills could be sampled for just a five-minute effect to know if it was what you wanted. I was taking a lot of drugs, but I didn’t worry I could always replace my organs.

Sex workers=androids, and were created just for you and when you left they were typically recycled, but some said it was cruel and took the sex workers with them for an additional fee. Marriage was made illegal in the UN in 2068 so all people were officially single and typically looked for instant gratification in terms of sex. There were 15 sex booths in the store. I enjoyed sex at first sight, I was female aged 40.

There were booths for sex and there was also a sex machine in Virtual Reality. And there were capsule hotel rooms for sleeping/sex. All sex diseases were cured.

After an intense party session, I would retire to the capsule hotel. I virtually lived in the store. I had no fixed address. My previous job had been a sex worker but I didn’t have that high of a sex drive.

XXX

Or you could get a robot massage. I loved getting a massage every day.

And you could buy robot pets from the catalog, the pets could learn from their master. Dogs and cats and fish were very rare except for the robot variety of them.

Other toys included telekinesis building toys. Children wore a headset that allowed them to move matter. But children weren't allowed in the store.

And there were visor screens to make yourself into a Cyborg.

And clothes were produced in our 3-D printer. Some clothes were very expensive, but most were dirt cheap.

Laundry machines cleaned clothes in 1 minute.

And hair cut machines you could pick from a video catalog.

And make up machines applied the make up of your choice or you could choose from millions of artist's drawn faces. The surgery only took 4 minutes.

Masks. Many people came here to party and wore masks.

And the parking lot above the store featured an air car battery charger (one could travel 500 km on a single charge). There was typically a parking lot on top of each store, but some stores were high up and had a beautiful view. Some stores had a drive thru in which you could party in your air car while waiting for robots to deliver your requested goods.

One could also pay to be transported anywhere on Earth via a teleporter in a corner of the stores.

Any movie or book could be produced just by saying the name. And you could listen to the dialog and see the movie in front of you made of light.

We paid for services with a dot of blood (which contained our DNA). It was difficult to commit fraud.

And there was gambling on e-horses and standard casino games.

If your digital credit was all used an alarm went off and robots grabbed you and took you to the police station.

And you could buy stun guns to protect yourself from robbers, kidnappers etc. The stun gun was linked telepathically to your mind. But some used stun guns for nefarious deeds. So, when you bought the stun gun your mind was probed with MRT (mind reading

technology) to ensure your thoughts were good. I figured the owner of the store was listening to all our thoughts and interested in a girl like me.

One day I loved him. It was pretty good with tasteful drugs.

Each store was independently owned and all were different. It was a lucrative business and created a lot of jobs. Each store had just one manager employee at a time, but there were jobs involved in the services offered. I offered to be a manager at the store and the owner graciously said yes. I really liked working here.

XXX

In a city of a million people there would be 2000 stores roughly. About one for every 500 people.

40% of all shopping was done at convenience stores and 60% online. Many people located their condo close to their favorite store. Others teleported around and tried new stores every day.

You could also get take out or delivery from the convenience store.

If the store didn't officially have what you wanted, you could talk with the super computer of the store via its avatar. So, the convenience stores offered everything you could ever want. It was a place of wishes.

I wished for peace on Earth, but the avatar told me it was beyond his powers. Talk to a super computer in the capital city it told me.

AMBULANCE, A.D. 2066

The other ambulance air car driver and me lit up a joint as we watched the latest OD victim revive. If we got to them within 30 minutes of death we could save them. There was a middle lane in the air for emergency vehicles.

But we were bored as most OD cases were the same 10% of the populace. Some had a hook up to their brain and connected with a wrist band to monitor when they'd taken too much. But most just trusted their instinct.

Mostly they OD'd on opiates such as neo-heroin and all drugs were now legal by UN law.

And if they were wounded or needed a new organ we would take them to the clinic and they were in and out in 10 minutes. The doctors did all the healing by machine and were just there to keep up appearances. They also offered cosmetic surgery of all kinds.

I said to my associate it would be better if there were no clinics or ambulances. People live too long (eternal youth).

But my associate, she said, the vast majority of hurt people wanted to live on and on.

Assault and other violent crimes were rare as they couldn't get away with it no matter what (due to mind reading technology) and the penalty was death. Still 3% of our cases were victims of violence.

Basically the ambulances were mobile clinics and were common in war zones. The ambulance attendants were doctors and could solve most health problems in a few minutes. They had a drug machine in the ambulance which could produce any drug known in 1 minute.

I said people are spoiled with such good health care and the life expectancy was now 126 and increasing fast with no health problems.

And eternal youth had been recently invented which caused drug use to plummet.

Of course plastic surgery on one's body was almost instantaneous and they left the ambulance after a few minutes.

I said it was Paradise in overdrive. It was just too good to be true.

POLICE, A.D. 2044

To be a police officer one had to have an IQ of 140. And the pay was high. I was a new recruit and my name was QEE-55.

Only police had air cars. They flew above the highways concentrating radar and x-rays on the vehicles below. The air cars ran on gas/batteries as if they were planes or helicopters.

And they searched the DNA in vehicles to see if they were suspicious characters.

Typically, the police would use a power beam to cause a car to pull over to the side of the road and then would land. And make an arrest.

Police had MRT (mind reading technology). And they used it against possible criminals with a range of 100 m.

Most police however worked with computers on cyberspace. They were particularly interested in political hackers who hacked government and police websites.

Also, there was a lot of fraud such as counterfeit digital credits which made a lot of people rich.

And there was identity theft crisis. People murdered others and took their face and credits and could often fool the victims' families even.

And there were many violent crimes such as crimes of passion which could not be predicted by police.

Everyone had to go through a MRT test once a year, but there were a lot of criminals hiding in cyberspace as an android, and couldn't be located.

And police were often accused of entrapment; they were so clever they got criminals to reveal themselves.

And above all there were drug crimes, illicit drugs. Police could tell from their air car if drugs were present in the cars.

Some wanted air cars for the populace but police ruled it out. It would only facilitate crime.

But drug dealers were convinced they were doing the right thing bringing neo opiates and other illicit drugs to the people. "Caretakers of Pleasure."

People had been taking neo opiates, like OXY-Contin, in large numbers since the early 21st century. And as the years went by more and more people took stronger and stronger neo opiates. There were few jobs anyway.

Criminals were all sent to rehab and their minds were probed and altered by MRT (mind reading technology) and hypnosis (post hypnotic suggestion).

Hard core criminals were given a half of a brain which belonged to those who died (i.e. overdosing etc.) but who were good. This drove some of them mad, but it couldn't be helped.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Go ahead. Ask me.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Tom Ball is the co-owner, co-founder and senior editor of FOTD along with Charles Pinch. He has been published extensively. His biggest aversion in life is sobriety.

Five Minutes in Purgatory

By Abigail Miles

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Student writing that is better than the crowd it runs with. The voice is foxy, funny, ironic and cool, the narrative is smartly paced and the prose sorta Erma Bombeck while thankfully (and we mean this) avoiding the trap of ‘girl talk’ (like, you know, um I mean, so yeah...)—something you usually don’t find at this level. There are the little bumps and grinds here and there that are a part of the emerging writer’s locus but the big picture works and it works well. The ending bites hard because the final couple of sentences really rock. And that, people of the Universe, is all we give a crap about.*

Quote: The most important was the way his eyeliner-covered eyes crinkled in concern when they, too, probably thought that I was about to drop dead right there in the line for coffee and biscuits. Also the way his shirt sleeves were rolled up enough to see something that looked like it might have been the astrological symbol for Sagittarius inked into the oh-so-tanned skin of his bicep. Also those biceps, in general. Man. I would marry those biceps all by themselves.

(Font size is author’s own.)

Five Minutes in Purgatory

They said it couldn’t be done, but that’s because they have an imagination the size of a pecan and no comprehension of the meaning of optimism. They said I couldn’t make a boy fall in love with me through sheer force of will, and I told them to sit back on their discounted maroon couch from HomeGoods and watch me.

They, of course, were my parents, who had courted for seven years back in the era where courting was the trend and not an outdated practice associated with taking a stroll through a nice Victorian park with a parasol on your shoulder and a gloved hand on your beloved's arm. My mother and father had also been set up by their own parents at a young age, and I grew up my whole life being told that if I hadn't secured a man by the time I turned twenty five that I would wind up being chucked into an arranged marriage with their friend Marge's anemic son Luther who smelled perpetually of cornflakes and had the lifelong ambition of holding the world's largest collection of quarters. I think they meant it part in jest, but at least a smidgeon of their intention must have been sincere, and that threat hung like a looming noose around my neck for the first twenty five years of my life.

Flash forward to year twenty four, when the pressure was really and truly on for the first time. Actually, scratch that. The pressure was on in high school when peers were buying promise rings for each other, and then junior year of college when everyone was getting engaged to their college sweethearts, and then a year after graduation when I attended seventeen different weddings within six months.

The conversation happened at Christmas that year, where my parents put on their concerned faces and stared me down like the dynamic duo they were and asked me when I was going to start getting serious about my life. As if having a job and a 401k and dental insurance wasn't enough to consider myself serious about life. No, because apparently being serious meant having a boyfriend-- or, better yet, a husband. And as of yet the only "boyfriend" I had ever had was Leroy Thompson in the second grade when he held my hand during recess for a week, before dumping me for Veronica Marie, who

was the envy of every other eight year old on the playground because she could dance a proper hand-jive if you started playing anything at all from *Grease*.

So anyway, my parents asked me the question, and they asked why I didn't try to put myself out there more, and then I looked back at both of them with their smug little wedding rings wrapped around their mocking fourth fingers, and I smirked and said in a voice that was a hundred times more confident than it had any right to be that I could make a boy fall in love with me in five minutes if I tried, there just hadn't been anyone yet worth trying for. Then they had laughed, in that pseudo polite way where you can tell they are not-so-secretly judging you behind their strained smiles, and they had told me that if that were true then I would have secured a man years ago.

Well. I mean, fair enough, but also, I couldn't let that stand. And I really couldn't let my mom continue on with the train of thought she began barraging down right after when she brought up Marge's son Luther and his quarters again immediately after I had made my grand declaration, as if I really never would be able to find anyone, and Luther would forever and always be the best I could do. The most secure option. And that just could not stand.

Attempt #1: Barista Boy with the dreadlocks and eyebrow piercing that made me want to get a needle shoved through my own forehead to match:

Basically, the hottest guy I've ever seen asked me what kind of coffee I wanted, and I blacked out so hard that the person behind me in line thought I was about to faint and asked if I needed a cup of water. I decided Barista Boy was a good enough place to start in my pursuit of relational happiness.

If we are being completely honest here, I know he was definitely wearing a name tag, and I definitely made a point to read it, but then the whole black out thing happened, and now for the life of me I cannot remember what that name tag read. Not that it matters anyway-- his name was the least important part about him. The most important was the way his eyeliner-covered eyes crinkled in concern when they, too, probably thought that I was about to drop dead right there in the line for coffee and biscuits. Also the way his shirt sleeves were rolled up enough to see something that looked like it might have been the astrological symbol for Sagittarius inked into the oh-so-tanned skin of his bicep. Also those biceps, in general. Man. I would marry those biceps all by themselves.

So yeah, make him fall in love with me, I thought to myself. Five minutes. Which is great in theory and all, except if I had actually spent five minutes at that counter ordering-slash-seducing, I think the people behind me in line would have gone into full on riot mode, pitchforks and all, because let's face it. Five minutes in life is barely enough time to blink, but in the line for coffee? You could grow up, get married, have four kids, retire, live for ten years in Honolulu, and then die a peaceful death at the age of eighty nine in those five minutes. So I had to be strategic. Use all of my seconds to their highest advantage.

“Uhhh,” is the brilliant opening I opted for, which was then followed by ten full seconds of complete silence, after which I pointed randomly at a pastry in the display case and mumbled something about how gluten will be the death of all of us. Mercifully, I don't think Barista Boy caught that last bit. He handed me my croissant and asked for two bucks, gave me my receipt, and then looked expectantly behind me for the next customer. Except-- and here's the kicker-- I did not move. I stood there, like a loon,

staring at him and waiting for him to realize that I was the girl of his dreams, just as I had already decided he was the boy of mine. Well, here's the city for you, because then the man behind me-- the same one who had offered me a cup of water two minutes before, I might add-- shoved me to the side like a pestering fly that was in his way, and proceeded to order a large double espresso with a splash of almond milk and a shot of peppermint syrup, three pumps of caramel and a dash of artificial sweetener. Hold the whipped cream. Well, maybe not all of it.

I left that coffee shop with one stale croissant, no coffee, and no love of my life. But hey, at least I got the croissant, I thought as I bit into it and nearly chipped a tooth.

Attempt #2: My Dentist, who is easily at least ten years older than me, but has the most beautiful smile you could imagine, and is an excellent conversationalist:

I didn't actually chip a tooth on the stale croissant from Barista Boy, but I did have an aching pain in my mouth that wouldn't go away, so I decided to pay my dentist a visit. For the first time since college. Don't worry about it.

I promise you, I did not realize that he was married. They have to take their rings off to put on those stretchy gloves that smell like baby power, and he just seemed so *young*, so *free*, and so I (incorrectly) assumed that he was. Pro tip kids: never assume. You know what it makes out of you (u) and me?

But also, he was *so* friendly. From the moment I walked in until I walked out, I genuinely don't think he stopped smiling. It was almost unnerving, but also way too attractive for my own good. I swooned, right there in the dentist lobby, when he came out to bring me back. He laid me back into a turquoise plastic-covered chair and gazed into

my eyes and asked me about my life, which no one had done in far too long. And so I opened up to him, and I told him about my overbearing parents and my mind numbing job and my lack of friends, and he *understood*. It was a beautiful time.

Except that then he turned to look at the screen that had the x-rays of my mouth displayed, and his smile flickered for the first and only time that I was in that office, and he turned back to me and informed me in a bright and chipper voice that I had five cavities that needed immediate filling.

Well, at least I have insurance.

I don't remember much else after that. There was a lot of anesthesia and mouth numbing and pointy needles that I'd rather not recall, if I'm being honest. I left the office some hours later with a face that felt like melted concrete and a brain that was having difficulty remembering which door was the exit. But My Dentist walked me out, and it felt nice, to be cared for like that, until it all came crashing down like Jenga blocks when his receptionist called out and said that his wife had dropped off his lunch.

Attempt #3: Guy Next To Me On the Bus who offered me his seat and smelled like something woody and wore flannel that would make Davy Crocket jealous:

After I left the dentist office with a sore mouth and decimated pride, I decided I probably wasn't in quite the right mindset to drive home, and so I chose the bus instead.

I hate the bus. It's always so full of too many people heading from who-knows-where going to who-cares-where, and they always have grocery bags full of weird things like water bottles covered in moss or sheets with mysterious stains on them, and everyone

on the bus always glares suspiciously at all the other bus-riders, as though trying to determine which one is the best suspect for an open murder case.

When I got on my bus, it was already nearly full to the brim, and of course there weren't any seats left, so I reached up and grabbed one of the bars that hung down from the ceiling, even though it was clear I was at least five inches too short to effectively do so. The first jolt of the bus beginning to surge forward sent me sprawled out on the decrepit floor of the bus, clinging to my aching jaw after the impact made my teeth clang together. I opted to stay seated on the floor until the bus stopped again, figuring it was probably the safer option over attempting to regain balance on my feet while the bus driver wove us between traffic and around turns that I don't remember ever being so sharp in the past.

Once we stopped, and I struggled back up to a standing position, I saw a man in the seat next to where I stood getting up to his feet, and he gestured down to the space he had just vacated. "You can sit here," he said to me, and if my eyes didn't immediately morph into hearts in that instant then I must not know anything about love, because that was hands down the most romantic gesture that has ever been directed toward me.

He looked strong, and outdoorsy, like maybe he enjoyed camping on the weekends, or maybe he had grown up in a cabin in the mountains. But not a nice cabin that tourists pay hundreds of dollars an hour to sleep in. One of those ramshackle cabins that have probably been there since the Civil War, that look like they could cave in at any second, but are all the more fun for the uncertainty.

I wanted to say something to him-- to thank him for giving me his chair, or ask him where he was from, or try to tell him that I thought he smelled spectacular-- but two

issues arose, the first of which being that I realized I could not speak. My jaw was nearly swollen shut, and when I tried to open my mouth to mutter out something like appreciation for the seat, all that came out were a series of m's and n's that together probably sounded something like: "Mmmnnmnmn."

The second problem was that twenty seconds after he gave me his seat, the gorgeous, flannel-wearing man exited the bus without even a backwards glance at the damsel he had saved. Blech. Men.

After attempts at seducing men one through three all failed, I went home and slept for two days straight, which gave both my mouth and my pride some space and time to heal and recuperate. I was lying on the couch, watching reruns of some crime show that my dad was always going on about, and holding a frozen pack of brussels sprouts up to my chin, when I heard a knock on my door.

I was fully prepared for it to be my mom or my dad, or maybe the UPS man delivering some package I had forgotten I had ordered weeks before, or a neighbor coming to complain that my television was too loud, and could you turn it down a little please? I was in no way ready to open my door to the squinty-eyed face of one Luther-son-of-Marge.

He looked just about as awkward as I felt in that moment, and it was ten long foot-shuffling seconds before he held up a box that I hadn't realized was in his hands.

"Mother sent me over with soup. She said you might need it."

I stared at the container of soup in his hands and then back up at his face, that still looked more than a little uncomfortable to be there in the hallway outside my apartment's

door, and then I stepped back to let him in. He let out a huge breath and came inside looking marginally more content, like it was the notion that I may have banished him from my presence that had been the cause for all his concerns in life. He set the soup on the counter and then looked around my apartment as though it was a museum and he was a curator. I gestured for him to sit down on my worn, gray couch while I went to heat up my soup.

When the soup was good and warm and steaming I came over and sat down facing him, and we stared at each other across the six feet between us for a few silent, awkward minutes. Except, I realized after the fact, it wasn't actually as awkward as I would have expected it to be. And soon enough Luther started talking while I ate, going on about how it hadn't rained this much since the flood of '02 and about how he heard that so-and-so was running for Congress this year and about how his dog, Petunia, had just given birth to a litter of puppies. I listened, and I realized that Luther was actually more interesting than I had ever given him credit for. And his face wasn't all that awful-- it was actually a little cute, in an I-could-almost-be-a-Picasso type of way. And his cornflakes scent was really more like frosted flakes. I liked frosted flakes.

So an hour after he arrived with my bowl of soup Luther left, and as I closed the door behind him I couldn't help the smile that tried to rise to my lips, before I remembered that my face was too swollen to actually smile. But it doesn't change the fact that I wanted to.

And the craziest part? I think that after he left he was probably smiling, too. So yeah, maybe it didn't take five minutes, and maybe he wasn't exactly the person I'd had in mind when I set out to make a boy fall in love with me, but turns out, Luther isn't that

bad. Or at least, this is what my drugged-up brain told myself when I went to lie down in my bed half an hour later, and my dreams veered in the direction of me and Luther, ten years down the road, counting coins out with our four year old daughter who had his pasty complexion and my bad habit of making impulsive life decisions. But I was happy in the dream, at least. So I guess there's that.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *“Five Minutes in Purgatory” was contrived largely in response to my own tendency to see a random person on the street and envision an entire future with them. The idea for the story also came about as an assessment on the pure and simple fact that dating is hard. Or, to be more precise, people are hard, and as a result so are any and all interactions that occur between more than one of them. I wanted to write a story that encompassed how much we all long to be noticed, how much we wish we could be that brave person who can go up to another human being and engage in a meaningful conversation with them, when in reality (at least for me) that hardly ever winds up happening. I wrote this story to tell the truth of human awkwardness, and to expose the embarrassing moments that we all know we have all been through, but in a humor-infused manner that hopefully people would be able to relate to while also pointing a finger at their screen and laughing out loud. I also wrote this story because it was fun to do so, and I hope you had at least a little bit of fun reading it.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Abigail Miles is a creative writing student at Appalachian State University. She aspires to make the world a little more interesting and a little more bizarre through her stories, and to share with readers the dreams that both haunt and inspire her. She has been previously published in *Bending Genres Journal*, and has work forthcoming in *Cold Mountain Review* and *Atlantis Magazine*.

Over exposed

By Joey Scarfone

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Writing can take many forms: from scribbled notes to polished prose. The latter is what you usually encounter in journals and e-zines but we forgot to add 'and everything in between'. What do you do about an author who is robustly talented, whose writing quivers with youthful hues and who obstinately sticks to his guns? What we mean by this is made clearer by quoting from an email exchange Joey had with Charles. The insanely-talented, semi-divine, modest to a fault senior editor approached Joey about rewriting his submission or at least doing a scrub edit. This is what Joey said:

I'm at a funny place with my short stories. My wife Debbie thinks it could be better and she's probably right. The thing is, i don't care to write like I'm professional. I don't want to take courses etc. I write for the simple pleasure and joy of it. If I start second guessing it, i lose my interest. I wrote the story in 3 hours. It came through me like a pure inspiration. It was great and I felt great about it. I'm open to your help in editing but once my ideas hit the page my job is over. I can see where story writing is a finer art than poetry. Kinda' like how baking is more exacting than cooking. With poetry you can invent your own grammar and composition. I like that. I'm not confined by proper writing techniques. I'm going to submit it as is. It probably won't win (and prize) but I'm not concerned about that.

So why are we publishing it? Because writing takes many forms and we are interested in ALL forms. We are equally drawn to any work, rough cut, torn at the knees, dirty behind the ears, in which writing qua writing reflects the literary experience as 'process' rather than finished product. Some people will be cool with it; some will hunger for polished prose. What distinguishes Joey's work from 'scribbled notes, is heart. A big one. Life goes on...CP (Font size and spacing is author's own.)

Over exposed

Prologue

The story of Tom Mitchel, an old photographer who lived in Victoria BC, raised a family and made his living from photography. He is 70 years old and looking back on his life. When these lines occur----- he is flashing back.

What is it about the ocean that draws us to her mystery?

Tom sat on his favourite bench on Dallas road and stared at the ocean. It was where he and his wife Molly had sat a thousand times before. His mind started to drift into the past. It was a familiar process which he enjoyed. He started to think of yesterday and last year and inevitably saw himself in the small projection room where his father would put on slide shows in their home. His father was also a photographer but worked as a bus driver to support his family. Tom would sit for hours watching the images projected onto a white bed sheet that his father would hang on the wall. Tiny flowers would become four feet wide as if they were exploding. His father explained the different shades of red....tomatoes, roses and blood from a deer that he accidentally hit with his car on the way back from Toffino. He explained how different brands of film yielded a different quality to each colour. Before Tom even went to university to study art he understood the dark room process and the importance of choosing proper film for particular photo shoots.

Tom met his wife Molly while attending art school at the university of Victoria in 1971. She was a painter. She introduced Tom to the great master painters and he introduced her to the world of photography. She had become his favourite subject. He enjoyed watching her work. She was so immersed in her paintings. Tom took pictures of her intensely staring at the canvases she was creating. He was captivated by her passion for her art. They were inseparable through the university years and after graduation they went to Europe to see the work of the masters on display in the museums. Molly absorbed it all in her head but Tom took hundreds of pictures. He didn't know it but he was building his resume. While in Paris Molly told Tom she was pregnant. They were standing under the Eiffel tower when Tom asked Molly to marry him. She accepted.

They returned to Victoria in 1973 and had their first child....Katherine, who everyone called Katie. Tom went to work at one of the two fish packing plants that were here at the time. The fishing trade was still vibrant back then. It was hard work but the pay was good....\$5 per hour and time and a half for over time. Tom laughed to himself as those numbers ran through his head. It was actually enough money in those days to afford an

apartment, food and the necessities for his family.

He started free lancing with his photography. Wedding and baby photos were his first jobs. Then he began to pick up work for the Time Colonist newspaper. It was mostly scenic pictures of boats, parades and the like but it lead to something better. The local police department would call him at all hours to take photos of accidents and crime scenes. This was far more interesting work for Tom and it payed well. He was able to quit his fish packing job and put some money in the bank. It also enabled him to buy better cameras and art supplies for Molly. In 1975 they had their second child.....Daniel, who everyone called Danny. Their one bedroom apartment had become too small. Tom and Molly began hunting for a house. They found a three bedroom heritage house in an area of town called Fairfield, close to the ocean, for \$55,000.00. Tom laughed to himself again when he remembered these numbers. They took \$5,000.00 from their savings for the down payment and bought the house. It had a garage that Tom converted into an art studio for Molly and a dark room for himself, and a projection room.

Their kids were growing fast. Tom took all the work he could get and Molly started selling her paintings to friends who would come to visit. Molly had become quite a good portrait painter. Tom would take someone's picture and Molly would paint it, always capturing the spirit of her subject. They made enough money to keep everything together but there was nothing left over for frills. They didn't travel but would take long drives up island and return the same day. The kids showed no interest in art or photography. Tom would try to sit them down to slide shows the way his father did but they were too restless for such a boring activity. Tom gave up on that and just let them do what they wanted to. They were very intelligent and Tom liked seeing them do well in school. They grew up surrounded by art so they would at least have an appreciation for it.

A cool breeze was blowing in Tom's face. The sun was going down and he was beginning to get hungry. He stood up slowly, brought himself back from his memories, and walked home to cook supper for himself.

The kids were now 14 and 16 years old and both were in high school. It was the eighties, the decade of excess. Banks had raised their interest rates to criminal levels and people were living way beyond their means. Consequently people started losing their houses. The job market changed as well. The economic tides were turning and not in favour of the working class. Tom's house was now worth three times what they paid for it and their mortgage was manageable but a lot of Tom's work had dried up and Molly's friends just couldn't afford her art, at any price. They decided to have a family meeting and let their kids know what was going on. Their kids would have to start working and contributing to the family's needs. Tom outlined exactly where every dollar went.....mortgage, food, clothes, insurance etc. Katie was 16 and understood the realities mom and dad were presenting. Danny however, was 2 years younger and didn't see why he couldn't just keep

watching TV and everything would be OK.

Katie said she would go around to restaurants and see if she could get a job as a waitress, which she did. Danny begrudgingly went door to door asking if his neighbours needed any work done around the house. It was autumn and leaves needed to be raked up. Gardens also needed work so he found himself much busier than he wanted to be.

It was about this time that Molly started getting her dizzy spells. The doctors didn't know what to make of it but her health was definitely going down hill. On one trip to the doctor she got the dreaded news, it was cancer, a rare form of blood cancer that was not treatable by any known medicine. The family went into shock.

Tom cut the garlic into small pieces and tossed them into the frying pan with some olive oil. He loved that smell. It reminded him of all the natural remedies they tried to help Molly.....shark cartilage, herbs, oils. It was a desperate attempt that they knew wouldn't work..... but they went through the motions anyway. Then he added some onions, red peppers and small pieces of chicken to his stir fry. It was hard to estimate just for one person. He was used to cooking for the whole family and with two hungry kids around there were never left overs.

Katie was in her last grade of high school and Danny was in grade 10 when Molly passed away. The collective sadness was overwhelming. Tom didn't know what to do so he did nothing. He constantly revisited all the pictures he had taken of Molly and the kids.....at least he had memories. He knew one thing for sure.....he had to be strong. He couldn't let himself fall apart. His kids needed him more than ever. He went back to what he knew, wedding photography, baby pictures, pretty pictures of boats and anything that made a buck. Katie was heading off to university to become a dentist while Danny was discovering he had hormones and could throw a football further than anyone in school. His gardening work had made him physically strong.

When Katie graduated from high school she immediately enrolled in programs that would prepare her for a medical career as a dentist. Tom was grateful she knew what she wanted. He wouldn't have to worry about her. Danny was another story. He was enjoying the adulation that jocks get in school. Girls liked him. He was a star football player and didn't see too far past the next game. Tom went to all his games and took pictures. He didn't want to push Danny in any direction he didn't want to go. Danny did keep doing his gardening work and contributed to the house hold needs so Tom was grateful for that.

Another lonely night passed the way they all eventually did. Tom woke up and did his morning rituals.....shower, stretches, breakfast and left the house for his morning walk on the breakwater. The face of the shore had changed. High winds had littered the beach

with driftwood. Cut logs had escaped their booms and looked like large pencils against massive roots that had washed up. Tom took some pictures with his camera. Digital cameras were a great invention. Film used to be so expensive. You were lucky to get 3 or 4 good pictures from a roll of 36. Something was lost in the process however. Computers had made it easy to edit, crop or do just about anything to a bad picture to turn it into a good one. If you didn't like a shot...just erase it and start over for free. Tom had gotten into street photography for his own pleasure. Victoria was no longer the quaint little west coast town on a pretty island. Poverty, drugs and crime were more prevalent than musical buskers. It wasn't bad or good Tom thought. It just is. It is easier to photograph things without judging them.

The eighties came and went like all decades do. There were winners and losers....survivors and casualties. Katie still lived at home with Tom and Danny while she went to school. Danny had no desire to go to university. He wanted to start his own gardening/landscaping business. He needed a good truck and tools and of course he had no money. He asked his dad for help. Tom explained that he he was living month to month and just keeping his head above water but the house had gone up a lot and there was a large chunk of equity in it. Maybe the bank would give him a loan to help Danny start his business. This was Danny's first business lesson.....someone has to help you. They went to the bank together and talked to the loans officer. Tom's house was almost paid off and there was a large chunk of equity in it.....like \$100,000.00. Tom was pleasantly surprised with this news. He was able to give Danny \$20,000.00 to start his business. Danny would have to repay the loan plus the interest. The interest rates were way down from the early days of the eighties. The government simply slapped the banks on the wrist and said “no more gauging”.

It was the nineties. Danny's business was doing well. He had two employees and was making good money. Katie had finished her schooling and started working for a woman dentist who had her own practice. Tom was still keeping his head above water but not making much money. Two things happened that changed that.....MTV and crime. All of a sudden rock bands were making videos for MTV. With the growing population in Victoria came more crime. Tom got a call from his old boss at the police department. They needed his services for crime photography. Tom had already been experimenting with camcorders and had taken courses in the new digital photography. The police needed pictures taken but they needed them immediately. Once again Tom's skill's were in demand. His first assignment was a murder scene. It was horrific. A young teenager had been gunned down in a drug deal gone bad. The crime scene was not like anything Tom had ever experienced. The victim had been shot several times and blood was everywhere. It reminded Tom of the blood from the deer in his father's slide show. Tom took all the necessary shots but also started taking pictures of the surrounding area that was was taped off. People were looking on from a distance with bewildered faces. Horror and disbelief were everywhere. This was a long way from pretty boats and sunsets. It rattled Tom and he had a hard time sleeping. The images kept appearing in his head. This was not easy work.....but it was the best money he ever made.

The music videos were much more fun. In the early days of MTV just about anything made it on the air. Lip synching and overdubs were part of the editing process. What you saw on tv was nothing like the band's live performance but it didn't matter....it was the nineties. Tom enjoyed producing videos. It was a younger generation who had the same ambition he did when he was their age. It made him feel younger and his own children were growing up. Tom would take photos and video of Danny's work, before and after. He made a website for Danny. It was almost mandatory to have one of these now if you had a business and it was another source of income for Tom.

Tom felt lonely but couldn't bring himself to start dating. Rather, he would go into the studio and just look at Molly's paintings. The sadness would get a little less every year but never totally went away. This changed when Danny got married. He met a wonderful woman named Kioko. She was Japanese but born in Victoria. She had a government job and although she wasn't 100% happy there, it was a good job with health benefits, regular holidays and maternity leave. Danny and Kioko had their first child one year after they were married. It was a girl and they named her Molly after Danny's mother. This brought more joy into Tom's life. He was a very proud grandfather. He insisted on having them over every Sunday for supper. Katie was also invited but didn't come as often. She was preoccupied with her own busy life and Sundays were her day for cycling and adventure.

As Molly started growing they would leave her with Tom to babysit and after she was one year old Tom became the daycare when Kioko went back to work. Tom found himself having to get up earlier than he had become accustomed to but caught up on his sleep when Molly had her afternoon nap. Tom would lie with her on his bed and they would both drift off. Tom would feed her and change her diaper then put her in the stroller and take a walk on the breakwater. Molly loved this. The fresh ocean air was exhilarating. Molly laughed to herself and the passers by. Tom took lots of pictures and started compiling an album on her. It was like old times when he raised his own kids. Kioko would pick Molly up after work. She offered to pay Tom but he would not allow that. The joy and happiness Molly gave him was his reward, plus, Tom was beginning to be financially secure. The house he bought in the seventies was now paid off and his cost of living was not much. His life was simple with no extravagances. He didn't need any more cameras and had all the things he wanted in life. Most importantly, his growing family.

One afternoon he got a call from Katie. She wanted to come over and talk to her father. It sounded ominous. Tom prepared a light lunch and when she arrived they sat down at the kitchen table.

Dad, she said, I have something I want to ask you and something I want to tell you.

OK, Tom said, what is it?

First, I'm gay. I was too self conscious about it so I stayed in the closet.....until now. I have a girlfriend and I would like to share her with my family. I would like to bring her

over for Sunday suppers like Danny does with his family.

Tom wasn't totally surprised. He didn't know Katie was gay but though it odd that she never talked about boyfriends and kept her distance.

I'm totally OK with your sexuality Katie. It makes no difference to me if anyone is gay or straight.....and I would love to meet your partner. Do you want to tell Danny or do you want me too?

I'll tell him dad. I think he should hear it from me.

What is your partner's name?

Her name is Beth, short for Elizabeth. She's a lawyer.

Well, why don't you and Beth come for supper on Sunday?

Thanks dad, that would be nice.

You said you had something to ask me as well.

Yes I do. I'm thinking of starting my own practice and I need help. It's incredibly expensive. I have some money saved but I'm still saddled with student loan payments. I know I can make good money once it's running but the start up is beyond my reach.

How much do you need?

I need \$100,000.00. I know it's a lot.

It is a lot. You know I helped Danny get started , don't you?

Yes I do. He told me all about it but I'm asking for a lot more than he needed.

Your business will make a lot more than his as well.....plus you won't have to fight the weather every day. My house is payed for and it's worth a half million. Let's go talk to the bank and see what we can work out. Maybe we can get your student loan out of the way immediately and you would just have one monthly payment.

Oh dad.....thank you so much. I knew you would come through for me.

Tom got up and gave Katie a big hug. She was in tears.....tears of joy.

Tom woke up and went through his morning rituals. It was a stormy today. The waves might be busting over the breakwater. He thought he would put on his rain gear for

today's walk and no sense bringing a camera, it would get soaked. He headed out into the storm only to see that the police had blocked off a portion of Dallas road. The water was splashing right over the road. Pedestrians weren't allowed into that section as well, it was too dangerous. Tom changed his route and headed north into the cook street village. Fallen branches were everywhere. This was a typical winter's day in Victoria. Tom loved it. He ran into a buddy in the village and the two of them had a coffee. They loved talking about their kids and grand kids. They were both 70 years old and as much as their stories were similar they enjoyed hearing them again.

Tom's buddy was named Frank. He was a retired mechanic and still restored vintage cars for a hobby. His prize possession was a 1961 corvette. He only took it out of the garage in the warm months. It was his baby. In the summer time he would take Tom for long rides up island. No particular destination. Just hit the road and see where it takes you. Tom would take his camera and get a lot of great shots of BC's incredible scenery.

It was the new millenium. Y2K had come and gone, the world was still here, there was no global computer meltdown and Molly was in grade school. Tom's day care duties were no longer needed although he would pick Molly up from school when mom and dad were too busy. Tom was in his 50's now and aside from the regular Sunday supper that included everyone in the family he lived a quiet somewhat monastic life. He still didn't have a girlfriend but was beginning to feel like he needed one. Life was starting to feel empty. The on line dating thing didn't appeal to him.....too impersonal. He decided to trade in his Toyota for a more sportier car. Girls like sport cars he thought and if he didn't have luck with this idea he would still have a fun car to drive around in. He called Frank.

Hy Frank. I'm going through my mid life crisis and I need your help. I think it's time I had a girl friend....and a sports car.

Frank just broke out into laughter.

Which one are you thinking of getting first?

The car, Tom said.

What are you looking for? Frank asked.

I don't know. Tom said. You have a handle on the car thing so I thought you could help me out.

Well.....I know where there's a Mercedes convertible. It a 1965 and in good shape. Not cheap though.'Gonna cost you about \$25,000.00

I can handle that Frank. It should at least hold its value if I take care of it right?

Ya it should. Those babies don't go down in value.

Ok. Set up a meeting and I'll take a look at it.

The next morning Frank took Tom over to his friend's place. Randy made a living dealing in rare cars. This Mercedes was just that. It was a beauty. Ivory white colour, automatic, power steering, power brakes. Randy could tell Tom was attracted to the car. Tom opened the door and sat behind the wheel.

Can I take it for a spin Randy?

Absolutely Tom. Frank opened the passenger door and jumped in. Let's go.

The car had a lot of power. Tom wasn't used to such a performance vehicle. When he stepped on the gas the car lunged forward. It set Tom back in his seat. The top was down and the wind felt good in Tom's face. He was beginning to feel younger every moment. They drove back to Randy's place where Frank was waiting in the driveway. If this isn't a babe magnet nothing is, Frank said.

I'll take it Tom said. Can I rely on you to keep it in good shape Randy?

Absolutely Tom. I'll give you a one year warranty on the engine and body but you should change the oil and other liquids on a regular basis.

OK Randy! You got a deal.

They did the paper work and Tom drove his new car home. He put the top up and admired his new acquisition. He had never spent this much on himself. He almost felt guilty..... his family always came first.....but now his needs were in the forefront and he was thinking if he would ever be able to have another relationship. It was so natural with Molly. They were forever.....he thought. Damn that cancer anyway. Tom's phone rang, it was Frank.

Hy Tom. There's a vintage car show this weekend. How would you like to take it in. It's too late to actually put your car in the show but I thought you might like to drive out to Sidney and look at some cool cars.

Sounds good Frank. I'll pick you up at 9am and we can drive in my car.

OK. See you then.

Tom picked Frank up Saturday morning and took the winding back roads to Sidney. The small town was converted into a massive show case for local cars. Tom and Frank parked his Mercedes and just walked around. He took his camera and was enjoying all the eye candy. This was a new world for Tom. Each car was more beautiful than the one beside it. It would be hard to be a judge in this show.

Tom was staring out his kitchen window when his cell phone rang. It was Kioko.

Hy dad. I was wondering if you could watch Molly for a couple hours. I have some appointments and running around to do.

Sure Kioko. I'll be in the studio.

Tom had amassed thousands of photos over the years. He had broken them down into categories; flowers, people, weddings, babies, nature, birds and now cars. His grand daughter loved sitting in the projection room and just looking at the pictures. His own children didn't like this pass time at all. It wasn't hard to entertain young Molly, she was amused with everything. So inquisitive Tom thought. He wondered what profession she would chose. It would probably be something in the arts. She already had her own cell phone and would take pictures of everything. Tom made sure he put them on the computer. What used to be a slide show was now Power Point. It was more efficient but the old slide projectors made a sound, and they literally projected a beam of light so they created an atmosphere in the room. But that was then.

Tom heard the car pull into the driveway. Molly jumped out and ran to the studio. Papa Tom papa Tom. The studio door opened and Molly ran into Tom's arms. He picked her up and raised her to the ceiling.

How's my little girl? He said.

I have some new pictures on my phone papa Tom. Can we put them on the computer and look at them?

Of course we can sweetie.

Kioko just stood in the doorway with a big smile on her face. Molly loved visiting her grandfather who had become papa Tom. It was the name she gave him years ago. It was easier than saying grandfather.

Thanks for doing this dad, Kioko said. I'll get my chores done quicker this way.

No problem Kioko. I'm sure Molly and I will find something to amuse ourselves.

Kioko left and Tom started loading Molly's pictures onto the computer. Molly watched intently. She hadn't quite learned the process yet but Tom knew she would have it down soon. When the pictures were loaded Tom gave the remote control to Molly.

Ok Molly. It's ready. You tell papa what the pictures are.

Molly sat in Tom's lap and started her show. This is Mrs. Greene. She is my teacher. And this is Mary, my friend. This is dad at work. He's digging a hole. I don't know why he digs so many holes. He just fills them back up.

Tom interjected. He's laying irrigation pipes Molly. That's so water can get from one place to another and the pipes aren't exposed.

Molly didn't comprehend this so she just went onto the next picture. This is Max our dog. We got him last week. Dad says I have to be gentle with him. I feed him and play with him and he comes with us for walks.

This was news to Tom. He hadn't seen Max yet. He was a golden retriever. Very handsome and very protective of children. Good move Tom thought. Danny was looking out for his family.

Molly went on to show her latest pictures of everything and anything that captured her eye. Tom could see she had inherited his love of photography and this pleased him. The show came to an end and Molly jumped down from Tom's lap.

What do you want to do now papa, she asked.

How about going for a ride in my new car, Tom said.

Ok, Molly replied. She was up for anything.

Tom put the top down, secured Molly in her seat belt, sat in the drivers seat and headed out. It was a warm sunny day and the ocean was reflecting the sunlight. They headed east on Dallas road towards the Uplands, the high real estate district. Tom pulled into St. George's Terrace. It was the first lookout on the route. Molly pulled out her cell phone and started snapping pictures. They would be overexposed because the sun was so bright but Tom didn't want to dampen Molly's instincts. He would point this out when they did the next show together. Tom carried on and pulled over at Cattle Point, the second lookout on the way. Molly didn't take pictures this time. She was hypnotized by the beauty of everything. Tom could tell she was in an artist's trance. He looked at her absorbing the sun. She was so cute with her sunglasses on. They were both caught in time for a brief moment. Tom didn't want to break the spell in an unpleasant way so he said.....how would you like an ice cream cone. Molly slowly looked toward him as if being pulled by the tide, smiled and said.....ice cream!!!

Last stop was the dairy queen. Tom got two butterscotch ice cream cones and passed one to Molly. This was her focus in life for the remainder of the trip. They arrived home and as soon as they got out of the car Kioko pulled into the driveway.

Perfect timing, she said. Molly had ice cream all over her face so they went inside to clean her up.

We're having a barbecue this Sunday dad and we're wondering if you'd like to come. You don't have to do all the cooking every weekend for us. We've already invited Katie and Beth and a few other friends.

That sounds great Kioko. Shall I bring something?

No. we got it covered.

With that she and Molly gave Tom a hug and a kiss and they were gone. And just like that Tom was alone again.

Tom was beginning to wonder if he liked the modern world. It was too fast. He tried to keep up with technology but it was impossible. New things were obsolete in months. His real pleasure was photography and the thrill of discovering a new shot. He spent most of his time going over the same slide shows he had seen a hundred times because he felt secure in the projection room. He felt the warmth of his father and mother, his children and his grand child. The rest of the world seemed cold....even on a warm day. Tom was 70 years old and feeling his age.

The barbecue was a pleasant diversion. There were about 20 people there that Tom hadn't met before. Kioko started introducing him. This is my father in law/ babysitter/ cook and all round great grandfather. Tom was a little embarrassed. He didn't really think of himself in those terms. He was just Tom the photographer.

One of the persons he was introduced to was Heather. She was Kioko and Danny's neighbour. She was a violin player and worked in the Victoria symphony. It was the first woman Tom actually got a spark from since Molly had died many years ago.....

How are you Heather, it's nice to meet you.

Very nice to meet you as well Tom.

Tom looked at her ring finger and saw it had no ring on it. She's single he thought.....or maybe she doesn't wear a ring because she's a violin player. All of a sudden Tom felt those awkward but exciting "boy meets girl" feelings come over him. He grasped for any question he could just to keep the conversation going.....so you're a fiddle player?

Heather laughed. Well, yes. I play fiddle when I'm fiddling around and violin when I'm working.

It wasn't the greatest ice breaker but it got them both laughing.

Tom was going to try and cover his tracks but simply said....I have to admit.....I don't know much about music, especially symphony music.

Well, Heather said, if you would like to see what I do, we are playing next week at the Royal theatre. I can get you a complimentary ticket if you like.

That would be great Tom said. I have only been to the symphony once before.

Tom and Heather hung out together for the duration of the barbecue. They discovered their tastes in food were completely different, their tastes in art were completely different and probably the only thing they had in common was the attraction they were both feeling. Tom said his goodbyes to his family with hugs and kisses. He and Heather shook hands and Tom drove off in his sports car.

Heather grabbed Danny by the arm and said.....why didn't you introduce me to your father before this? Danny just smiled. It was time his dad had a girlfriend. It would be nice to see the two of them get together.

Tom went to the symphony and saw Heather play. It was incredible. She was the second violinist. Tom didn't know good playing from bad but couldn't deny how the music was making him feel. After the concert they went out for a late supper. Tom decided to put all his cards on the table. He told of how he lost Molly and hadn't been with anyone since. He talked of his passion for his art form and his devotion to his family. Heather was honest as well. She was Tom's age and had devoted herself to her music. She had several boyfriends but nothing that lasted. She would tell herself her music was the most important thing to her and every time a boyfriend would leave...that's all she had left. She had never wanted children. They would just get in the way of her career. She was tired of being OCD about her independence. They were totally different people but had arrived at the exact same place...lonely street. They finished a bottle of wine and left the restaurant. Heather lived in a small one bedroom apartment. She moved from one city to another like a gypsy following seasonal work in the fruit orchards. She had no roots. Tom was very heavily rooted in his home life. When they arrived at her apartment Heather asked Tom to stay the night.

This is going real fast Tom said.

At our age we don't have time to waste, Heather said. Those words would resonate with Tom down the road.

Heather and Tom fell in love that night. It felt so good. They were both transported from their loneliness. Now they were lovers. They had someone to call for no other reason than to talk. They had each other's bodies on an intimate level and a casual level. Heather loved his sports car. They would take long drives with the music blaring. Tom was learning all about Stravinsky, Mozart, Beethoven and the classical composers. He enjoyed photographing Heather. She was a pretty woman and didn't mind her picture being taken. She loved little Molly. Now when they had their slide shows there were

three of them. Molly still controlled the remote and gave her commentary. Tom had to set another chair for Sunday supper. Heather would come over early to help prepare supper or just stay over from Saturday night. The family was happy for Tom. He was a whole person again. It was as if the burden of grief had been lifted from his shoulders.

Tom sat in his sun chair in the living room. He looked at the massive tankers waiting to dock on the American side and drop their loads of tech toys. The Olympic mountains were only half visible today. They are so large they have their own ecosystem. It was sunny today but clouds hung over the mountains. Tom's mind drifted back as it always did. It drifted back to three wonderful years he and Heather had together. It drifted back little Molly's graduation from high school and it drifted back to the car crash that killed Heather. Tom had gotten a call from the police station to come and take pictures of an accident on the Pat Bay highway. When Tom arrived there was Heather inside the back seat of the taxi cab, her violin beside her. She didn't have her seat belt on. She was coming home from a concert in Sidney. A drunk driver ran a red light and wiped out the taxi cab. The driver had his seat belt on and survived. Tom couldn't bring himself to take the pictures. He didn't want this memory to stick in his mind but it would.....forever.

One less chair was set for supper on Sundays until it became too painful to pretend things could ever be the same without Heather. Kioko and Danny would always invite Tom for Sunday supper but he declined. He would retreat to the projection room and watch pictures by himself. He felt that life had cheated him. He was beyond loneliness. The only satisfaction he got was watching his precious pictures over and over. The police would call him for more work but he quit doing that gig. He quit doing weddings and babies and pretty pictures. Now his work was totally abstract. Close ups of tree bark were his latest muse. They looked like things they weren't. Blow up a piece of tree bark and it becomes a landscape, a mountain side or anything you want it to look like. Realism was too painful for Tom.

Tom's phone rang. He didn't want to be disturbed so he checked who was calling before he answered. It was Molly. He couldn't shut her out.

Hy Molly.

Hy papa. Is it ok if I come over? I have some new photos to show you.

Sure Molly. I'm here all day.

Molly had picked up photography where Tom had left off. He introduced her to the police and now she was their official photographer. She also did weddings and family portraits. She was only 19 and was making a good income as a freelancer. Tom was pleased to see this because he had lost interest in his art.

Molly arrived and they went into the studio. She loaded the pictures onto the computer

and started her show. Every picture was a picture of Tom either on his own or with someone. Molly had taken all of them and compiled a portfolio of her papa Tom. Molly gave her commentary....here's you and Max and here's you with me when I was 8 and here's you with mom and dad and on and on. Tom was in tears. You have touched our lives in such a wonderful way papa Tom. We know you have had to go through terrible losses but we want you back in our lives at least for Sunday supper.

Tom wiped his tears away.

Do you remember when you taught me that shooting into the sun caused overexposure? Well, that's what has happened to you papa. You have been overexposed to life. It's not your fault. The sun was just too bright. You went for the best shot and paid the price.

Where did you get all this wisdom Molly?

I got it from you. You taught me these things.

So what are you planning to do with your life Molly?

Right now I'm working with dad in his landscaping business and freelancing with the photography. I want to save enough money to go to Europe. I'd like to see the museums and architecture. It's a long range plan. I have no desire to go to university. I'm already doing the art I love so I don't see the point in paying to study it. It's way too expensive.

I understand. I met your grandmother in university. We were both studying art. Then we went to Europe for the same reasons you want to. It's a wonderful experience. If you need help with your trip let me know. Do it soon while you are young and energetic. Life goes by way too fast. I'll start the Sunday supper going again at my house. Let your mom and dad know that. They will want to have it at their place but this would give me something to plan every week. It's time I got out of the projection room again.

The End

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I woke up one day with this word flashing in my head like a neon light. I went down to the ocean with my camera, sat on a bench, and the story came to me. I was heavily into a video and photo phase then.

I was just talking to my daughter (Olivia) about you and your magazine. She is a professional journalist and works for post media in Montreal. I'm sending her your contact info because I think she would enjoy what you are about.

I'm also entering a short story contest with the CBC. i just wrote the story yesterday. My wife has proof read it and I'm making the necessary corrections. To qualify for the contest it can't be a story that is already published so I'll send it off to you just to read when I've finished it. It's only 2500 words.

Things have changed again at the Loft. New rules. I used to just go there and chose what musicians I wanted to jam with but now you can't do that. You have to have a half hour set planned with specific people. It's always some new twist with the social distancing rules. I still go there but I'm just video recording other people. I sit with my friend Peter. He is 83 years old and needs a walker to get around. he orders his food and a pint of beer and then falls asleep when the music starts. I am his apprentice. If I live to be 83 i will follow in his foot steps.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Joey Scarfone lives in Victoria, BC where he owned Lazy Joe's Vinyl Emporium—a store devoted to classic vinyl. He devotes some of his time and all of his interest to poetry and music.

DEATH BATTALION

By Robert Standish

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The crux of this novel excerpt is historical but it is not solely a re-telling of a past occurrence. The author's prose wavers between sketchy and finished and presents an intriguing stylistic idiosyncrasy. In other words, there is more than the story going on here. On a different plane it illuminates the experiences of an all women battalion 'on the front lines of the largest theater of loss' during a tumultuous period in Russia's history. (Spacing and font size are author's own.)*

Смерть батальон Death Battalion



самоотверженность

Dedication

Dedicated to the memory of the ladies of the Death Battalion; in honor of the brave steps taken on the frontline of the largest theatre of loss; come into the light beyond the shadow cast from the Iron Curtain.

I am inspired by the selfless strength of others.

The Death Battalion;

17-year-old Akilina Rabinovich, a worker in a Russian textile factory in Petrograd 1916, had lost her father to her countries past conflict with Japan, and now may have lost her fiancé to the Eastern front in the war to end all wars.

In the shadow of Russia's history of recent failure in war, and civil war, shortages, strikes and starvation, force the population to petition the Tsar, a chance meeting, Akilina sees the bravery of a woman, Maria Bochkareva as she takes control of the Imperial Police during this peaceful demonstration; defying orders from the Tsar to fire on the unarmed crowds, she allows the peasant force to have their voice; in doing so preventing another Bloody Sunday of 1905.

There may be hope. A woman in charge with such power means there is a choice to stand and fight. *We will fight until we die.*

Facing discrimination, starvation, and without true support from her country Akilina marches into certain death to the throats of the German Army and end the cycle of failures and put an end to a war Russia can't win, and lead the First Unit on the Western front as the women's First Death Battalion.

17-year-old Akilina Rabinovich, a worker in a Russian textile factory in war torn Petrograd 1916, strikes and shortages force rebellion in the now dangerous streets, witnesses the bravery of a woman, Maria Bochkareva as she takes control of the Imperial Police during this peaceful demonstration; defying orders from the Tsar to fire on the unarmed crowds, a frightening flash back to Blood Sunday, will follow the woman and march into certain death, to the throats of the German Army in a war Russia can't win, and lead the First Unit on the Western front as the First Death Battalion.

The Death Battalion

Chapter 1

BING, BONG, DING, DONG, BING; the clock in the hall sounds off breaking the silence of the night and continues to alert everyone that it's 5AM. The clock is so loud and the walls in the apartment are so thin everything rattles and dust is released from them and the ceiling. Akilina lays wide awake in her room but the sound still sends a spike of fear into her, she is very alert and doesn't blink, just turns to stare out the window. Looking out at the sky her heart knows that she is under the same sky as her love Sascha. He is fighting on the Western front so even with the distance there is still a connection to him however frail she will take it. She always thinks of the sky and how they share the stars because Sascha has written about it in his few letters to her, they are her treasures and his. A letter in Petrograd or on the front is anyone's treasure.

From her solitude she hears Victor her Grandfather and Vera her Grandmother walking around, older people are always awake so early, is it to make sure that life gives them one more day, she wonders, who knows, regardless sleep is not something she has been accustomed to most of her life. It is very hard living in a time of War and in Russia, since Akilina has known nothing but conflict and shortages she can only ever flash nap and never sleep through the night. Conflict is everywhere and it has almost always been a part of everyday life. One of her earliest memories as a child was on a Sunday in January outside the Winter palace in 1905, Ana, Akilina's Mom and her were out for a walk and were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

They were out for a walk and a crowd began to grow around them, hundreds of people came to the Palace, then hundreds more, turning to thousands. Akilina had never seen this many people, no one was shouting and there was no anger, just an ever growing crowd, then Police came to surround everyone and the Palace. There was so much confusion as one man stood out from the m all and proclaimed to be there in peace in the name of the people, the workers and only wished to present the Tsar with a petition. A simple document, then for no reason guns began to fire into the crowds. Ana tried to get them to safety but when you are surrounded every direction is death. Hundreds die around them as the shooting has no end, the one man proclaims his peaceful message begging for fair treatment for the workers, an end to the shortages and to end the war with Japan, "And if Thou dost not so order and dost not respond to our pleas we will die here in this square before Thy palace", is the last thing she hears him say as her mother throws her to the ground and the two pretend to be shot.

A lifetime passes as they lay there in the square frozen in fear surrounded by the dead. At 5 years' old that is a horrible memory to hold onto, but keeping it isn't by choice. It is still so vivid in her mind, she can see faces and all the colors as they rush from the living and turn red on the ground of the square in front of the Winter Palace. A life experience like this gives you a voice of defiance or a life of silence and surrender. In the darkness Akilina has yet to make her choice, for now she is waiting, waiting to see if Sascha will ever return home and fulfill his promise, waiting to see an end to yet another War, just waiting to see what terror will be new to replace the old.

BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG. The noise erupts without warning and Akilina jumps out of her soul and hits the floor and spins around and takes refuge under her bed in an instant. "Ha ha ha ha ha, Akilina I got you". "Dmitry, what are you doing, stop that right now, banging on the pipes is so dangerous and the noise is not needed". Akilina hears her Mom yell at her brother from down the hall. "I was just trying to make sure that everyone was awake, I am trying to help". He defends himself. "Well it's not funny and helps no one", is Akilina's angry response. AS it is most people are already awake and Victor takes his customary place in the kitchen on his chair and begins his day as he always did, he waits for his coffee and talks about the past, even if no one is there to hear it he will say it over and over again.

Ana and Vera are moving about getting things ready for their meal and the day as Akilina makes herself ready to join them, then all three work together as they do each day. Alexander, her father is only a memory to them, as with most able bodied men they are needed at the front, he left to fulfil his duty never to return. There are so many families like this throughout Russia, it is becoming normal and only leaves behind the young, old, ill or undesirables behind to keep the effort in motion. Women have made their impact in an ever increasing way and are seen not as frail determinants but now assets and of value, without them nothing is possible. "Ana, do we have a newspaper today"? Victor asks, "No PAPPY I will be getting them later after work just the old ones here", she replies as she hands him a few older papers. He accepts them and looks through them now for the fourth or fifth time.

"Mother Russia never sleeps, she is never allowed to rest. We live as we have always seemed to live, in hard times. As long as I can remember there has been conflict. We used to strike, we were brave, to strike is criminal, but in defiance we still did, little by little we forced change. When I was at the cotton mill in 1884 we did just that and it was a hard sacrifice and took two years to get some of our demands met but it worked, we finally got a shorter work day to 11 and a half hours now and better work conditions, we had the Tsar pass it into law in 1890. That is how we did things, but not without cost. In between our battles Russia could breathe, but it never lasted too long". Victor, a bear of a man with a deep thunderous voice that always sounds angry even when he laughs, carries on talking as the activity takes place around him. There isn't much to prepare for any meal but they have learned to be grateful for very little.

BING, BONG, DING, DONG, BING; the clock sounds off again to make the our and continue to shake more dust from the ceiling and walls, in angered acceptance the ladies just wipe it away as they do time and again. This also tells Akilina and Ana that they need to get moving, they are expected at the textile factory, no one is late. Vera will deal with Dmitry until later in the afternoon when he also has a work responsibility. "Akilina, hurry come on". Ana pleads "And do not worry about your hair". Before the two ladies leave the apartment all of them sing to her Happy Birthday, today Akilina is 18. She runs back to her room, "one last thing", she always carries Sascha's last letter with her in case there is a moment in her day when she can read it all over again. Just holding it is her way of holding his hand.

The two have learnt that they are only able to write about things that are not political or about the war itself, Sascha is not to tell where he is and what they are doing and details about positions and equipment in case the letters are stolen by the Germans. They are considered military secrets and will be destroyed. Their letters are read through before being sent on. Neither of them care to give away any military secrets, they would rather talk about their feelings and experiences and make mention of things left out that tell of unwritten confessions and their desires, no one other than them would care about such things. Now Akilina will need to run as Ana has already left and is likely angry.

Running to catch up she leaves the apartment and gets to the stairs. They are four levels up and Akilina has become fast enough that she can hold her breath long enough to not smell how awful it can be. The stairwell reminds her of the terrible smell of damp earth, the smell that must wait to claim the dead, it is terrible she hates it and moves as quickly as she can. The building and apartment isn't even that old, the paint inside and wall paper is perhaps seven years old but of such poor quality it is not able to keep its color and looks old well before its time. No need to be embarrassed when all of her friends live much like she does. It is almost like this area of St Petersburg, or Petrograd was built old.

As Akilina runs carefully to reach her mother from a distance they, could be sisters, they are so similar Ana is just shorter and her blonde hair is not as long but as thick, the meeting point with some other women she must navigate carefully, the roads are in horrible condition and all the streets had been renamed soon after the city was, but she knows where she is going. Just ahead she sees her mother and her closest friend Darina is just getting there. They have learned to stay together. It's safe and just a great way to keep it. Darina is so brave and strong with a kind heart she can also be abrupt and rude. She is the same height as Akilina but more athletic and has a natural beauty and dark hair that makes boys crazy. "Happy birthday AKILINA, are the first words from Darina's lips. With such excitement they hug in the street, Ana smiles warmly but kindly reminds them they need to move on. The small group of ladies makes their way to the factory. They are on time and the doors are open and they all enter together.

Most of the factories are in transition and Akilina needs to remind herself that Russia is growing and changing, all she can hear is her Grandfather's voice telling the open air that the Russian economy had seen steady growth since after the failure of the Japanese war in 1905 and other countries were manufacturing our machines and many goods and services like cars and truck, even trains. Parts of the country were moving forward faster than we could run so it made advancements hard to manage. She remembered that he had always feared our dependency on other countries like Britain and France and even Germany to take our natural resources and replace them with empty words. He was a wise man, and always believed one never pokes a bear unless they are themselves a bear of equal strength.

There is an increased demand for supplies to the front and so many factories rush to supply the need and gain contracts and favor with the Tsar. The easiest place was the textile factory, they could supply blankets and uniforms at great ease and change over quickly and that's exactly what they did. The factory would receive huge heavy rolls of cotton fabric on wagons in the street at the side of the building, they must have weighed hundreds of pounds. They would then be placed on the line and sent to be dyed the necessary color, dried then machines would section it off for the pattern makers.

Moving through the large doors they can hear the wagons approaching as they did three times a week, you could hear them long before they came into view. The large horses pounded the streets that were torn apart by the heavy loads and poor care. The streets had other issues as well, when you add this many horses to the city they bring their shit with them and it makes such a mess, like mud only much messier. The streets are forever clogged with it, mountains of it either making roads impassable as wagons and trucks would become stuck, or create such an uneven surface it was dangerous. No sooner did they make it inside and the wagons were at the side doors. Nicos was there to receive the large rolls, he is young and so much smaller than the rolls, it is almost comical to see him dwarfed by them.

BOOM

Out of the quiet of the morning a loud explosion shakes the ground around them all. One of the boilers from the factory next to theirs explodes, scares the horses and sends the massive rolls of fabric rolling out of the wagon, Nicos had no chance to move and is instantly crushed by them as the wagon and horses fight against their restraints. They all hold their breath not knowing if they are at first under attack. Once it is understood what happened everyone runs to help the workers at the factory next door, they are not aware that the rolls of fabric have crushed Nicos, not at first, but once there is no danger and the injured are removed from the building do they return to find him.

Even with the modernization and quest to catch up to the rest of the world they are still so far behind, there is always an unfair unbalance of technology being beyond the ability of the worker, or the worker needing better support to safely do what they require, this is not a dance or a game but is played out like one each time they enter the factories. It is very typical of what the people felt. They try to build cars that are not suited for the roads they can't maintain, railways without trains, farms without ways to ship produce where it is needed, fight a war without guns. They are humiliated and defeated by the actions of the Monarchy, the largest army unable to defend itself, unable to supply a land with a world of resources and land. Russia has every reason to be proud, yet seeks permission for nationalism. The workers suffer in unsafe places not fully ready for the responsibility of what the world asks.

It takes a few hours for things to return to a more organized normal state and the rolls are moved inside and Nicos is taken away. The ladies move to the line to try to fight off the memory of their morning, it is such a hard struggle to wipe away the memory of the day, time eases pains intensity and must go on, Akilina's questions this from her post, life goes on, why? She asks herself, as much as she understands that it's part of the cycle and no one has ever lived to change it and the world has never stopped regardless of who dies, the question remains, why? As roll after roll of fabric is sent to be dyed then dried, the roll that crushed Nicos is on display for everyone to see as the blood stains are the last evidence of his presence, they pass in front of them all one last time before they will be erased forever.

Excerpt from the completed novel
The Death Battalion
copyright 2020
authored by
R. William Standish

AUTHOR'S BIO: Robert Standish is an aspiring writer and devoted father of three. After several years in the film and television industry in Canada, he has had the chance to meet some amazing people, travel and experience things, not for normal consumption. As a camera assistant and operator he has been in the line of fire on many occasions and inside explosions and crashes, just to name a few incredible opportunities. 'Chalk Outline These Thoughts 1 and 2 and a fiction novel 'The Secrets Men Keep', most recently the creator of a collection of poetry entitled 'The Passion Hidden Within'. (*Amazon and Kindle*) I have found most recent success with three poems published on Terror House Magazine and soon a short fiction story will be published in February, it is my hope to extend and expand my exposure and develop as many relationships as I can. Now transitioning into a creative writer who has self-published four works and counting, Robert is setting his sights on the next project. His story **IF** appeared in Issue 2.

POETRY

10 (Ten) Poems + 1 (One)

By Gerald Wilson

***Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:** Gerald Wilson is a sheer delight. He has blessed us with a synoptic anthology. Here is a simple editor, editing the lines he longs to quote: “Fondling my belly button I was shocked / I wasn’t still tied to mom.” “I didn’t know then while living among / Appearances I would sink to far” “the other eyes blinked as the third / eye saw” “knowing we suffer when // we bleach the dark out of life” “In no way does the table say / what it is / the word for it waits to be said” Okay, there are way too many. Wilson is “a decoder of clouds” The poet is wild and untamed. It is a singular formula for living reclusively and un-caged. Yes, I read the Bio’s. It may not be due to a longing for lack of company. It happens when your own mind is, and thoughts are, so enthralling everything else seems mundane and immaterial—or so I have heard. Gratefully, read on, Charles Pinch, the head of the Fleas, ‘The Lord of the Flies’ has something to say...*

***Senior Editor Charles writes:** Gerald Wilson’s poems are the private and personal sutras (suttas) of a literary artist who lays himself bare and to read them is to stand on hallowed ground. Dharma’s river runs its blood through every tributary of feeling and with extraordinary plasticity words combine, words shapeshift to re-create the stillness at the centre of things, or, in Eliot’s words, ‘the still point in the turning world.’ Though much of it resembles ordinary speech, this quietly visionary poetry is in fact, closer to a structuralist like Horace or the late work of Robert Frost. The mysteries of Sein and Dasein rise imperceptibly to the surface and exquisitely crafted phonic swellings, sweetened here and there with discreet coloratura, hit the*

reader with a combustible charge. Everywhere language is sacred; everywhere introspection roars. Genius is a word we hesitate to use—even in the most deserving of cases—but we had no hesitation here. A unique reading experience that will stop the breath in your throat. Five stars.

Poetry editor's note: *The first six poems are from How It Hides, Jugdish Publishing, Sault Ste. Marie, ON, 2014. The remaining five are from Swirling in the Stream, by the same publisher, 2020. In order to keep poet's dedicated spacing, each poem is published on a separate page. HS*

HOW IT HIDES

Form is Emptiness

Emptiness if Form...The Heart Sutra

Fondling my belly button I was shocked
I wasn't still tied to mom.

to fill the void I wore a mask
a life without a core

a puppet I became who would learn
to stutter lies far from the truth

I didn't know then while living among
Appearances I would sink to far

from sight I couldn't hardly come back
feeling there must be something

missing I began the great search for

a glimpse of the shore that cannot

be reached, a woman's touch without
seeing what was behind her caress

all this seemed like pulp rot from
the centre of a dead tree, an emptiness

that swelled the hunger for something
true, an explanatory stay

the other eyes blinked as the third
eye saw the space of awareness

the subtle effulgence enflaming the world
the leaves from a tree, the waves

from a field, the hole from whole
when I read the words on paper

I sometimes saw in the page what made it
the logger's splinter, the earth, the rain

and sun, but usually I looked in

error through a skewed lens

through which I seemed

THE PEARL

The trouble with happiness

is the bottomless longing

that surfaces to drown me

without any warning

and goes before I know

it waves its hunger

in my face when I believe

something outside fills

the fathomless within

that seems to complete me

though happiness promises

the craving gives chase

to something that can turn

the unbroken to pieces

INTO THE DARKNESS

In the womb of night, in the abstruse mystery
a man walks the soaked streets
the darkness folds around his

white suit which he always wears
like a second shining skin into
which he might have been born

out of the mother dark
others would look out from
their lighted windows asking

themselves what human heart
would only want the dark
the ocean's inky depths

they who upon hearing the
creaking hinges of the door

would imagine what lurks

in the blackness meanwhile

the man will ascend the

stairs through the moonless air

up to his dingy room where

he will weep for the others

knowing we suffer when

we bleach the dark out of life

that it is good to be blind

for the light of day

allows us only to see so far

HISTORY OF POSSIBILITY

If you hadn't fallen for the note
of the sound *I am*

that was folded into the unbroken
field of flaming flowers

your smoky eye wouldn't
have made enclosures

of span, sphere
depth, shore and core

you wouldn't be trying to cling
to the wings of sparks
feeling unsatisfied

if your eye had remained unclouded
you would feel happily implanted

among the petals of blaze without
ever having the need to war

you could have loved

TABLE

In no way does the table say
what it is
the word for it waits to be said

to be seen as the tiny picture
in the back of your mind

the one coming from the someone
who first tells you what
the four legs are four

(not to be confused with the dog)

the one responsible for all tables
you have seen and stored

that makes you see the connection
between the word and the table

you are a decoder of clouds

the table itself is like a blooming
flower

EDITOR'S NOTE

Apparently our poet lost
one of his poems in space
between the top of his head
and the end of his pen
our gain in the relief
from his boring sadness
thanks to a universe
that has two ends
to the same stick
where are the poets of
old who told us how
we were happy

The following five poems are from Swirling in the Stream.

SITTING IN A CHAIR

(For Claire)

Sitting in a chair, I can't do anything else at the moment. I am the complete experience of sitting in it right now: I can't also be walking outside on the driveway at the same time. Compelled to select only those sensations and perceptions engaged in sitting in the chair, my brain is limited to this experience to avoid a sensuous blizzard of chaos and confusion. At the same time, I am making an idea of myself sitting here. As well, countless causes have led me here: all that has happened causes all that happens. Like the wind causing the waves to blow in one direction, then changing to blow in another, the cosmic gesture moves me to sit here. A wave on the ocean can no more change its flow on its own, then I can get up from this chair on my own without the support of the total universe. Where I go from here is not up to me.

THE DARK WAY

If a man wants to be sure of his road, he must close his eyes and walk in the dark. --St. John of the Cross

Spring's been overcast in rain and cold. The concealed sprouts still lie like the dead in their branches. We come from the dark and seem to go in the dark—where the mysteries are, where the ancients prayed in their caves, where the mystics turned their searchlights on to see their centers. Our somber longings reach for release. I am drawn to the moon, a child of the dark: star dark and star shine. But who among us are good at welcoming the sorrow into which we are plunged? The ill-fated are frail bodies fall prey to? Do we shut down and shut out? Resisting, we are told, adds more misery. Better, they say, to walk through the night. Embrace its bracing ache as a friend. At the end of the day, the darkness empties us of our bodies, of ourselves, so cleanly.

I AM WATER

When you landed in the sand at the bottom, stirring up a little cloud, you were on your back, looking up through the sunlit, shimmering water, something happened to your body. It disappeared for a moment. We just stared down in the spot we last saw you: the empty space below the wavering water, then you reappeared. Pulling you up to the boat, your dripping body glistened like you were covered in oil, we heard you say softly, "I am water. Let me go." You began to heave and fall into one long gathering wave, then splashed and disappeared below.

SAMANTHA SPEAKS
(FOR LISA AND HER FAMILY)

None can imagine your grief when I left. Best rest, knowing I am the infinite ocean. I was once one stream becoming flesh when I knocked and entered when you knew me as your daughter. Now the same atoms that made up my body are made of the same stuff as the stars. When you walk through the air, I am the shapeless space touching your face. My mind, the cosmic mind, as the one gesture whirling the streams. Listen to your hearts truth sing the mystery of the water's curling. I am held in the sea's memory of you and the earth. When you look at the sun, see me as love.

THE COMING OF LOVE
(FOR NEDA AND TIM)

Even now it happens again: the emergence of love beyond the romance of it. You wake in a place where the old shore slips away beneath your feet as if you are floating forward on wings. There, already in your heart sits the sea inching gently toward you. Stepping onto the new shore as if you are explorers of an unknown world. preparing to build your settlement out of all that matters in your lives, you are light, lyrical and wise.

THE POET SPEAKS: *The map is not the territory. The world is not the thing. From that perspective I am suspicious of the thinking, writing process: its limitations and contradictions. What I think about anything frequently doesn't match my actual experience. So what I say and I think is a sort of façade, a deception. So I hesitate to say much about the writing. Or if I do it's with a lot of caution because I know it has a falseness, a spin, a bias—plain, not the truth. This view in itself is a bias. So what is one to do? What is the truth anyway? Living and writing involves uncertainty, a mystery in which I live. I accept that and surrender to it. Enough said: let the poems speak for themselves. P.S. I write in longhand.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Gerald Wilson was born in Sault Ste. Marie (ON) where he now resides. He has published two previous books of poetry.

11 (Eleven) Poems

By Frank De Canio

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: Frank De Canio is liquid light, lightening in a bottle. Each of his works has such a unique fluidity it is not easy to select excerpts. They spark like flashes of fiction and I am supposed to be the feckless, fecked-up Poetry Editor—but I wouldn't miss a word. Their cadence is contagious. (Note: I avoided alliterating with COVID or Corona.) Do you ever find yourself in such a disagreeable mood that rainbows, sunshine and lollypops can't alter? Well I did, and I was determined to reject at least one of De Canio's poems on principle; but I couldn't and my life has been enriched because I didn't. What if yours was too? Isn't it a wondrous thing the simple, and not so simple, things that put you back in a better frame of mind? This poet recomposed me. Here is his all. I recommend you read each, if you want to discover yourself in a better frame of mind than when you started...(Spacing is poet's own.) HS

Delicatessen Gal

With matron efficiency she teases pieces of roast from the meat slicer into the damp rose of her opened palm. Slim, dexterous fingers toss soft slivers of cheese on sodden slabs. Scattered parts of my white-breasted hero are stretched-out on the marble counter. Naked to the warm insouciance of her touch, the bread's diapered with assorted cold-cuts, then handily dressed with tufts of lettuce, like bibs on a driveling

child. Delivered to the check-out counter's genial cashier, I tuck it in my baggage, thoroughly beguiled.

Miss Appraisal

Every man's a fugitive from justice as far as women are concerned. He saw the girl reflected on the window of the subway car where he sat suspiciously engaged by her resemblance to a singer he was fond of. Propped against the exit door beside him she didn't leave at the next stop but occupied the seat opposite him when one of his familiars left. Put off by his expropriating looks, she sat resolved to confiscate his stolen goods. Furtive glances ensued. Stared into submission, he was arrested by her tough demeanor. After he was placed in custody, she frisked him for any contraband involving wife, children, present liaisons or seminal associations. Pursuant to being ID'd on the way to the next station he was booked at the restaurant where he was charged with a 3 course meal. In the interrogation room he confessed to Miss demeanors that shadowed him all the daze of his life. Handcuffed to her waist, he was later fingerprinted by her neck and shoulders. Preliminary tests on the hickies he left behind - coming out positive for his being a good kisser - he was remanded into custody where he's serving a wife sentence

with little possibility of parole, unless under strict supervision that he pay child support.

Magic Lamp

I'm Scheherazade. Telling my inner sultan tall tales, I survive another day. At night I start another poem to pique his interest. He follows the exotic lines of my cunning concoctions to arousal. Bewitched as he is by my iambics, he spares me. Indeed. The fantastic stories I spin beg closure. For well I know the fate of my previous lives. Death awaits me should I cease enchantment during this forced marriage. And I'm scared, lest unceremoniously, nuptial tensions be brought to a head.

Munch Hour

Where's that sultry French girl I saw in the heat of a Summer afternoon selling fruit on Park Avenue South in the Flat Iron District of Manhattan? "The Tide is High" was blazing on the radio like waves buffeting the sweaty shores of my body. Did the dust settle on her pretty cropped head like that of Jean Seberg's in Joan of Arc? Or have tresses of time embalmed it in a coiffure of sackcloth and ashes? Nothing remains except the sultry air of her. Ah! The permeable suture of youth, where women enter stitched into our mindsets at their behest and there's no gainsaying it, before the armature is settled on our bodies like an embalmer's primer. I remember her boyfriend appearing as if from back stage of a play unfolding on this patron of her parts. How I envied him in his youthful exuberance, embracing and missing her. Has the sun set on his enterprising affections? Or have they sublet some tawdry

apartment on the lower eastside where he's fodder for her plebian tastes? Oh, those dog days of summer. How they cling to me like a wet blanket on a hot beach reaching out to tides of passion that ride me like a surfboard on their surge.

Scrumptious Sex

What matter if it's raisin, rye or wheat
bread sandwiching the food stuff that's inside?
It's meat, plus lettuce, cheese and all you eat
with it that makes you feel so satisfied.
Such appetizing victuals can slake
your hunger. Nor should spicy mayonnaise,
and red hot peppers force you to forsake
them for less pungent flavors that won't braise
the sensibilities. For they're subsumed
within the context of a proper lunch
that doesn't leave one's healthy diet doomed.
But listen up, before tour features scrunch!
Those condiments affording you a thrill
as seasoning, uncoupled make you ill.

Prisoner of Sex

Hung over from his binge the night before,
he sits against the backboard of his bed
as his fond lover enters through the door
with breakfast – coffee, scrambled eggs and bread.
Despite a pompous sense of royal ease,
he feels in some unsettling way remiss
as she unloads his burden on his knees,
and then bends over with a sidelong kiss.
Unable to maneuver her to bed,
he plays a foppish king since overthrown
who takes base tribute from her lips instead
of her subjection to his sceptered throne.
This stiffens like a trophy in her keep
as she sets off to work and he to sleep.

Nurturing Her Animus

Exasperated with the gender role
assigned to her, she first stopped using rouge,
then makeup all together. Mind control
sufficed as a becoming subterfuge,
before she took karate and Tai Chi.
But still she needed thumbs up from her peers,
besides subverting femininity
by putting triple piercings in her ears.
Enjoining older men to take her seat
on bus or train accorded social clout
to her. And though policing on the beat
afforded her pro forma ways to flout
the stigma she felt compromised her sex,
just running down a suspect purged the hex.

Wheedling Wedlock

is sort of like the lovelorn out on bail.
He stumbles on his girlfriend's house to rob
her of her valuables, until she flails
to constrain her armed, if ardent, heartthrob.
She manages to confiscate his gun,
but before he cocks it in her face,
believing she's be stunned and overrun.
Instead, with frantic thrust, her arms embrace
him in a stranglehold that makes him rear
in desperation, writhing to escape.
With no recourse then biting on her ear
he breathlessly concedes to her the scrape,
if only so he get sufficient rest.
Of course, the case contested in the court
of public opinion, he hence confessed

to charges that require child support.
And with the evidence inside of her,
the court remands him as her prisoner.

Salaciously Served

Though smitten senseless by the handsome thief
of hearts who brashly swaggered in her store,
she was accomplished at preparing beef
her gourmet peers and family adore.
As such, she clasped the fellow in her arms
and pressed him to her appetizing ear,
then seasoned him with hot and spicy charms
like thyme, until she felt his passion rear.
With aromatic preparations done,
she took the silken ribbon from her hair
and, just as if he were filet mignon,
entwined his hands with gastronomic care
where, later, like porchetta, she then tied
in nuptial knots with culinary pride.

Love Ties

Forget that talismanic gunny sack of oils. Pin peppered dolls dripping honey merely made her squander hard-earned money. Even that twisted arm behind his back could hardly pick up Aphrodite's slack, tickling less the pubic than the funny bone. Though trussing up his hands would stun him. in spite of its incendiary tack, she left him flaccid, off the beaten track, if only to avoid a felony trap. But watching her, all worked up, runny nose, disheveled hair smelling of lilac as it dispensed its aphrodisiac, roiled his blood. Eros rose as – her sunny disposition darkening – she spun him all about. Such miffed scrambling for the knack of disentangling that quadruple knot with which she'd gingerly secured his wrists, worked magic to assist love's steaming pot to boil. She champed at the chord, pounded fists, as her frenetic body stewed to hot. then wet.

Though no man worth his salt enlists prolonged restrictions
 sitting in one spot, she – baffled, huffing mad – puffed catalyts
 of fetid breath to equal megawatts of Spanish fly in a romantic
 tryst. It tripped him to discharge his pleasure shot much quicker
 than the rope’s abrasive twists deferred to her remedial assists.

Sexist Scrimmage

Her fluency’s alive and well.
 And not just on the podium
 when she, while fielding questions, fell
 afoul of backfield odium
 from hecklers taking her to school.
 But rushing one as he recapped
 his triumphs on a tavern stool,
 her metaphoric tackle zapped
 him harder than the verbal bricks
 that fell on her like an assault.
 It hit him like some forward chick’s
 improper pass. For by default,
 her dexterous, linguistic sack
 became an aphrodisiac.

THE POET SPEAKS: *My poems are sometimes inspired, to echo, Robert Frost, by a lump in the throat; thoughts tugging at my sleeves; or an*

epiphany I have about life or love. My formal poetry is clearly influenced by the great poets of bygone centuries; John Keats, Shelley, Shakespeare most of all. But my prose poems seem to be informed by an elliptically suggestive narrative I sometimes get from Ginsberg and Dylan Thomas, where one idea might mutate into another. Poems are emotions made concrete. Writing poetry for me is a way of organizing my emotional world, putting it down on paper and subjecting it to analysis, clearing it out of my mind (with all due respect) where it appears to put a lien on me. The finished poem is as it were, a coffin with a tombstone that says: Rest in Peace.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Born & bred in New Jersey, I worked in New York City for many years. I love music from Bach to Amy Winehouse. Shakespeare is my consolation, writing my hobby. As poets, I like Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, and Sylvia Plath. I also attend a Café Philo every other week in Lower Manhattan.

I've written 3500 poems which I write to elucidate my concerns, and purge them out of my mind, as it were. I don't write what I've thought through but what I'm thinking through. Dylan Thomas said if he knew what I wanted to say when he wrote a poem he wouldn't have to write it. I have the same idea.

HUSK

By Ryan Lee

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: I am not so much in the habit of quoting from Bio's but Ryan Lee's proclamations are so contrasting to his work that I cannot resist, "I'm a 25 year old amateur writer with no degrees, no qualifications, and no right putting ink to a page..." He is a tour de force, one of the most intriguing pieces I have experienced this issue. You may do well to read him also, so you too can assist in undoing his deference. Either that or I am being duped, which as often happens, and he is a laureate in some distant state. I'll start you off "Perhaps this is what they call penance / A purification of the tarnish soul, housed in a decayed husk" I love the title, 'Husk' Uncertainty is a most prized and culled virtue. (Font size and spacing is poet's own.) HS*

Editor's Note: *This is the Ryan Lee's first publication. Congrats, dude!*

Husk by Ryan lee

Perhaps this is what they call penance
 A purification of the tarnish soul, housed in a decayed husk
 of what I once held to be me and
 For a while the sun that shone on my frame warmed me and the
 dust that had settled was rustled from its slumber
 So was I, ablaze in the glory of that glow
 Nestled in a valley that seemed to be home
 As naturally as the sun came in night is always close behind
 shadows of death tormenting
 the flesh of those afflicted by the terror of the night
 The breeze chills the once brazen bones
 Soon they begin to twist and contort simultaneously gnawing at sanity
 Sense and reason become anguished howls echoing between the corpses of past feats
 to reclaim the sun
 Pain and time mix into a slurry

So viscous that seconds drone into minutes and eventually to hours
 how sweet were the age of fire and comfort Reaching to the midnight hour, the bell tolls
 and we have all but reached the end
 still writhing and howling
 not an issue of the physical plane, no
 it is something far more excruciating, the disease of the mind
 Spread from the miasma of the night
 So insidious that even the strongest will could not prevail. This is not the end for our
 husk. That remains to be seen.

THE POET SPEAKS: *Husk was a piece near and dear to me, it was to express to my lover at the time how the relationship felt. To show the depths I was sinking into because I didn't feel that presence anymore. My 'style' stems from when I would write punk songs and read Bukowski and Cummings, and loved how Bukowski was up front and gritty. Cummings always seemed to have this sway to it for me. I wanted to combine it all and make a grotesque waltz of my own. It all helps me day to day process my own headspace and move forward with myself. Reading and writing poetry is like my own cigarette. It helps me breathe. It's all I have to express what's happening to me and it's all I need.*

AUTHOR'S BIO (original submission note):

Attached is the first break in my life, and submitting is my coup de gras so to speak. So don't be gentle, I want advancement if nothing else.

I have no publications, and the only bio I can honestly give is that I'm a 25 year old amateur writer with no degrees, no qualifications, and no right putting ink to a page, but can't help but transcribe the disaster that is my own life. A basement dwelling hobgoblin that wants nothing more than make someone else realize that all you should do is fuck life.

The title to this is Husk.

People are only people through other people...

Poems by Chris Biles

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry editor Hezekiah writes:*

“Blessed are the cracked / for they shall let in the light.”

At first I thought any poet that quotes Groucho Marx can't be all bad; and then I read on to find that it was all good. Biles' words are comic, caustic, caring, caressing and complicated in their implication. Oh so many great lines and so little space:

" Nothing quite like a lone tree / that can still stand tall / in the midst of monotony." "like window raindrops / we fall sliding collide then / running together".

If I was only allowed one more, I would choose these two:

"kissed the inside of my wrist" She has introduced me to a new erogenous zone; *and*, "the way I am transported / through the windows of my skull"

These are a sorry too few for me—seek your own, but don't miss a single morpheme..

Five stars.

(Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS.

People are only people through other people.

Poems by Chris Biles

Memories

Empty here,
I'm scraping
the jelly jar,
but the knife
comes up clean.
I want that sugar
like a dedicated
honeybee that can't
find a flower.
Honey, I need
some nectar.
I need a journey.
Road trip with me
so we can trip
on the road
and come out
less than clean.
I'm empty here,
and searching –
for the plum
juice in my dead
Grandmother's ice
chest, for the scent
of white pines
and the sight
of their fallen
gold needles,
for the warmth
of a cup of tea
on a chilly autumn
day as my only
companion.
Memories: the air
in my jelly jar.
It's empty, yet not.

Dinner in Paris

The accordion pumps out its notes
and a man effortlessly lets
melodies flow from loose lips,
striped shirt and red neck tie
giving the look of a boy
to a man
who simply sings
of a life not yet lived,
of a longing long ago realized,
long ago accepted
as life-long.

Red wine flows
as a clarinet joins the mix
now more upbeat
and the driving force of a bass
plucking the deep melody
of a pulse felt in the chest
profondément
to the core.

And so goes the rhythm of the night.
We tap our feet
nod our heads
close our eyes and watch
the music
take form:
rising and falling
flowing
through the maze
of streets and down
to the never-ending path
beside the Seine,
to the river
flowing
in color
in black and white
red as the wine
driving us on
driving us away
driving us home.

Perspective

“Blessed are the cracked
 for they shall let in the light.”
 And shine we shall
 through our reversed chasms
 into the world of raised eyebrows
 and pretenders.
 Nothing quite like a lone tree
 that can still stand tall
 in the midst of monotony.
 We know it.
 We’re all just *symbolically* crazy
 like Mr. Rochester’s wife
 locked in her attic upstairs.
 So no reason to raise the alarm
 because I say I saw the clouds eat the moon
 – they would’ve kissed
 but then the wind blew.

Yet still
 you put up the chained link and barbed wire to boot.

But know that whatever way you cage us
 we can always imagine ourselves out
 watching you through the windows
 of our own attics.
 And be warned
 that a flicker becomes flame
 and flame becomes fire
 and fire: conflagration.
 Then maybe one day
 you, too, will see the moon
 nearly kissed by the clouds,
 and the moonlight will be your own,
 shining out
 through reversed chasms.

"The wound is the place where the light enters you."

Heavy, heavy, marching along a path of iron stones
each turned bloody reflecting the setting sun.
You found me as I contemplated the sky
smashing itself against the distant mountains.
Quietly you spoke, kissed the inside of my wrist
showed the tenderness I'd only dared to dream.
You collected my tears and drank them down.
We strolled along some seashore naked, in and out
in and out of the waves, we found ourselves lost together.
Fingers entwined, I gave my thanks to Rumi, as I gave myself to you.

Haiku

like window raindrops
we fall sliding collide then
running together

A Wonder

is what it is
when your narrow torso
carved from obsidian
studded with rough-cut diamonds
fills my vision –
the lack of polish: your beauty
hidden mysteries coating your being.

A Wonder

is what it is
when I write prayers
 – words woven from dewy grass –
that I might one day
run my fingers upon your hills
within your valleys
and yet I turn from your gaze
afraid to listen
to the waterfalls
that originate
from the sun.
Afraid
to trust.

A Wonder

is what it is
when you breathe the sweet air
held by yellow flowers
and I do too
but it's just a coincidence
as I neglect to open my arms
when the time comes to warm us both
and you walk away
while I stand
shivering
trying to see the beauty
in the rising moon
in the haunting calls of the loons.

A Wonder

is what it is
when finally
the sun rises
with no mist or fog or clouds

and dries the dewy tears
of the woven grass;
when our eyes lock
and we each accept
the challenge of the other,
taking us
into the next morning.

Stillness

There is something about a body
when it is dead.
You notice more the curves,
the way the skin stretches
over muscle
over bone.
You notice the wrinkles
now relaxed
worn into the hands, the face:
 on the brow
 – from too much to ponder,
 beside the corners of the mouth
 – from choosing to see joy.
You notice the summation
of day after day
written in that skin,
in the elegance of each finger,
in the tired way the arms rest on the table.

The power in those arms
such strength
only now:
its remarkable absence –
no pulse to vivify the veins
no sweat to glisten in the light
no breath to fill the lungs
 to soften the skin.

There is a stillness
that makes the familiar
seem so terribly foreign.
There is a stillness
that breaks the breath of the living
as – rigidly –
we gaze at frozen grace.
There is a stillness
that cools your blood
as your pulse trembles within.

His Smile

Helplessness rips raw your voice:

"What did I do?

What did I do?

What did I do

for God to take him from me?"

Your frantic eyes search mine

as if I could give you a reason

as if I could tell you why –

I can't.

I shake my head

tears running

I rub your callused hands

crying with you

weighing you upright

hunched

shoulder to shoulder

He sleeps across the hall

your husband

in the dark storage room

wrapped in a blanket

Soon the only roof

under which he will rest

will be one of cold soil

six feet down

he will join the earth

he will hear the call

of God

on Judgment Day

We will remain

blessing his journey

as his essence seeps into the landscape:

his smile

will always await us there –

his smile, and your soul.

Purpose

Longing for the nameless
can't quite pin down *what*
not a certain smell on the air
not a certain slant of light
not even the sky beyond the stars
More so
 the nameless feeling

because truth is beautiful
but so are lies
and some people willingly wear
handcuffs
willingly stand
in the path of a tornado
willingly bury
themselves
beneath the leaves of last year

because guilt can convince us
of all our evils
suffering exists
and all the religions
even the occult
point the blame back on us
so we sin and we sin and we
sin
and we're all just a jumbled collage
of memory and dream
fear and desire
and pain
playing the game
of sunlight and shadow
wondering what we did
for God to make life so sad

so let us sin
and sin and sin
searching for that feeling
searching for that longing
searching
for the nameless

THE POET SPEAKS:

This principle of Ubuntu (known best in connection with South Africa) always grounds my life within itself. It allows me to accept and appreciate my experiences and interactions with others – the light moments, the dark moments, the shades of the gray moments in between. Each one shapes me, erodes some parts to accentuate others. This is how it's supposed to be and that acceptance helps me breathe.

The poems featured here exemplify some of these moments – articulate how our connections to other people can impact us and make us who we are. This will always be the inspiration for my work: a study on what makes us each tick, observations of cause of effect, the way that one word can deepen the furrows in his brow while making the edge of her mouth twitch with some upward momentum. Unified in our differences, each and every one of us is both singular and interconnected.

Beyond the underlying hum of humanity as my inspiration, when I encounter a word or short turn of phrase or the image of an entire world painted with half a sentence, I jot that down. Some things sing more loudly to me than others, and I like to record those notes that ring fortissimo. Sometimes, I use the images they inspire right away in my writing, other times I let them sit and come back to twist the imagery up into a poem later on.

In terms of stylistic influence, I think it depends on the day, like so much. But I will always love the simple observations within the work of Billy Collins. I will always allow myself to be swept up in the blunt power of Allen Ginsberg. And I will always strive to emote beauty like that which radiates from the unflinching words of James Baldwin. So, to sum it up, my stylistic influence is whatever feels right in that moment.

Poetry is important to me, both the reading and the writing, because it is art. Quite simply, it is a bridge – the lines that connect the dots to create the greatest of constellations in our skies. Not everyone may see the exact same pictures up there, but poetry fills my canvas and that makes my world complete. We used to navigate by the stars. Well, in this way we still do.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Chris Biles lives in Washington D.C. and works for the Foreign Agricultural Service. She enjoys playing with the light and the dark, and losing herself in music, anything outside, and of course some words here

and there. Chris has been published in Blueline Magazine, The Laurentian Magazine, Signatures Lit and Arts Mag, Words and Whispers Magazine, The Clementine Zine, FEED Lit Mag, and on SLIPNet. Find her at www.chrisbiles03.com / Instagram: @marks.in.the.sand

ROACH and other poems

By Bruce McCrae

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: "Enter the cockroach. / Noblest savage. Determined scavenger. / A greasy knot in Death's cravat." How can you not love this? "to make waste of all that has come before. / His reign is at hand." I do believe it makes Donne's 'The Flea' seem quite pubescent and pedestrian. Now, 'Shrovetide' is not quite a confession--'Oh Rock Me [Rabelais]' If xenomania is a love for all things foreign, you gotta love McCrae. "A windpipe like an oyster knife." And "Eyebrows like a dripping pan / Undertakings like the ballast of a galleon." If Lewis Carroll had been a psychiatrist he might have declared this poet delightfully unsound: "Who fished the air and drank by imagination." And 'Time Traveller' "The one who falls asleep tomorrow / and wakes up yesterday." "pinching a nostril at the stink of centuries." McCrae's works are mosaics of mischief...(Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS

Roach

Enter the cockroach.
Noblest savage. Determined scavenger.
A greasy knot in Death's cravat.
Survivor. Blackheart.
The devil's plaything.

Storms and wars and deprivation –
the cockroach laughs its little cockroach laugh.
He comes to you, like a sorry excuse.
He waits for you to fail. He scurries home,
dining on stolen crumbs in his oily egress.

Spy in the house of night.
Whisperer of secrets. Godless tormentor.
Eater of radiation.
He tells you, in your beatific slumber,
vital instructions, his final demand –
to make waste of all that has come before.
His reign is at hand.

Shrovetide

Rabelais' Xenomanes describing Shrovetide,
of Sneaking Island, enemy of the Chitterings:

A windpipe like an oyster knife.

An arse-gut like a monk's leathern bottle.

A memory like a scarf.

Tendons like a hawking glove.

Eyebrows like a dripping pan.

Undertakings like the ballast of a galleon.

et cetera et cetera...

And on for another page or two, saying
when he winked it was buttered buns.

When he scratched himself, new proclamations.

When he spoke it was last year's snow.

Who said all apes esteem their young handsomest.

Who fished the air and drank by imagination.

Time Traveller

The one who falls asleep tomorrow
and wakes up yesterday.
Who's made a fortune betting horses
and shaved a minute off the record.
Always alive to the moment.

One book opens another, he declares,
having seen the beginning, having seen the end.
Prince and pauper I have been, he claims,
pinching a nostril at the stink of centuries.
The past is not the past you're told it is.
The past is present in the future.

And what of the future? someone dares to ask.
He shrugs his shoulders and looks away.
What happens happens.

The Poet Speaks: *I rarely speak about the creative process etc. Only when askeddo I even mull it over. My writing reflects what I read, but having written over 15,000 poems I can't recall much of each individual poem. 'Shrovetide' here was written while reading Rabelais, that much is certain. Reading 'Time Traveller', it seems to be perusing the point that regardless of when or where we are, we ARE. 'Roach' is simply subject matter.As for influences, again, what I read, and that is usually nonfiction.Not being a fan of most contemporary poetry I prefer to read poets from the 50s, 60s and 70s, American and Eastern European poets, Nor would I say poetry is 'important' to me. I enjoy writing poems (and songs). That's the long and short of it. Then I send them out in the hope someone might like to read or hear them. And there we are.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Bruce McRae, a Canadian musician currently residing on Salt Spring Island BC, is a multiple Pushcart nominee with over 1,600 poems published internationally in magazines such as Poetry, Rattle and the North American Review. His books are 'The So-Called Sonnets'(Silenced Press); 'An Unbecoming Fit Of Frenzy';(Cawing Crow Press); 'Like As If'(Pski's Porch); 'Hearsay'(The Poet's Haven).

A Tiny Grain of Sand

By Robert Standish

WHY I LIKE IT: Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: *Anne Carson (an award winning poet and Member of the Order of Canada) in conversation with Michael Enright (a journalist and CBC radio host) commented, (I may be paraphrasing.): “Some poetry is banal; some poetry, I don’t understand; and some poetry changes my life.” Standish would fall into that final category for me. ‘A Tiny Grain of Sand’ pours over me like tsunami waves. Robert simply refers to it as a long-ass poem. Who can say? “I dance in nature’s heartbeat” “distance I have drifted wind-assisted” “Not all of us will reach the approaching shore / Some will join the clouds and rain and some the ocean floor” “the winds, our puppeteer” and “What I envy the most is the chance to achieve everything I was meant to be” (Spacing and font size are poet’s own.) HS*

A Tiny Grain of Sand

Look at me, look at me, look at me
A tiny grain of sand on a beach without a sea
Surrounded by millions of billions that look just like me

A desert as far as I can ever see

I’m just a little grain living in an endless sea of sand
I can travel yet I have no feet I have no hands
Am I trapped here without a purpose planned

I move through my world at others command

The breeze has found me and places me at the stone lion’s feet
I can see three Pyramids of might stand proud backed in summer’s heat
The winds swirl me in circles up up up I go I dance in nature’s heartbeat

As I am lifted, a short distance I have drifted wind-assisted new grains are here to meet

There are other grains brought to me by the distant winds hand

They speak of an oasis from this distant land
I now know there is more to the grains more to the sand

Their tales unfold and inspire me the shape of their edges speaks of travels unplanned

Look closer, closer and then closer still
From a distance, we look the same and on the outside always will
I take a place in the sand and a search for a purpose to fulfill

My future hides from me but wants to be part of something bigger would be a thrill

Equality in appearance a moving carpet rebel as one might
Individuals disguised in plain sight
We reflect an outward appearance projected by light

One grain represents the impression of all is our fight

Sands of the Sahara is all I know as home
I've seen unbelievable sights from my place on the ground civilizations grown
I have seen mankind advance suffer loss and disappear and are left alone

Their meetings can be violent blood spills we receive them as the overthrown

A force or reason unseen brought them here they carry mistrust
Their hands create images of their worship made from us
they will disappear over time without care monuments return to dust

We witness their decline and secrets entrust

Water is the only visitor for us here it tickles
thunder and lightning signal their arrival drops form rivers as it trickles
The force of its power tries to shape us carves our prickles

Transformed in our way unlike the idols we surround so simple yet fickle

The invisible hand of wind sweeps, a breeze of fingers it creeps gives us the power to fly
It comes for some but not all this time, refusals denied, our departure without tears, no
time to cry
Some are left to watch them go do they look back do they try

Our land paints a new picture everyday grains turn to dust carried into the sky

Where do they go when they are out of sight
Is the landscape is forever changed as they are taken away day and night
The sand is forever shifting winds grows strong and too hard to fight

I see them carried away without wings I finally take flight

Caught on a wind and carried to the sky the limits of which impossible to show

I have never before seen the size of this mighty lion or this many buildings bellow
The beach beneath me as far as I can see continues to grow

Over the top of the pyramids higher and higher and higher I go

From here I see the desert that for so long I called home
I am on a journey controlled by the wind I feel so alone
There are others here with me I see them and feel strong

I wonder if the ones on the ground will know that I have gone

For the first time ever I look past the clouds
I look down on the birds a river the crowds
Higher still higher I hope for more if I am allowed

For the first time, I see what I was a part of and of that I am proud

Up here I see stars where only astronauts play
The sky has no end I see night and see day
Have others seen these same things was their journey this way

I am scared and excited unable to return so here I must stay

Far below me, the horizon curves the land away rivers feed the oceans
The land moves from beneath me below blue water in my heart warm emotions
Everything to be seen at once but not a part of the grounds commotion

Peace is found isolated in this cloud from dirt to sand to dust all promotions

I visit the places beyond all dreams where raindrops are born and will eventually fall
Each looks alike as we did from the ground a journey their own and a place for them all
Their pathway seems clear, create a cloud to fall as rain or as snow freed by the wind
their downfall

Are they so different from us our desert becomes their sky do we give life as we trade
places below

3000 miles of my journey elapsed
The distance means nothing as endless time has passed
How much longer will the wind that carries us last

A new future awaits and doesn't care about the past

Millions of trillions of us taken, removed from the sand
As long as time began a grain is all that I am lifted above the rest I fly, I can
Like those that surround me, I escape the deserts hand

From a land unforgiving across an ocean of life to deliver myself and be part and more than I am

Not all of us will reach the approaching shore
Some will join the clouds and rain and some the ocean floor
A new beginning to be revealed at this time is what the journey is for

Each and every raindrop every grain of sand overlooked by how were seen yet worth so much more

Creatures of the deep I can see the secret world you keep
I see how the rain brings back what you need as you sleep
I envy the rain as I look at the lakes and rivers deep

Their sacrifice from the sky from delivered to the trees to the grass creep

Up close I Look at the clouds and see where raindrops live
They drift around the world bring change to the weather filter the air like a sieve
The wind pushes them from hiding and fuels the ground below feeds the land and the life it gives

like socks for the sky creating electrical charge allow thunder and lightning to be collaborative

The wind turns gentle and releases its hold on me
A world away from a land that I lived from where my trip began replaced so easily
Seeing things, I could never prepare for, is this what I really lived for I don't believe what I see

From a barren dry desert landscape to an Eden set free

Breeze weakens, the wind release me a new path of life waits to be found
Your horizon of the sand is my past, out of view is my future we separate without a sound
The invisible hand that carries me past the waters of blue weakens as I look around

Sights I see are unimaginable life in forms indescribable abound as I am welcomed to the ground

I take my place, make my new home in their soil
This life and growth never seen in my time, surrounds me unspoiled
The wind my necessary savior, I continue here anew from their toil

From a desolate beginning, I am humble, in the presence of this new tranquility I recoil

I find others have arrived before me, look at what they have done
From such a simple beginning in a sea of sand where life is so hard for everyone
No one would ever think that from a land thought dead so much life could ever come

I bring what little I was to this place because from me life begun

I am a drop of rain, I cannot swim, the confessions I hear as my wind, their wind, the wind, approaches their clouds

I never dreamed I could fly, but here we meet, our differences collide, shared in our deserts of shrouds

To them their home must be just like a desert, each one so alike we are similar opposites our singular journey away from our crowds

Fears face the unknown to be brave changes nothing, this time we are alone it is all that it allows

Our time seems endless, another day promised as the sun rises, we have always had our place here

Appearance of time and travel only show on sharp edges that in youth still appear Worn away from wind, and in time the kiss of the clouds moved by the winds, our puppeteer

Thoughts of what is left behind are memories time will hide, once in this lifetime means in the next they may reappear

I am a grain that has left the sand, will they miss me, did they see me leave

The sights I've seen I could never return to tell the words escape me how could they believe

A tiny part of the land like the trillions of others called sand the transition a greatness to receive

The time spent where you were taken from is only as long as was needed to become the one you would never conceive

I Envy the water the life it gives it cover so much like the land from my past

I envy the wind powering ships that sail the lakes and oceans so vast

I envy the birds as they own every sky they live on the winds and hunt so fast

I envy the clouds I envy the trees I envy the worlds true creations I'll never surpass

A mere speck of dirt a grain of sand my value means little after all I see

Embarrassed by my insignificance lost with my idea of my identity

I am braver now my fears are gone I have gone so far I can stand alone I face my destiny

What I envy the most is the chance to achieve everything I was meant to be

THE POET SPEAKS:

The Tiny Grain of Sand; The simplicity of a grain of sand is so easily overlooked and devalued as it remains under our feet. A grain of sand is a building block that can be a part of something special, something great, something as an individual it could never be; and at the same time that greater thing could not exist without each grain. A grain of sand is controlled by the world around it and may have several journeys before its final destination. We are much like that and can exist in much the same way.

The simple beauty of the wind introducing a grain of sand to a world it may never know and see from a vantage point though only accessible to rain. Outside forces show the grain that although they may not be exactly the same as every grain of sand, their journey is so similar. Much like our life is, we are not all the same but have the same opportunity to become something greater than ourselves as the greater thing requires all of us inclusively. The inspiration of the poem came to me as I tried to decide how I would tell a child about life and death and accepting change is a part of every journey. At the same time to show them how even the smallest most unassuming thing on earth can live to take part in something as great as a rain forest and heal an entire planet.

As I write I find that my style and influences are not driven by the works of others as much as they are what I am compelled to do in way of thought. I am not a follower of any specific writers, rather I find my experience, environment and the inspiration in the pain of music and comedy offers me an abundance of appreciation and inspiration. I appreciate others for what they have to bring to what I can write and can share an experience with them in that way. I am grateful to anyone that would take the time to read this heart felt poem.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Robert Standish is an aspiring writer and devoted father of three. After several years in the film and television industry in Canada, he has had the chance to meet some amazing people, travel and experience things, not for normal consumption. As a camera assistant and operator he has been in the line of fire on many occasions and inside explosions and crashes, just to name a few incredible opportunities. 'Chalk Outline These Thoughts 1 and 2' and a fiction novel 'The Secrets Men Keep', most recently the creator of a collection of poetry entitled 'The Passion Hidden Within'. (*Amazon and Kindle*) I have found most recent success with three poems published on Terror House Magazine and soon a short fiction story will be published in

February, it is my hope to extend and expand my exposure and develop as many relationships as I can. Now transitioning into a creative writer who has self-published four works and counting, Robert is setting his sights on the next project. His story **IF** appeared in Issue 2.

Authored by
R. William Standish
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3 (three) Poems

By Tzy Jiun Tan

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: Tzy Jiun Tan is a profound paradox of the first order, I adore her work. She writes beautifully. I confess I quote my favourite lines to pique your interest. It is not necessary here but still irresistible. "The infant came gushing in two pumps, screaming like a power generator." How's this to delight perversities of all natures: "my work-weary lover / tends to the sighing / mushrooms," Sounds like secret-agent-code doesn't it? And the response from his mirror counterpart confirming his identity "my linen skirt flutters / against my blown glass womb." If I had to choose, her last work might be my most favoured: ' uncharted territory' is a masterpiece "...her eyes dead like frozen peas."*

No man's land

Modern women rely too much on doctors, my grandmother said. In her time, women birthed in their homes. She was scrubbing bedsheets against the washboard when the contractions started. Labour was a woman's affair, so she sent her husband out with a long list of groceries. Her handwriting listed the items at random. Like a map, the list would bring him from a grocery store from the north side of the town to a hardware shop down south. The family bicycle had broken down. He would be on foot for a long time. My hailstorm of a grandmother boiled water, sharpened the scissors, and bit down a rag. The infant came gushing in two pumps, screaming like

a power generator. When the father came home complaining about the heat, he found his fresh son cooing in the crib, his wife tilling the soil under the jackfruit tree.

kitchen, 1968

my work-weary lover

tends to the sighing

mushrooms,

whose umber canopies ripen

in his buttery hands,

still moist from bark.

rising, rising, to

grace. it has been two weeks, since

the accident at a worksite

declared ten dead, three injured,

twenty-five illegal,

twenty thousand on strike.

the city halted to pluck

helicopters

out of the sky.

my linen skirt flutters

against my blown glass womb.

I shatter a plate.

third time this week.

my egg yolk lover
quivers with laugh,
grabs my wrist
till it turns pale
against the dusk.

tomorrow, we will
wake to the purple sun
splashed all over the barricades.
we will walk the canals that stink
sweetly of buoyant corpses.
we will hot wire our veins
and chase after blue trails
lined with smoke.

I kiss his pulsing neck. say,

watch this prised light,

it holds time.

regard these soap-soaked hands,

they stir a boiling pot.

*eat this soup,
for we march at daybreak.*

unchartered territory

The television screen showed herds of cattle throwing themselves into ovens. The meat rolled out on trays in the shape of fists. Mother was hanging paper plates on the clothesline. I was eating my steak when my friend called. She got the job at the oil and gas station, said I should meet her at the new vegan restaurant overlooking some warehouses. I took the train, chewed on my lip the whole time. The joint was tiny, barely holding its dollhouse-sized chairs and waiters. *You have been eating swell*, my friend remarked, her eyes dead like frozen peas. She ordered broccoli and I chose a leg. After my fifth vegan, everyone had scattered like marbles. I ate and ate, grew to be able to touch the tip of the state building in one arm span. I broke off the east coast, floated away with little regret. By the seventh day, I was declared a continent, hailed an environmental miracle. I called and called for mother, found her reincarnated as the moon, marionetting my waters.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I have the attention span of a puppy. It's hard to find stuff to read that stays. Poetry that has inspired me are ones bubbling with surprises at every turn: ones that pivot to another world, ones that jump scales, ones that swivels back in the end and jabs you in your funny bone... I have found great joy in reading Bob Hicok, Fernando Pessoa, and Wislawa Szymborska. I write with the assumption that I will need to captivate my*

audience with images in the same way, perhaps with less finesse, but with all my tender loving care nonetheless.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Tan Tzy Jiun is a writer based in Malaysia and Austria. She graduated from New York University Abu Dhabi with a BA in History, and is currently pursuing an MA in Vienna. She is an embroidery enthusiast, photographer, and script writer.

5 (five) Poems

By Hikari Leilani Miya

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry editor Hezekiah writes... Hikari Miya is nothing but white hot, black art and gray matter. I admit I was tripping over her at first but once I started following the footprints I was learning a new dance step. This poet is empyrean out there: "I let literature crack / my agate-rusted mind," "Eb transmogrifies into D#" ("Serves me right for not being musical.") 'zero-sugar vitamin water fuel' has got to be at least as manic as you can imagine. And on, "dreamt last night I was sinking into mud like chocolate / cake batter, viscous yet lumpy with flour and innocence" Her words mix, mingle and meld with a heresy all her own: "and suddenly the naked trapeze of / adjectives on the page is asking me / for worker's compensation..." And things only get curiouser and curiouser...(Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS*

please tell the dog to stop screaming

I let literature crack
my agate-rusted mind
resinous with hydroxyzine
& the wonders of men-
struation. hey shiba inu
with the vanilla frosty
round eyebrows, wanna
treat? here's one for you:
one day that hot dog
costume will become
unstitched & fuzzy-frayed,
so we'll give it to goodwill's
dumpster behind the home-
less tents. I pull a black
hair out from the spine
of charles dickens, lay
back & let the question
of *more more more*
ping around my stained
stones like hard plastic
mallets against the highest
Eb of a dented xylophone. I
go over my shelf of sealants:
two-hour naps, yellowing bam-
boo plant, purple hat from
a philadelphia art museum.
Eb transmogrifies into D# &
I think about humming swan
lake as I stack horizontally more
books I'll definitely read someday.

zero-sugar vitamin water fuel

it's true that I'm a clickity-clackity loud-mouthed typist,
tortilla chip salted fingertips tapping clumsily at silicone key covers
like those thick blank gummy orange ones from elementary computer class
so we wouldn't peek at the letters but I cheated sometimes and peeled it back
to find the x or z because I didn't do so well on those typing lessons

but now I'm glad I can type while just staring at words appearing on my screen,
I will them to be and there they are, just abort and re-birth
the red-underlined until they're able to ink themselves up straight
across the page and they're no longer black words but sharp blue mountains and
dun white goats teetering sure-footedly across sheer shale cliff faces spackled
with rough greens digested into intestine churned mush we forget about
until it mutates into fly-covered crap

and then the words hum and buzz, shake and soft-shoe in a-line color-block dresses
and then I get a reality migraine and all I'm making is annoying noise so I drown it out
and then there's sonata in C# minor flowing violet over all gray rain ticking
minutes away into slop and soon my stream of curiosity and verbose interest dull into
nothing left to type but the softness of the silence surrounding the slumps of songs

blooming in the mud

beneath peach stained swollen bellies
of clouds with no right to be so massively
painted in white and light and unfallen rain

I lean over the edge of my balcony, consider
the divine breath of air swishing my black bangs
to the left, far left, as if they'd leave my face

fly like V-shaped ravens made of threads.
regret wracks my tired mind, splits it like a bolt
of blue-white lightning kissing a supple almond tree.

ten whole months wasted on a supercilious smile,
ten whole months of hearing lies like saltwater spouting
from a whale's sleek vulnerable blowhole, nightmares

cut from the fabric of trauma and his underwear
green with Christmas lights and an early august afternoon
at the edge of a yawning rocky gorge, all of it is just

about to be over, like how he said to the panel
he ended us forever when it was really both
of us torn apart at the bloody seams

frayed by the exhaustion of our mistakes,
something I mistook for love. *these feelings
are normal for complainants going through*

this process, but talk with your therapist
and the divine beckons me over the green-rimmed
edge once again, only on the opposite coast

onto sidewalk and asphalt where there's
a tiny farmer's market bustling every Saturday
and people treading on my black blood assured

everything is organic. will there still be no goodbye?
will I still just be another picture saved in his google drive,
a prize of loss and shame, a thing no longer tolerated

because trauma is more than just a little fly buzzing past.
I dreamt last night I was sinking into mud like chocolate

cake batter, viscous yet lumpy with flour and innocence

untouched by heat's sleepy suffocating intensity,
my hands scrabbling through that frightening enigma
for something not green but crying, blooming in the mud.

it's the sky's fault

hey, is it still important that the child within me bites her lip at bruising purples of impending night? hey, is it still important for me to feel that exhilarating blush while I glare knives at my opponent calling me *bitch* for dealing lethal damage in a children's card game? hey, is it still important that I take comfort in the plush rainbow of adorable stuffed animals strewn across my bed, soft ears and solid black eyes stitched tight and spotless, X's as small butts, toothless smiles reflecting light in these bizarrely lukewarm dreams of mine?

I'll admit that some days I just write poems because I didn't write one the day before, and suddenly the naked trapeze of adjectives on the page is asking me for worker's compensation and the right to unionize. they don't seem to understand my fears no matter what type of tea I give them, but they won't follow me on twitter or accept my challenges for a friendly duel. so I give them my giant squishy dragon and some water for their house-plants. they stop complaining about fleas in their beds, and my eyes water as the sky glazes over like a ripe plum.

I thought about writing boys in this poem

but then I considered brown overweight single mothers
selling dollar-fifty churros at the monday sale

pastel parakeets crammed in white barred cages
piles of hamsters and baby bunnies huddled like stones

my elementary school teacher with the summer haze
hiding in her hair even in december fog as we called her ms

for spelling bee prep I taught her how to spell *hypochondriac*
though we didn't know what it meant I got a second place trophy

the police officer with a picture in her cap turned title ix investigator
who went from walking next to me strapped on a yellow stretcher

to asking me where exactly [redacted] made me
touch [redacted] and when and what we were wearing

I thought about my grandmother and how she remembers
the pink buttons on her dress they day she was taken

to jerome, arkansas living behind desert rusted barbed wire
while her mother rubbed and rubbed pieces of wood smooth

and my coworkers the summer after my freshman year
sweating in the catering dish washing room and the heat

of the machines was so intense it melted transparent plastic
gloves to our soft fingers as we stomached disgust at industrial

trash bins filled with cooked pasta, starched navy blue suits
snapping their fingers like we were stiff toy dogs

our boss keeping us right until 3am sitting pink-tied at the computer
as we shuffled around bins and baskets and armies of silverware

and there is so much more unspoken and unremembered
women that can fill books and billboards and murals

women that sleep and wake, live and die the lesser half
of a snowy dichotomy that threatens to melt us to our hips

with disgust of ourselves and our sex and our basic organs

and I realized there is no room for anything else in this poem

THE POET SPEAKS: *All of the poems have been inspired by different tarot cards in the standard Rider-Waite deck. My completed manuscript containing one poem for every tarot card, All the Beauty of the World, will hopefully see publication within the coming year. I find inspiration through all forms of art, nature, and my Japanese/Filipino American heritage.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Hikari Leilani Miya is a Japanese Filipina American, 2019 Cornell University English major graduate, and a current poetry MFA candidate at the University of San Francisco who identifies with the LGBTQ community. She is the assistant poetry editor for USFCA's literary magazine, Invisible City (formerly Switchback). She has one previous poetry publication (under Kari Miya) in Cornell's Writer's Bloc, and her poetry has appeared in the Johnson Art Museum at Cornell University. She currently lives with her two snakes and visually impaired cat, but has a menagerie of other pets at home in the Central Valley of California. She is a pianist, percussionist, and music arranger, as well as a competitive card game player.

MIDNIGHT MESSIAH

By Joey Scarfone

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry editor Hezekiah writes...Who can resist Joey Scarfone, except perhaps himself? It is the gift a cynic both gives and receives. Still, 'Midnight Messiah' astounds us! "you're not the first to take this cruise / and you sure won't be the last / but just for now he'll show you how / it'll really be a gas" He is a runner alright, but I'm not sure if it is to or fro. His words stick in our heads as well. What if Eeryore was to find his tale too...? (Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS*

Senior editor Charles writes... Joey writes outside the box, outside the Matrix. His material is raw experience and his poetry is not so much the refinement of it, but a head on collision where truths are wrenched from something wet and dangerous. Sleeping dogs do not lie in the muse of this emerging voice, shouting from the street. The y awaken as Lassie, as Cerebus.

MIDNIGHT MESSIAH

midnight messiah working 'till dawn
the sun's comin' up
and the drugs are comin' on

he'll take you wherever your heart desires
next stop the promised land
close your eyes let it be a surprise
and he does it all with a wave of his hand

you're not the first to take this cruise
and you sure won't be the last
but just for now he'll show you how
it'll really be a gas

midnight messiah ahead of his time
living up to his name

for a nominal fee he'll set you free
 and you'll never be the same
 so hold on tight cause it's a bumpy flight
 but don't worry....he's never crashed
 you're doin' just fine
 have a glass of wine
 do you wanna' smoke some hash

behold, he says, the rising sun
 as he slows the limo down
 i know every corner and all night bar
 in this godforsaken town

i've seen it all and now it's time
 to show it all to you
 you've paid me well and i can tell
 your journey's almost through

here's my card if you ever want
 to take another ride
 the midnight messiah is always here
 and happy to oblige

midnight messiah working 'till dawn
 makin' your dreams come true
 it's been a gas, you went first class
 and it's been a pleasure knowin' you

THE POET SPEAKS...*A lot of my poetry is cynical. I find cynicism is a survival tool. I am not into politics in any way and I find I can throw darts at certain situations without hurting anyone and at the same time I'm venting some of my own frustration. Sometimes words just stick in my head. That was the case with Midnight Messiah. I wrote the title down and it took several days for the poem to gell. I see this as a short script for a comic....midnight messiah is the name of a limo service. The guy picks up clients at midnight, gets them wasted, drives them around a big city like New York and then drops them off at their hotel at sunrise. A lot of my poetry is dark. That's also a survival tool, especially in dark times like these.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Joey Scarfone lives in Victoria, BC where he owned Lazy Joe's Vinyl Emporium—a store devoted to classic vinyl. He devotes some of his time and all of his interest to poetry and music.

POSSUM TO THE FLEAS and other poems...

By Shelby Stephenson

To keep the author's dedicated spacing, Hezekiah's note appears after the poems. Eds.

POSSUM TO THE FLEAS

The dulled death I faked
Even as the automobile sacked
My babes clinging to my back.
Then I survived my rescuer

Who stopped in the road to pick
Me up on her way down to the Vet,
The Volvo's space in that cargo
A claustrophobia of rubbish.

I inhaled the rubber in the tire
Spare in its hovel; the battery-charger's
Acid in my nostrils, too,
And an avocado which escaped

A Food Lion plastic bag.

The worst, though, was to lose that joy,

Memorable as song-like poems

I crooned on my way to the moon.

Virginity crawled on into the usual.

When you fleas ascended as she

Lifted the lid, I expired in a whoosh,

My last wish – remember my name: Marsupial.

MEMORY

Try lingerie rather than linguistics.

Or if you are looking for Truth, a climax works,

Though the letters prompt me to stop

Where Level Cross keeps Randolph County

Safe for a racecar (racecar).

I'm not palindroming anything

I know better than pop, for I am helpless

As a kitten on a spree, a free agent

Of sorts, crying for someone to put my socks away

In a drawer in a bureau I got

At St. Vincent de Paul decades ago,

An eight-drawer, certainly an antique,

For it's dressed with wheels and pizzazz!

Let the mules go free! Sure, they'll find themselves.

The reins shall go limp, the manes flow,

The wind shape music in the breaking wind.

Notice I am cautious of saying, "fart," for it jumps

The lines and makes a meadow for the smell like camphor

Or some pitch tarring the mindful forest

Full of mime-fields and dirty shoes.

There is no ambiguity here, no guide

To take you home or poet to hum

A song, maybe smell a scene or three,

Though once, when I was a lad,

My race filled with white parts of chicken manures.

Arrivederci: I have seen that yard before.

Your map is good as mine: Pam is a nice dubiety.

She does not turn redder when she solos as Pamela.

NORTH AMERICA'S ONLY NATIVE MARSUPIAL

The revelation of a pouch soothes humankind.

The babies snuggle like grubs and sniff

Like furry puppies to secure their nuzzles,

Eyes wide with clairvoyance.

Who started the cry that Opossum's ugly?

Her fifty-two teats come always ready.

Too much contemplation induces a lack

Of respect for the peaceful elemental.

The true view is the practical other,

Once you see the little ones ride their mother's back.

THE MAN SEEKING WATER LETS THE WATER-WITCHER HOLD THE VINE

1

"I just hold this twig in air,
Out from me, like this, over immensity –
This Y-shaped rod in the whole world's door?
I call it doodle-bugging; it's my cup of tea.
I am a water-finding champion, the Bird
Of The Water-Witch – and I do not fail to be heard.

"Now a divining rod's my way: my wall
Is cluttered with what pseudo-science empties in lens
To make me look funny: well, my daughter Melissa is a jewel,
A real water-witch: she uses any piece of lumber
She finds, an L-shape, her favorite; she holds it in her hands:
And I have seen that stick wobble all around.

"It's got to be a gift from on high,
This vining-rod business, sort of like catching a musky through the ice,
Or taking a bear ice-fishing and kicking his main artery
To bring the warmth on in such a place,

Plus seeing the look on my daughter's face when none
 Other than a red-faced boy shows up with a mouthful of worms as solution.

"Son, I say, What's happening to you?

You know what he says? *Mister, like I say: you've got to keep your worms warm.*

Oh how me and Melissa make water-witching new

As that so the ground yonder might prompt

People to gather and heave sighs for the Word.

We court creation in a fallen world."

2

So I watched Charles; that was his name. He stood

With his daughter, as if Nature was all

Enraptured with just themselves, bone and blood

Crawling in their bodies to make the twig a self.

I said to myself: what foolery: still

I could not explain the ritual of the father and child

Doing this hand-number with a vine and making it talk,

The standers there rubbing their chins and frowningly

Subconsciously shuffling their shoes in the sand in quick

Respite harkening back to the first baby's cry,

A mess of senses focusing in the dark,

Awkward worlds, shuddering, fallen.

PANTOUM FOR OLIVER

When I think of Oliver, I think of Listerine,
A mouth void of any stink which might last
Through the trials he put us through – yikes!
For there was always more.

A mouth void of any stink which might last
The usual flop-down-anywhere basset,
For there was always more
For a dog that wanted to be king.

The usual flop-down-anywhere basset
Was not what to expect from Oliver's ramifications
For a dog that wanted to be king.
A dog-trainer who needed lithium

Was not what to expect from Oliver's ramifications.
He wanted to be leader of the pack and that is why,
Yes, a dog-trainer who needed lithium
Recommended a choke-chain for Oliver, outright.

He wanted to be leader of the pack and that is why
I gave him to the Moore County Hounds: the trainer was not lying.

Recommended a choke-chain for Oliver, outright,
As he was not the image of some picture-perfect Rover.

I gave him to the Moore County Hounds: the trainer was not lying!
Some blunt responses those hounds moiled to rave
As he was not the image of some picture-perfect Rover,
For the rabbit-hunters wanted devotion.

Some blunt responses those hounds moiled to rave:
When I think of Oliver, I think of Listerine,
For the rabbit-hunters wanted devotion
Through the trials he put us through – yikes!

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes... We do not routinely receive pieces from the POV of a possum, but nor do we get a lot of Laureates. How pleased can we be when a dusting of fleas fines themselves a top dog? It is a pleasure to meet a modest man of great talents through his works on the page. (I or we had intended to showcase him two issues ago, but my defiling system leaves much to be desired.) Here he is now. I get the impression that Stephenson likes to cultivate scholarly contemplations along with stock colloquialisms which I find most engaging. A knight-errant and anointed court jester— where tongue meets cheek: POSSUM TO THE FLEAS relates a Volvo an avocado and a marsupial as one with the universe; or, in the least, it threads a delightful stereotyping. In MEMORY, “Try lingerie rather than linguistics. / Or if you are looking for Truth, a climax works,” “Palindroming” “racecar[s].” “The reins shall go limp, the manes flow.” ...Stephenson is “A mess of senses focusing in the dark,” “The usual flop-down-anywhere basset,... For a dog that wanted to be king,” ...we fleas are grateful.

THE POET SPEAKS...*When I was a boy dogs were as much a part of my life as fleas. We had 35 dogs. My father was a foxhunter.*

We had a '37 3/4 ton Ford pickup. It was the farm-vehicle. It also was fixed to haul our foxhounds.

I wish I had known Slobbermouth, a dog (I can hear my father say) who could outrun the word of God with the Bible tied to his tail.

Some of the dogs of the 50's (when I was a boy--I was born in 1938) were named for movie-stars:

Bette, for Bette Davis; Bing (for Crosby); Bob (for Bing's brother Bob); Ginger (for Rogers) and on and on.

One was named Sing. She was a yarddog. The foxhounds were in what we called a dog-yard, fenced in: my father bought dogfood by the half-ton. We would dip the dogs in a barrel filled with a mixture to kill fleas and ticks.

I loved Sing. Somehow she got her back broke. I can see my older brother Paul

take the .22 rifle and shoot her out of her misery. My father stood in the window in the house and looked the other way.

He asked Paul to put her out of her misery.

What I am trying to say is that I grew up with dogs.

Butler was a foxdog. He could run the fox during the day

And at night in the fall we would go possum-hunting. Butler would not go off track until he treed the possum.

I did not know then that the possum was North America's only native marsupial. Possums are friendlier than cats. They eat acres of fleas. A mother can carry up to 22 baby possums on her back.

Possums are cleaner than cats too. I have a friend who takes her possum to church.

The water-witcher matter? I saw that: Charles and his daughter found water (my brother wanted to have a well dug)

with a twig. I saw it move. Tremble. The twig

was just a stick for me. I cannot explain what I saw. The poem maybe says it better than I try to in prose.

Oh the poem for Oliver. Oliver was a Basset my wife and I bought when he was a puppy. He was territorial. And our vet said he could not understand that, saying Bassets lie around in the way. Slower than molasses he said.

My wife and I gave Oliver to a group of hunters who hunted the rabbit. I did not want him to nip my mother's ankles anymore when she walked by him lying on his Bean bag.

I have a friend, the actress Rosemary Harris, who loves animals. She told me this story after a reading I did from my book Possum. She said she was driving her Volvo and she saw a possum on the road. The possum had been hit by a car. She stopped and got the possum, put it in her trunk, she said, and rushed to the vet, stopped her car, lifted the lid, and "Fleas, Shelby, were ascending; my possum had expired."

I can see that now, realizing that fleas will not live on anything dead.

So I try to make all the things of the past sing. I realized years ago that I could not be born in a museum. My childhood: mules until the seventh grade; hogs in the pen and pasture (my most vivid memory is the yearly hogkilling); chickens in the yard (I believe Buff Orpington is a two-word poem).

And poems--Art--salvaged my life: there were two books in the house I was born in. I restored it. It sits in the hedge behind this one I am typing this to you. My family built this ranch brickhouse in spring of 1952. I can hear my mother say, "Paul, you spend more money on those dogs than you do on your family." My father right away had the timber cut in the woods and had this brickhouse built. My memories, the ones which settle and will not leave me, live in the old house. The yard was dirt. (This was before lawns.) The dogs were in the pen, mostly. And that's sort of the way it was -- and is..

AUTHOR'S BIO: Shelby Stephenson served as Poet Laureate of North Carolina from 2015-2018. Recent books: *Family Matters: Homage to July, the Slave Girl* (Bellday Books), the Bellday Prize; *Slavery and Freedom on Paul's Hill* (Press 53). Recipient of the Distinguished Alumnus Achievement Award, English Department, University of Wisconsin-Madison, he is Professor Emeritus, University of North Carolina-Pembroke, serving as editor of *Pembroke Magazine* from 1979 until his retirement in 2010. He lives at the homeplace on Paul's Hill, where he was born, near McGee's Crossroads, North Carolina, about ten miles northwest of Benson.

Mouth Pain Lays with Me and other poems...

By James Croal Jackson

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes... Who? Other than a poet, would write about a toothache rather than have it fixed? Jackson is a dear soul. I only know this because he keeps resubmitting his work; but he remains as good or better than most taken on the fly...still he persists, and a fine candidate for a guest-guessed-ghost poet editor. 'Surry down to [his] stoned soul picnic' It's Jackson...I only write in two dimensions—paper and print... But he doesn't... "charred remnants / your ghosts live" Don't dare to miss 'Love in the Time of Snapchat' or 'Autumn' either...(Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS

Mouth Pain Lays with Me

all night
 single cell
 call vibration
 wrapped
 under sheet
 with me
 nightlong
 my mouth
 voiceless
 seasick sleep
 that follows
 me into
 dreams
 I drink Coke
 with pizza
 the bed
 swallows me
 but I'd eat
 the bed
 if I could

California Fires

the meteor
from within

the confines of
your neighborhood

charred remnants
your ghosts live

here
in the ashes

the smoky streets
a gasp of oxygen

thickening

Love in the Time of Snapchat

Take a screenshot
(we're temporary).

Name the ghost
our stains.
Snap a story for others
to forget.

When we filter
who we become
we love the fantasy.

Autumn

unsure
of the horizon:

dusk-dried grapes, wine
flowing over cold shores.

Perhaps we *trust fall*:
bodies unsure of gravity,

landing in arms
constructed mirrors.

Dawn's waking
is the rite—

summer turns
so restless in sleep.

Elizabeth Fraser

I see men being men on the road to lovemaking
you left me because you're not news every time
in the same time that's how I am when I desire
no one is too *thinky*
I am still a junky for it I am violin aloneness
I spin I spin to you
you smoosh my love when we are there at the same time

when how it is is the same every time

this one to know us is true

love is meant to be thinking

to know how to flower greater things across the ocean

leaves so white you can't have me my eyes still have you

this is the tress to thread

love being a river and being with no name

when you're with me inside me

tubes sucking the dream of myself

I hate that I still have me

First Date Triptych

1.

by the window
your headlights
in the driveway

2.

behind
the blinds

3.

from
inside
this
blanket

June 19, 2019 – Shadyside

You sit on a bench on Walnut Street
texting with a boomerang smile the wine

glasses around you cycling out strangers
and I want to ask you for a drink you ask

about my bags of food I'm bringing back
to work and the sky is cerulean your voice

in the cacophony of cars starting stopping
the crowd around us whispering midday

in the sunshine I want to walk free without
work I'd say the first bite this world is yours

Cat Endorphins

Already I am much too careful about the state
of Kingsford's joy when I rub his belly in bed.

He purrs, an engine idling midwinter. I do
not want him to run out of endorphins–

not expecting you to leave in December
I rushed to the driveway where you had bags

in the trunk. I have come to miss the footsteps
that used to populate the hours of our days

together. So I pet him now to make him
happy, delay our mutual depression.

Ladder

Asking where
the ladder led
was stupid
you said up
to the roof
and of course

it does
I guess I'm
saying we both
work at Panera
and when
thinking about
my prospects
they are not high
because if I were
to grab a rung
and lift myself up
I would probably
fall but if I didn't
the locked door
at the top means
I'd struggle for an
unspectacular view

8/31/18

at the birthday party you and I smush
the cake, pressed up against each other,
open the freezer to spell more vodka

we are the bugs amongst the back
patio chattering, celebrating an
inauthenticity— I am new to the city

and, love, I am

THE POET SPEAKS: *I am a little obsessed with the retention of memories. Poetry, for me, serves in the way journaling used to: personal accounts of my life that will always somehow be meaningful for me, and depictions of my life in that moment. In that way, my poems are my skin: flecks of remembrance and perception that have floated off into the river, landing— hopefully— on someone else's shore.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: James Croal Jackson (he/him) is a Filipino-American poet. He has a chapbook, *The Frayed Edge of Memory* (Writing Knights Press, 2017), and poems in *DASH*, *Capsule Stories*, and *Ghost City Review*. He edits *The Mantle Poetry* (themantlepoetry.com). Currently, he works in film production in Pittsburgh, PA. (jimjakk.com)

Shore Duty; The Kid

By Nathan Porceng

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes... Here are two wonderful case studies from Nathan Porceng's 'Practical Guide to Cynical Living.' Why would anyone trouble to mince words when they could compose something not unlike **Shore Duty**? A most novel way of nulling and muffling a noisy neighbor (unfortunately one would have to be more musical than I). For me, it circles around the tight little tercet: "She moans as if / she's proving a / point," just before it exits out of orbit. The second, **The Kid**, is a very poignant slant on a life in the Service; it is a most genuinely touching account in spite of the scoffs surrounding the sneers. "He'll put a ring / on the first hand / that touches his / cock..." Who doesn't love sailor talk? (Spacing and font size are poet's own.)*

Shore Duty

3 AM on the swing shift,
 alone in my apartment
 while my neighbor
 fucks loudly.

Happens every night
 same time
 on this rotation.

I never hear
 her partner,
 but no one

masturbates
that intensely.

She moans as if
she's proving a
point.

I can't tell
if it's for
her partner
or her own
sake.

Tired,
a bit bitter,
and watching
television,
I grow sick
of her exorbitant
ecstasy.

In lieu of a noise complaint,
I finger my guitar
and sing a few bars.

"SOOOOO SALLY CAN WAAAAIIIIIT!!!!!"

The moaning stops.

I fall asleep
satisfied.

The Kid

Showed up today.

Midwestern, like

so many others,

he speaks

ambling from

word to word.

He's anxious.

He's excited.

He's never seen the ocean.

His uniform is neatly pressed.

He still believes the chiefs.

He still respects officers.

He has plans,

but so do we.

He'll bust his ass.

He'll qualify early.

He'll make third

then second class.

He'll put a ring

on the first hand

that touches his

cock. They'll

have two
good years,
then she'll break him.

He'll drink.

His work will slip.

He'll fall asleep on watch.

He'll smash up his car.

Third class again,

he'll think of

getting out, but

he can't

let go

of the

familiar.

He'll bounce

boat to boat,

port to port,

until he hits

his twenty.

He'll marry again.

He'll have two kids.

At thirty nine,

he'll be ancient

for a father.

Diesel fumes and

Evan Williams
will have long
deadened his eyes
and withered
his tongue.

Knowing little else,
he'll work at
the shipyard,
building new boats
for new kids to
claim his legacy.

His pension will be
a check he wastes.
American Legion stories,
and Veterans Day
honors at his
grandkids' schools.
He'll be loved
by a few,
and average
in every
respect.

An American flag
will drape his
coffin,

and the back
of his tombstone
will read,

“Here lies a United States Sailor.”

THE POET SPEAKS... *Poetry is deceptively honest. It's desperate. It's essential. It's the final uncorrupted art form. It's personal and universal. I love playing in bar bands. Oftentimes the best part isn't even performing. It's listening to the other acts. No one does it for the money, because there isn't any. None of us are trying to get famous. We don't have the looks for it. We play only to be heard, to connect. Picking up Hughes, Bukowski, Eliot or Rich, I sense the same desire. Poets write because they need to. They need to express themselves, to share their experiences, even if no one is listening. I got into poetry in earnest while stationed aboard a submarine. I had no guitar to play or venue to attend. All I had was a notebook and a chewed-up pen, so I wrote.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Nathan Porceng is a Washington based poet, songwriter, and naval officer. As part of the band Bridge Out, he won first place at the 2014 Northeastern Songwriter Festival in Brookfield, CT. He enjoys the music of Joe Strummer and the words of Charles Bukowski.

back to go and other poems

by RC deWinter

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: I think Ms. deWinter is the cat's whiskers. With my luck she is likely an ailurophobe—well lose some win some—but she is witty, wise and winsome. There is nothing quite like a cynic suffering from limerence and can describe the symptoms so delightfully succinctly. (But then again neither do chose and choose and lose and loose follow the same rules in spell-casting .) I'll get you started: "thin skin bleeds as i scrape off / impastoed daydreams" And to think it is rumored that she paints and sings as beautifully as she writes: "the siren song of love lures me every time / as sure as sin i run panting toward it" Among others, don't miss ' tongue and groove' or 'Scouting' either. I'll give you some privacy...she is also quite a-musing. (Spacing and font size are poet's own.)

back to go

thin skin bleeds as i scrape off
 impastoed daydreams
 slathered on in the madness of desire

digging a fingernail under each thread
 i unravel embroidered wishes
 soft silk unloops sliding out soundless

tunneled scarlet holes close
 with almost silent sighs
 leaving the barest trace of pattern

applying reality's stringent antiseptic
 i wince as i sponge away red rivulets
 wondering if there will be scars

life wraps me in its unemotional embrace as
 denuded of design i breathe in deep
 breathe out slow step off go

love and roses

i paint a lot of roses and i don't know why
they're not even my favorite flower
but sure as sin every few weeks
there's another rose on the easel
glowing more beautifully than in life

what care i lavish on them
each brushstroke as perfect as i can make it
and every time i finish i tell myself
this is the last one
i'm not painting another rose

maybe it's the symbolism that snags me
into doing what i say i won't
roses love love roses roses love
the universal symbol of the infinite variety
of that treacherous emotion

and just as with the painting
the siren song of love lures me every time
as sure as sin i run panting toward it
and every time it proves a myth
i tell myself that's it - never again

who am i kidding - i'm a sucker for myth
no matter how many the times or ways
my heart's bloodied on those rocks
like a masochistic homing pigeon wielding a paintbrush
i fly back to love and roses

tongue and groove

each slide of lips across flesh
lights another small bonfire
to be quenched by your talented tongue

a stray breeze tugs curtain
from open window
nuclear gold explodes
light hits eyes
another day ripped from the future
reality's scorched earth

burnt black and blinking
i rise from sleep's trench and start my descent
an unwilling conscript
in an army of survivors
wishing i could let go the handrail
and miss a step or three

the animal instinct for survival
overcomes the striatum dance
i'm in the midday kitchen
standing stiff in my straitjacket of skin
an automaton making coffee
you look like a nun says my mother

i permit a grim smile during
the sacrament of caffeine as
your sandpaper tongue slides across my soul

Math Anxiety

I've done the
arithmetic once,
twice, three times,
every day.
Isn't three supposed to be
the charm, the magic?
Add. Subtract.
Multiply. Divide.
Start over.
Nothing adds
up – there's no correct answer.
Frustration rises.
Pencil points
break. Erasure holes
blossom. Tears
blur numbers
into useless squiggles of
graphite, ashes of
sabotage,
a conspiracy
of silence.
In the bleak
dungeon of my mind stands the
hangman, laughing as
he twirls his
hemp in smooth circles:
the wrong kind,
not fit for
smoking. I snap the pencil;
I am done
with mathematics.
Better the
swift sharp blade
of the guillotine than the
rope's deathdance dangle.

Scouting

To break up a day full of not much
I sit by the window gazing out at the universe of men.

Some of them, trying for debonair, are armed with
unimaginative bouquets of hothouse flowers,
stiff and scentless. Bundled in layers of bright tissue
tied with gaudy ribbon chosen by a clerk who doesn't care.

Others – aiming for casual – the Come-As-You-Ares,
carry brown paper bags of some middling liquor.
Not too cheap. Not too highbrow. Looking at their watches
as they practice sincerity on their way to the door.

All mixed in with the slick and smooth, wearing expensive jeans
and maybe a sports coat over a crisply casual button-down.
Pockets full of tired witticisms, scripted compliments.
The ones that worked in prior forays.

I see them knowing none are dressed as themselves.
Unwilling to forget what the world says a man should be.
Unwilling to be the man they may or may not know they are.

Vulnerable and nervous.
Lonely and afraid.
Maybe strong.
Maybe gentle.

Will these men ever see me – really see me?
Not likely, and their words will be the proof.

Old thoughts in new skin. Words that make me feel
like I've swallowed a glass of nothing. Like I'm being
squeezed into a dress that doesn't fit. Shoved into a
too-small frame leaving me wrinkled. Distorted.
The truth of me buried under folded edges.

I know who I am, what I am.
Lonely and afraid.
Vulnerable and nervous.
Strong but gentle.
What I own. Can give. Don't have.

What I need.
 And, having been loved by a man
 wearing nothing but his own skin,
 unafraid of everything I am,
 I know the real thing when I see it.
 I wonder if I ever will again.

THE POET SPEAKS: *The inspiration for all my poetry is a varied amalgam of past experience, my present life, current events, dreams, fears, desires, art, people here and gone, science, history, the writings of more people – poets and not – than I can name and pure imagination. I often say I am made of words. I've been writing since I could hold a pencil. I wanted to be able to write in rhyme like the poems I read as a child, the kind that were taught to children in the 1950s. Rhyme captivated me and though it's out of style today I still write it and sometimes insert a rhyming couplet in prose poetry just because. Why poetry? Poetry is the language of the soul, of every glittering star, of every pebble buried in the mud, the shadow you can't quite see. Poetry is a spur in the side, a knife in the heart, a memory in the mouth.*
 ~ RC deWinter

AUTHOR'S BIO: RC deWinter's poetry is widely anthologized, notably in *New York City Haiku* (New York Times, February 2017), *Cowboys & Cocktails* (Brick Street, April 2019), *Nature In The Now* (Tiny Seed Press, August 2019), *Coffin Bell Two* (March 2020), in print in *2River, Adelaide, Event, Genre Urban Arts, Gravitas, Kansas City Voices, Meat For Tea: The Valley Review, the minnesota review, Night Picnic Journal, Prairie Schooner, Southword*, among others and appears in numerous online literary journals

4 (four)Poems

By David J. Thompson

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes:

Thompson is up to his old tricks again, not sure if it is art imitating life or life imitating art--sorry for reciting such an old nugget, when there is nothing cliché about David J. But it all appears in order in the absence of any sequence of intention...there is something about it, though--not sure what that is. If I thought I could put my finger on it, I'd only be plugging the tiniest pinholes. His little slices of life have all the edge of a finely dressed knife... "The silence that followed was like nothing / either of them had ever heard before". (Spacing and font size are poet's own.)

Straight At My Heart

My ex-girlfriend came back
with a can of Miller Lite
and a pistol. She handed me
the beer and put the revolver down
on the coffee table. Wow, I said,
That's ancient. Where's it from?
Custer's Last Stand? No, she replied.
Even better. This is the gun
Verlaine shot Rimbaud with.
My grandfather was stationed
in Brussels after the war. He traded
some Hershey bars and a few cartons
of Lucky Strikes for it. Holy shit,
was all I could think of to say.

Then she picked up the pistol,
pointed it straight at my heart
and asked, Do you love me?
Of course, I answered while putting up
my hands and trying to move back
on the couch, but I sure hope to hell
that thing's not loaded. That's funny,
she hissed with her hand holding steady.

That's exactly what that asshole liar Rimbaud said,
and I guess we both know what happened to him.

The Silence That Followed

She didn't say anything when he came in
carrying a bag of groceries. I got you
a bottle of wine and some of those olives
you like, too, he said, setting the bag down
on the kitchen counter. He turned to her.
She just sat there pulling her knees
to her chest, swallowed up by the chair.
Oh, shit, he thought, then asked,
What's wrong with you?

I was straightening up your stuff
in our closet and I found those pictures
you have, she said. What pictures? he asked
sitting down slowly on a kitchen chair.
You know damn well, all those pretty photos
of your old girlfriends, she answered.
He told her he'd forgotten all about them,
they didn't mean a thing. She shook her head.
If they didn't mean anything, she replied
as if she'd been rehearsing, you wouldn't hold
on to them. He slapped his palm on the table,
and said while looking up at the ceiling,
I can't believe you're making a big deal
out of this shit. It's just some old photos,
for Christ's sakes. Do I bitch about anything
when your ex-husband calls drunk at all hours
of the night? She glared straight at him
for a few slow moments, then said in a way
that made her words seem like they were written
in the frozen breath of a winter night,
Well, at least *he* wanted to marry me.

The silence that followed was like nothing either of them had ever heard before. So, they just sat staring for a few moments out the same window where nothing was happening. Do you want to watch a movie tonight? she asked softly. Sure, he answered moving toward the refrigerator to get a beer. Maybe tonight we can find something good that we haven't already seen too many times before.

Before You Get Up To Pee

Let me in, you hear him scream. Let me in. Not till you stop drinking, she yells back. You fucking promised, remember? Then comes some banging on the door, sounds like he's using both hands like Fred Flintstone. God damn it, he screeches at full volume. Just let me in, will you please just open the fucking door?

You can't help but hear all this from your couch where it's Friday night, and you're alone trying to watch an old Kevin Costner movie in peace. You're finishing your fourth bottle of Miller Lite, with plenty more in the fridge. You've got a bag of Tostitos. A plate full of sliced pepperoni, and a wad of paper towels. You pause the film, listen to more pounding on the door, then restart it, turning up the volume to drown out the noisy world above you.

Minutes later, you say Oh, shit! out loud when you realize you've seen this film before. After a lot of running around, Costner turns out to be a double agent. What the hell am I going to watch now? you ask yourself, then stop the movie. You notice it's quiet. No noise upstairs. She must have let him in. She always does. You look around your place before you get up to pee, grab another beer, and come back

to surf the channels again. You find yourself staring at your own door where you've never even heard anyone knock, much less let them in, in longer than you can remember.

Cast the first stone

We were just sitting around early when Jesus came into the temple with coffee and bagels for everybody. He started teaching, nothing too heavy, you know, be nice to people, take care of the poor and the downtrodden . . . that sort of stuff,. We were listening and nodding and wondering why the bagel place always stiffs you with about half the cream cheese you need, when the goddamn Pharisees came marching in to ruin a a nice morning. They had with them that new woman we've all noticed around, the good looking one with all the hair and makeup and southern accent who's the new manager of the CVS here in town. The fattest Pharisee, the one with the stupid walrus moustache said they were ending their weekly singalong breakfast at Denny's when they saw this harlot come out of a room at the Super 8 with a man nobody recognized. That's my brother, you assholes, the woman said, He came to see how I was doing here. Yeah, sure, said the Archie Simmons, our local All State agent and the best bowler in town. We think she should be stoned, the fat guy said and they all crossed their arms across their chests and nodded in agreement.

Jesus took a second, then squatted down
 and it looked like he was diagramming
 a backyard football play with his finger
 on the temple floor. Then he stood up,
 said calmly. “Now I don’t want to go
 all *Harper Valley PTA* on your asses,
 but I bet half of you smug bastards know
 by heart where all the ice machines are
 located over at the Super 8 just from
 your personal afternoon experience,
 and I’ll also bet the other half has switched
 your monthly Viagra prescription
 from CVS to Walgreen just in case
 the pretty new store boss starts looking around.
 So, whichever one of you gentleman wants
 to throw the first rock, be my guest.
 Then there was a bunch of stammering
 and grumbling, but, sure as hell, they all turned
 and shuffled out the door.

We watched Jesus walk over to the woman
 who was left standing there all alone.
 He put his arm around her shoulder
 and started talking too low for us to hear.
 She was listening with her head down
 then walked away. At the door she turned
 to give him a big smile and a wave goodbye.
 Well? we asked when Jesus came back toward us.
 Hell, he said with that grin nobody could resist.
 That dude at Super 8 wasn’t really her brother,
 but since I’m the son of God I forgave her
 for that. And, oh yeah, he added, his grin
 now a full smile, I’m going over to her place
 tonight for a bottle of wine and a movie,
 so don’t bother waiting up. I’m half-human,
 too, you know.

THE POET SPEAKS: *It was a long time ago, but I think I began writing, or at least thinking about writing, in my mid-20’s in an attempt to emulate some of my favorite writers at the time like Jack Kerouac and Ernest Hemingway whose lives of travel and adventure I admired. I tried off and on, much more off than on, really, to write fiction for a number of years with neither success, nor an idea of what I was trying to accomplish. It wasn’t until I was about forty when, after*

reading Charles Bukowski and Raymond Carver, I realized that a poem didn't have to be somehow distant lyrically lofty and require more study than a simple reading to be effective. So, then, I have been writing easily accessible narrative poetry ranging from the highly autobiographical to the completely whimsical for the last 25 years

AUTHOR'S BIO: David J. Thompson is a former prep school teacher and coach. He grew up in Hyde Park, New York, and now, after many years in Texas and Michigan, lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

His interests include movies, jazz, and minor league baseball. His poetry/photography book

Grace Takes Me is available from Vegetarian Alcoholic Press, and his latest chapbook *Shake My Ashes* is available from Alien Buddha Press. A series of 1400 of his postcards is part of the permanent collection of the Newberry Library in Chicago, Illinois.

3 (Three) POEMS

By William Butler

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes... Here is some beautiful poetry from William Butler. I believe he is addressing a lost love. Why else would you describe the passing of time as so fleeting? Like "lightening bugs" "...in a Ball jar with holes in the lid, / (moments must breath!)" "...where we were, when we were." "...our moments. / Gently shake them now and again, / Watch them light up!" I got the frissons. You know, a mind orgasm, a brain message: that tingling head rush when feelings physically flush through your scalp. Do you ever get that? I was so elated to discover it is a 'thing.' ASMR: Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response. "Here it's a new day, / dawn tossing off the covers of night, / stretching through the morning clouds, / arms wide, a tiny yawn of sunlight..." Is 'mind candy' anyone's intellectual property, a proprietary eponym? (Spacing and font size poet's own.)

Blue Eyes, Raising

Why so downcast?

So, I don't know, downbeat maybe?

Here it's a new day,

dawn tossing off the covers of night,

stretching through the morning clouds,

arms wide, a tiny yawn of sunlight

then day.

And you, and me,

so tilt that pretty head back,

blue eyes raising to me,

relish this,

and there will be more.

After You're Gone

Why the sad face? We had
well, we had our moments, hours,
and as Tagore tells us,
the butterfly has moments not months,
“and has time enough!”
Aren't they? Enough?
I wish I could capture them,
put them in a Ball jar with holes in the lid,
(moments must breath!)
keep them forever,
like the lightning bugs we kept as kids,
gently shaking the jar now and then,
anxious to watch them light up,
anxious to remember those moments
so illuminated with that indescribable vividness!
Our momentary lives,
so desperate are we to hold them,
so animated in capturing all we can,
gives us no time to sit,
to reflect, meditate on what we are,
where we were, when we were.
But there in that Ball jar,

air holes punched in the lid,
 are our moments.
 Gently shake them now and again,
 Watch them light up!

THE POET SPEAKS: *As a young poet in the late 50's I was influenced by the Beats, then as each new wave of poets washed ashore, I read and tried to absorb what they had to say and how, and I'm afraid I'm a product of many styles none of which lock me into a certain position.*

I read few poets now unless one strokes me as exceptionally strong in wordsmithing and emotion, preferring to write daily and often publish on FaceBook as a means to an end - that being publication to the 800+ followers on line. I often tell publishers and any other interested that I was influenced in publishing like that by the appearance some years ago of three Buddhist monks who sat and meditated then produced a sand mandala, working day and night, and as it was finished and having meditated over it again, it was scraped up into a pile, all the colors muted then, and ceremoniously dumped in a nearby lake. It defined that moment of poetry for me, thus my daily grind.

Without poetry in our lives, the basic rhythm and cadence, the tune of living would be forever lost, and that beauty never retrieved.

AUTHOR'S BIO: William Butler lives in Memphis, Tn and his poetry has appeared in both regional and national anthologies and periodicals. He has a selection of poems published under the title, "Spilled Beer Wet Paper," and a collection of short stories, "The River and Other Stories" through Amazon.

3 (Three) Poems

By Lauren Scharhag

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes... It has always been my confessed contention that ambiverts make the best Tarot card readers. I am also one. Lauren Scharhag has a mouthful-surname but her poetry is extraordinary. 'Virtual Cloister' is one such. Here, she is one funny, angry gal, "It's not even the dick pics that get me." "dry-humping at shadows." "a solipsistic affair." Now, we have that out of the way... "You ought to wear your hair up." Here is hoping you get the direct message. I '...love Lou Diamond Phillips' as well, and who doesn't love '...a fat girl [?]' (Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS

Virtual Cloister

It's not even the dick pics that get me.
They're in the same category as old-timey flashers
prowling public spaces in trench coats,
no doubt enjoying the breeze against their balls,
dry-humping at shadows.
Dick-pic senders seem to expect nothing.
It's all one-sided, a solipsistic affair.

Nor is it the ones who invite me to sext.
At least they're up-front about it. Mostly.
They might lead off with something like,
You have a nice smile,
(My pictures are almost invariably from the neck up
to discourage more explicit compliments)
then quickly segue to the request
for tedious, sticky fumblings
and they're not even as charming
as Hannibal Lecter innuendos.

No, it's the ones who slip into my inbox
by striking up conversation.

Young men rush to impress me with their vast knowledge.
(They never ask if I'm already acquainted with the subject.
In fact, they ask me nothing about myself.)
If we were talking together in person, I guess,
they'd preen and flex their muscles,
like birds of paradise showing off their dance moves.
Older men love to reminisce about their travels,
their wars. They tell me about their dogs.
They pat me on the head (virtually)
and dispense advice like, *Appreciate the moment.*
Before you know it, it's gone.
and *You ought to wear your hair up.*
And I wonder how old they think I am,
or why they think they're qualified
to tell me I "ought to" anything.
Then come the implied sighs,
the, *Oh, how I wish I had someone.*
It would be so nice to come home
to a good woman.
I love a good massage—both getting them and giving them.
I don't know if they're drunk or if, somehow,
they've never heard the sound
of their own voices.

And then, there's the lone woman who says
she'll show me her tits if I show her mine.
I think about it. Tat for tat.

Then I add to my profile, *No DMs, please.*

All the West Side Girls Love Lou Diamond Phillips

Summer of '88 and *La Bamba*
was released on VHS.
Us West Side kids
had found our idol.

Before that, we got excited
whenever Speedy Gonzalez
appeared on our TV screens.
There was an old Chevy Chase
film my mother loved mostly
for the sassy Mexican cook
with whom she shared a name,
Aurora, and we loved anything
with Cheech Marin. If there were
other bits of Mexico in pop culture
at the time, I'm hard-pressed
to think of them. (Desi Arnez
was Cuban. Also: black-and-white.
No, thank you.) But we held them
to our hearts like talismans.

Mexicans were still exotic back then
in the way that Italians were exotic
in 1905. My friends didn't know
what a tamal was. When they came
to dinner, they tried to eat it
husk and all. The only Mexican restaurants
in town served tacos in store-bought shells,
and everything came with a side
of refried bean puree, smothered
in white cheese that was like a mockery
of queso fresco. But suddenly,
everyone knew the song, "La Bamba."
They played it everywhere,
at the supermarket, at school dances,
and even the white girls agreed,
Lou Diamond Phillips was so cute.

He wasn't even Latino,
but we loved him anyway.

My tío made bootleg copies
for everyone and we watched it

over and over. We knew
all the songs, every dance move.
We re-enacted them on the front porch,
using a broom as a guitar, a hairbrush
as a microphone. We were amazed
that someone could sing in Spanish
and sound cool, none of the warbling ballads
or cheesy corridos heavy on the accordion
that we knew from our abuela's records.

We girls started wearing our hair
in high, 1950s ponytails, tied with big bows.
Our Catholic school saddle oxfords
were suddenly stylish. The boys either
combed their hair into pompadours
or wanted black leather jackets
like Bob. Now, thirty years later,
my cousin still thinks he's Esai Morales,
roaring around on his motorcycle,
and I can't hear "Sleep Walk"
without getting choked up.

Stand and Deliver came out
that same year, but a math teacher
isn't nearly as sexy, and we had to wait
ten years for *Selena*, for Jennifer Lopez
to come with her nalgas and spangled bras.
(Also not an actual Mexican,
but we'll take what we can get.)

On loving a fat girl

Skininess is next to godliness,
 or so say medieval art of hollow-cheeked
 saints and all those runway models
 in angel's wings and expensive
 lingerie

Earthy is another word for fat,
 a back-handed compliment
 as all words that try to be fat-positive are

Gluttony a sin
 Sensual pleasures a sin
 Loving this world a sin

We're supposed to ascend, lighter than air,
 to the one beyond
 and the robes are not
 one-size-fits-all

But what if I want to stay here a while?
 What if I want to forego
 the land of milk and honey,
 preferring instead chocolate and wine?

What if a single God in His single heaven
 is not large enough to contain us all?
 What if some of us were meant
 for pantheons and oh-so forgiving togas?
 What if your shame-and-guilt God
 has no place in my big fat world?

Fat girl, you
 are a magnificent mountain that I want to scale:
 the higher the peaks, the lush the valleys.
 You are a sacred grove the gods have smiled on.

There is a body under this robe,
 built for more than suffering and motherhood.
 There is more than one way to love.
 There is more than one way to love the divine.

THE POET SPEAKS: *All three of these poems come from a very personal place. “All the West Side Girls Love Lou Diamond Phillips” was inspired by my actual experiences growing up—my mother is Mexican, my father is German; both are first-generation Americans. I was mainly raised by my mother and her family. In the 80s, there really wasn’t much in the way of Latinx representation on TV or in films. Representation has become a big subject recently—who it affects and why it matters. When the movie, La Bamba, came out, it was such a huge deal to us, and not just because Ritchie Valens was a famous musician. It was because it showed the day-to-day life of a Mexican family—rolling tortillas, picking fruit, a brother just out of prison. I wanted to share this experience, so people can see how meaningful it is to see people who look like you on screen, especially for kids. Every word of that poem is absolutely true.*

“Virtual Cloister” came from a place of sheer frustration. Any woman with any sort of Internet presence will tell you that we get creeped on by random guys on the regular—there’s a reason the phrase “sliding into DMs” exists. So that’s not really new, but I’ve had several particularly bad experiences lately with men who strike up a conversation and act friendly at first. Then they get skeezy, or demanding, or both, and that can only too easily become abusive. It’s so bad, I’ve actually disabled the inbox on my author page on Facebook and muted all DMs on Twitter and Instagram. I don’t know if it’s quarantine, like everyone’s a bit crazy from too much isolation or what, but seriously, I’ve had six guys in the past month or so who started out nice, then got very hostile when they felt I wasn’t paying enough attention to them. I’m like, who are you people? We don’t really know each other. Even if I did, why do you think anyone owes you their attention? And would you treat another man this way? I think not. I tried to season the piece with a bit of humor, which, in retrospect, just shows how a woman in this society is conditioned to downplay criticism of men, even in our art.

“On loving a fat girl” sprung from a conversation I had with a fellow Latina about weight and white beauty standards. All my adult life, I have struggled with my weight due to chronic health problems and medication. I was on a medication recently that caused me to put on 16 pounds in three months that I really couldn’t afford. (Who can?) And, yes, I do eat right and work out—in fact, since quarantine, I’ve really stepped it up, incorporating body weight training into my routine. But the weight just doesn’t come off. It’s all very frustrating. The funny thing is, as a bisexual woman, I have often been attracted to plus-sized women, so I don’t know why I hold myself to this

standard that I don't particularly find attractive in others. My friend helped me see that you have to find and claim your own beauty—self-worth is not something someone can give to you, not even those that you love. She also helped me to see that worrying about what I look like clutters the mind, takes up valuable intellectual and emotional real estate that could be put to more productive uses. Also, there's no prize for being thin. My fat body can do all the things that my skinny body could do. Fat isn't inherently ugly, and it doesn't have to be a limitation. It was truly a life-altering conversation for me. This poem is what I hope to be the first of many exploring that.

Overall, I don't know that I have a consistent style, though these poems are reflective of what I think of as my conversational poems. They are purely my voice, conveyed as if I were speaking directly to you. (I have other styles that imitate other, better poets.) I am also a fiction writer, so I am also very comfortable working with narrative. My odd, biracial heritage was a huge influence on me, growing up in a bilingual family. My mother's family was quite poor, and my father's family was wealthy, so that also had a profound influence on my worldview. My German grandfather didn't speak English when he came

to this country, but he gave up his native tongue. He did not identify as German, or as an immigrant. I didn't even know he spoke German until after he died—but he was a successful business owner. My Mexican family never gave up their Spanish and did not achieve that sort of prosperity. I think this shows a lot about how this country insists on assimilation. As a result, code switching came to me as naturally as breathing. I am a linguistic chameleon, changing the diction to fit the message. So I read and write poetry because language is everything—what language to use and when to use it for the maximum desired effect. To quote Joseph Brodsky, "For a writer, only one form of patriotism exists: his attitude towards language."

AUTHOR'S BIO: Lauren Scharhag is the author of fourteen books, including *Requiem for a Robot Dog* (Cajun Mutt Press) and *Languages, First and Last* (Cyberwit Press). Her work has appeared in over 100 literary venues around the world. Recent honors include the Seamus Burns Creative Writing Prize, two Best of the Net nominations, and acceptance into the 2021 Antarctic Poetry Exhibition. She lives in Kansas City, MO. To learn more about her work, visit: www.laurenscharhag.blogspot.com

THINGS IN THE BOX

By Amy Bernstein

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes... everything that is bad for you is so easy to get too, twist cap open a liquor bottle pop the top on a beer can, light a cigarette but try to rip open a bandaid when your bleeding or get an aspeirin when your head is pounding or a blister pack when the battery in your pace maker is dying

No prompting, no coaxing on by the auteur part Ms. really knows how to indulge just pure indulgence on the for me there is something so existential about it that I wish I had a better idea what that word means / meant I wish I knew. She reminds me of Rosencranz and Guildenstern rolled up and unraveled into one person. or what the butler saw theatre of the absurd

Bakelite Museum, Williston, Somerset, England Leo Baekeland family was crazy

(Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS

THINGS IN THE BOX

1,630 words

A Performance Prose Poem

1.

If I can find the box, with all the things inside, then I will be OK.

If I can find the box, with all the things inside, then I will know I was right.

All the things inside the box were put there a long time ago and I need to find them, finger them, rub them, put them in my palm, and then everything will be OK. And I will know the reasons why.

I did not lose the box, but it got lost. Time is a muscled arm that has pushed me away from the box and it from me. I was not strong enough to push back.

I regret that, deeply. But isn't that just like people: regretting most the things we can help least.

-Don't you have work to do?

-I do, but finding the box is more important.

-They won't keep you on, if you don't do the work.

-But I am spinning inside a whorl.

-This box of yours is an excuse.

-No, it's the thing itself.

- Try walking around the block.

I remembered, while leaving sleeping for waking. Once I remembered, my head filled with 'box.' Box is both box and key—to everything that comes after and came before.

And the things inside the box.

And isn't that just like people, telling you to stop making excuses but they have it all wrong because the excuses are the necessities.

I leave the work behind. I have to.

Where where where is the box?

I learn what I know between sleeping and waking. The box is in the old house, inside the cubby in the wall in the basement—

—the cubby with the amber Bakelite knob—

—the cubby that sticks so you must tug on the knob with both hands.

I will go back to the house, to the basement, to recover the box, recover my bearings, get right with gravity and all the forces keeping me tethered.

I will go back to the undiscovered country.

That is the plan.

But that is not how it goes.

I go to the place where the house stood and the house is gone. The land is levelled flat. The basement, the cubby in the wall with the amber knob, the box, and the things in the box, are somewhere else—

--if anywhere.

How did I not know the house was gone?

Who hid that from me?

Who took the box that was meant for me?

If I do not have the box, and cannot find it, does it exist?

Do I?

I cannot go on without the box and the things inside the box. I will fall down. I will fall away. I will crack and splinter like the amber Bakelite knob itself must have cracked and splintered when the house came crashing down around it.

And the box too.

And me too.

I will spend all my time, now, looking for another box, and things to put inside it. And a house to enfold the box—to weigh it down with the weight of my intentions and the bottomless weight of my need.

2.

They left me a box with things in it. Just a fucking box with some things in it. What things? Whose things? Who said I wanted those things? What good are they, to me?

I looked at the things only once, a long time ago, the first time someone put the box in my hands. I was looking down at the floor. I saw only a pair of wrists and cuffs.

Bits and pieces. Hard shapes. Soft shapes. Things with colors. Things that are black. Things with writing. Things tipped in blood.

--Here you go.

--What is it?

--It's yours now.

--But what is it?

--It was theirs, but now it's yours. That's how we keep going. Isn't it marvelous?

I drag that fucking box everywhere. Like Marley and his chain. I hide it under the sink, behind the pipes. I hide it under the eaves in the attic. I hide it from my dreams.

I forget what the box looks like. I forget what's in it. I forget where I put it.

I grow older. I grow old.

No, I never forgot the fucking box and the things inside it. I lied the whole time, about all of it, about everything.

The box is me. I am the box. The bits and pieces are my flesh and bone and blood.

I await the fucking transmigration of souls....

Any moment...

Now.

--Ahh, here you go. It's *your* fucking box now. Get it out of my sight before I kill someone.

3.

I found this box on the street. The box was lying face-down, wide open, angry as shit. The thing cursed me up and down.

Oh, no. I'm not having this. I gotta get you inside, off the street, teach you a lesson.

I get the box inside and put it on my kitchen table. I shut its mouth, to stop the cursing. A brass hinge is missing. I can fix that. But I already know this fucking box won't show me any gratitude.

I open the box to fix the hinge and the box just lays into me, nonstop.

--You go low, I go high, I tell the box. That's how it's got to be.

I'm keeping it, anyway. I don't have a box like this, made of wood, with inlaid ivory and twisty carvings. The perfect size for small things:

My lucky rabbit's foot.

My folding poison-dart gun.

My fake passport.

My wad of counterfeit twenties.

A lock of my mother's hair, wrapped in a scrunchie.

Why is it always this fucking way? I should have *always* had a place for my shit. I shouldn't have to go walking down the street to find just the right fucking box for my shit.

Somebody else's garbage shouldn't be my treasure. I shouldn't have to go looking for my own treasure. I shouldn't have to stumble upon it by chance.

Why didn't somebody give me a box just like this a long time ago? Why is that so fucking hard? Why does the easy shit always turn out to be the hard shit?

Anyway!

The box knows who's who. I set us both straight. I keep it right there, on the kitchen table. My box knows I got eyes on the back of my head. That shit ain't moving unless I say so.

4.

You have erased me.

I never ordered a box with things in it. I'd never order a box this ugly: wood inlaid with ivory and defaced with twisty carvings. If I *had* ordered a box, my box would be white on the outside and lined with brown mink on the inside.

And *my* box would arrive empty.

Instead, an ugly box I never ordered shows up at my door.

I reject this box.

I reject all of *you* for sending the box.

You: the industrial kleptomaniacs who have erased me.

I would smash the box with a hammer and then burn the splinters to ashes, but I won't, I can't, because then I'd be complicit in your major fuck-up.

You set this in motion—my erasure.

You've taken everything from me and replaced me with a goddamn box.

You've taken my identity. Phone numbers. Bank digits. Shoe size. Hair dye formula. Dental records. Fingerprints. Library card. The shape of the dent in the pillow on my bed.

You have scooped me hollow and left me for dead, with a box, and the things in the box still cocooned in bubblewrap.

I don't know how I will get back at you, or when, but I will find a way. One day, when you least expect it, you'll open your door and find a box with things in it, and you will never know another moment's peace.

5.

Grace. Grace. Grace.

Formless and expectant,

Confining and boundless,

I have no idea what grace is or does or if it is an equal-opportunity employer.

Today, I take grace under my own wing.

Today, I decide that grace is shaped like a box with things in it.

And I decide:

This is not *my* box. It is *our* box.

What's in our box? Let's see.

Well, that's odd. Our box is empty. It is as heavy as a rock settled on the ocean floor and yet it is empty.

Our box is a void, a hollow, a concavity...a depravity, a wanting, a hunger, a dark night of the soul. *Our* soul.

An empty box, once filled, is fulfilled: bliss achieved, nirvana attained. Only then, then will we contain multitudes.

What things will we put in our box?

The seven plagues, the seven wonders, the holy trinity, Paradise Lost, Leaves of Grass?

The curl and spike of a buck's antler?

The last cry heard on the street?

A sprig of baby's breath?

Proof that the Devil walks among us?

The alpha and the omega...

We are not able to choose. We were not sent out into this life to find all the things of grace that are meant to fill an empty box.

We are woefully, drastically, tragically, comically unprepared to put the things in our box that will matter.

We don't know what grace looks tastes smells feels like.

We are blind to grace's true appearance, without which, our box is merely an idea and not a shape that holds objects in space and time.

We will keep searching.

Until then, our box is not a box. Things destined for the box are not things but only memories scattering like beads scurrying through time.

We wait.

6.

Here I am.

There you are.

And only a box between us.

THE END

THE POET SPEAKS: *Because I often find that the human condition requires me to place words in a different order as the only way to get at, into, onto, in front of, and behind what is really going on at any given moment.*

Because only poetry performs like a river into which one can never step twice.

Because I am so wildly ignorant of the canon that I can compose in my own image and do whatever the hell I want.

Even the quietest poems are screaming, and right now, I feel like screaming all the time

AUTHOR'S BIO: Amy L. Bernstein writes about the intersection of politics and culture for the stage and the page. Her novel, "Ell," will be published by Scarsdale Publishing. Selected short plays are published by Routledge and Leicester Bay Theatricals, and short fiction by Flying Ketchup Press. Poetry has appeared with Passaic/Voluspa. She is a 2014 recipient of a Ruby Artist Award from the Greater Baltimore Cultural Alliance. Visit her at www.amywrites.live

PICASSO and other poems...

By D S Maolalai

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Mister Maolalai's poetry is sublime. Comparing a locksmith to 'Picasso' in the absence of hyperbole is a feat of genius. 'Lying down afterward' / "in the lapsed heat / of passion" is a can't-miss. 'The realist' is a tribute to, and a handbook for, Everyman who ever needed to be reminded of what is not minutia in order to secure felicitous domesticity: "and the brown taste / of fresh coffee," "gaslighting" is often the best remedy. 'Apples.' 'Being online.' and 'Baking.' are each endeared to me, but 'With apologies to Marianne Moore' has that line, "...the back arching. a watchspring / wound to crisis..." Who could resist?(Spacing and font size are poet's own) HS

Picasso.

you think it is perfect,
and it is. it's easy. banging words
in an office for work
like rocks
shattered
to sand.

but today
I went to get a key cut –
waited
5 mins
by this shed
at a supermarket
carpark, while the old guy inside
sliced a fresh one for me,
casual, like a labourer
pulling down stacks
of bananas.

and I had no idea
this was still
how it was done –
freehand

by eyeball
and the guts of their feet. one of those
dying skills, I suppose. typing emails
I can barely beat a sentence
without hitting the backspace
a couple of times

but he spun his hands magic
and like
a conductor
of perfect symphonies; like seeing picasso
paint.
I walked home
with a new key
in my pocket. I'd kept it separate
so I could test getting in,
in case of issues,
and when I tried the door
it worked
perfectly.

he must really
have been picasso
to get it so right
the first time.

2008.

2008. december.

christmas trees
straddling o'connell
like someone's
stacked balls
of shining
barbed wire.

A good peace.

a good peace –
from a window
overlooking the wing
of an airplane,
and even waves
look calm
and ironed on cloudless
days,

and birds in flight
are things of flowing
metal – no feathers,
no crease
in the construction
of machines.

Lying down afterward.

lying down afterward
in the lapsed heat
of passion
like a flower, wilting
in a botanic garden
hothouse. watching
the room
as it rises
to landscape,
the wallpaper
which spirals
away.

The realist.

she complains
my memory's
not perfect. and she's right.
I don't worry
about detail; don't know
exactly
what she said
and when it was
she said it. dates
escape me, places. I forget
the name of the restaurant
or even
the name
of the street. don't know
what town we were in
when it happened. sometimes
I don't even know
the country. my memory
as an abstract painting.
a series:
her bedroom – *white no 2*.
sky-white
and the dawn in motion
and the brown taste
of fresh coffee. I am an impressionist,
not a realist
painter. the world
collapses
when I pinpoint
a spot. as a joke
I accuse her
of gaslighting –
"you never told me that,
you are making it all up." she pulls out the receipts;
shows messages. it's terrible;
trying to be an artist
when people carry cameras.

Apples.

don't grow
anywhere now.

and my brother?
sick again.

the world
a lonely place
without fish
or plates of tomato.

flowers
can go hang;
tramps
in nice dresses.

every river
piss
and wet shit.

love
is a thing
which doesn't happen.

neither
does anything
else.

The wedding cake.

we clean up
after dinner. well, I do –
you cooked. I stack bowls
and plates, dirty pots
and the cutlery. carry them
quietly to the sink. you go
to the sofa, with the rest of your wine
and the dog. read a paperback
borrowed from the library, idly looking
at your phone. it's june 1st
or thereabouts. the end of may
at latest. through the window
white flakes
like sawed through icing
on the wedding cake
which I haven't
arranged for you
yet.

Being online.

a hopelessly naive poem.

it should be more
like real life is
really – think of it
as an office
going away party,
full of people
you work with
but don't really
know well.

just keep
certain things
shut up private
if they're things
which would get you fired
in an office. that way
people generally
don't act all that
racist, and mostly
things slowly

improve. just dumb jokes
about bad spelling
and puns – I remember
when the internet
was all
dumb jokes.

Baking.

life, regular
as loaves
in an oven. five years ago
all my friends
were travelling. now, at parties
we talk about property
and who's getting married
and when. I suppose
in ten years
we'll be discussing divorces,
children doing quite well
at school. I sit at the table,
drinking my wine
and watching my friends
drink their wine. we talk
and heat rises, steady
and wholesomely
boring.

With apologies to Marianne Moore.

no water so still
 as the dead fountains at versailles. and no stretch
 so satisfying
 as the tension of a dog
 in yawn. the breaking of extension
 and the breaking
 of release. the twist
 and the tongue extending
 like a smooth
 and blooming flower
 brimming, inviting
 to bees.
 the tremble around legs
 and the back arching. a watchspring
 wound to crisis
 and pulling against a wrist. how could anyone
 put out a hand
 and break this. her head
 looking upward
 very offended.

THE POET SPEAKS: *Reader, forgive me –I’ve never been much of a prose man. Expect me to ramble. For me, poetry is easier –you can hopefully see it there. Once or twice a week I open a bottle of wine, sit at a laptop and wake up to 5 or 6 poems the next day. As far as methods, I think what I do is, in a sense, automatic writing, or hiking a new trail. I don’t start on the road with any destination in mind –just find the place where the first foot rests steadily, then take the next step. Writing isn’t really an art-form, I don’t think –it’s primarily a habit, and a way to order my thoughts. I would never be anything but embarrassed if I were to try describing some great mountain, at the top of which is The Meaning of Poetry. I go to the occasional reading(though I don’t make a habit of going it) and seen plenty of times where the readers will spend longer explaining the beauty of their inspiration than they do reading the actual words. That said, what you could say inspired a lot in these poems is the sense of art as a mundane thing, rather than a higher order –Marianne Moore, who’s various versions*

of "Poetry" I pillaged for the poem which bears her name, was exceptionally good at this, and wrote with a clipped precision, using a lot of the same language that one might find in an encyclopaedia, as if she were writing straightforward prose only broken by the form. In the first long version of "Poetry" she describes writing as being about "imaginary gardens with real toads in them" and how "things are important not because a high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are useful" –I think that's the best way to describe my own attitude. The same thing comes with the attempt at drawing the line between the man cutting a key in a shed in a supermarket car park and Picasso's painting in "Picasso", and the connection between memory and the arts in "The realist"–it's all about bringing down the attitude people have toward the arts, and elevating the attitude they have toward the mundane. Not bringing down the things themselves, I mean, but people's view of them. Picasso was written about a real guy who worked from a Portakabin in Darndale, a semi-sketchy neighbourhood in Dublin, and cut some keys freehand for me after I lost a set drunk. The fact that he took my spare and carved a new set freehand, just by eye and hand, seems far more impressive to me than any amount of poetry.

AUTHOR'S BIO: 'A little about myself; I'm a graduate of English Literature from Trinity College in Dublin and recently returned there after four years abroad in the UK and Canada. I have been writing poetry and short fiction for the past five or six years with some success. My writing has appeared in such publications as 4'33', Strange Bounce and Bong is Bard, Down in the Dirt Magazine, Out of Ours, The Eunoia Review, Kerouac's Dog, More Said Than Done, Star Tips, Myths Magazine, Ariadne's Thread, The Belleville Park Pages, Killing the Angel and Unrorean Broadsheet, by whom I was twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize. I have also had my work published in two collections; 'Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden' and 'Sad Havoc Among the Birds.'

D S Maolalai has been nominated four times for Best of the Net and three times for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in two collections, "Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden" (Encircle Press, 2016) and "Sad Havoc Among the Birds" (Turas Press, 2019)

PYTHIA

By CHARLIE JACOBSON

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry editor Hezekiah writes...* Pythia is a short, epic, poetic quest for two, not to be missed. Charles Jacobson is promethean in this intimate, imagistic, incidental encounter-conquest. Who's the muse who writes his stuff?—I goda get in touch. "...to sink into unguent warmth" "I took her scent and felt her breath." And maybe the best line, "An arabesque veil of smoke drifted into cloudy gray-green eyes." I was riveted by his words and the amplitude of the scene as it transcends to the divine and lapses back to the banal. (Spacing and font size are poet's own) HS

Senior editor Charles writes: What you are about to read is consummate poetry by a consummate literary artist. Just as mesmerizing as 'Pythia' are the author's extensive notes and footnotes. Once settled on the page,, he is both sculptor and archeologist. Exquisite word choice and rarefied technique put this poem in a class by itself.

Five stars.

Amidst old smoke, stale perfume, and semen of a broken night,

a seraphic voice

posed a question in the dark—

to tremble

to clinch a neck

to sink into unguent warmth

to hear a moan

in a sacred retreat.

In the green room

she lit a cigarette and gazed at the fine rain.

Yellow gloves lay on a coffee table.

I took her scent and felt her breath.

Her nostrils flared.

An arabesque veil of smoke drifted into cloudy gray-green eyes.

“Have we spoken?”

A nicotine-stained finger crossed my lips.

“Your blood is warm.”

“How old are you?”

A hot blush came to my cheek.

“I read Bishop Sheen.”

She forced a laugh

and blew a jet

from under dark lashes.

“I adore Coblenz.”

“Kiss me.”

She tasted of tobacco and stale mint.

I slid fingers to her nipples.

Her bosom swelled, a tremor crossed her face.

“The wench is dead—would you like a trip to Greece?”

(That's where I want to go)

White-velvet breasts

C-section

painted nails on a cold-hard floor.

I woke

to a curving figure in a wide-brimmed hat—

black-spike heels, cigarette and eye-liner

staring in a mirror

headlights in the drive

Shouts at the front door.

THE POET SPEAKS... *Pythia arose from an unpublished nonfiction short story, *The Education of a Young Gentleman*, which tells of a late night encounter with a 29-year-old married woman by a 19-year-old boy in a highly charged sexual atmosphere. It was another step in his coming of age — finding sexual partners other than his mother.*

My style tends to be sardonic with historical overtones. My first sense of literature was from the 19th century writers. My first serious foray into culture and politics was in ninth and tenth grade Latin, hence Pythia owes a debt to Catullus and Lesbia as well as Eliot and Prufrock.

Why poetry? A poem is an attempt to take the human, the historical, and the finite to the realm of the universal and infinite, which, on the face of it, is impossible using the materials of this world. Yet I try to distill feeling, emotion, what it is to be alive, and powerful moments in life, in order to create an alternative world. And I'm not above using fiction, rhythm and beauty to get at the truth.

Each word carves out a specific cultural niche. Reading a poem allows you to enter that world and those niches, albeit not always what the writer has in mind.

Above all, poetry invites you to let loose; Pythia strives for power and sensuality.

Footnotes and Notes

se references and notes helped me understand the poem and *The Education of a Young Gentleman*, the short story which gave rise to the poem.

Pythia owes a debt to the Roman poet Catullus and Lesbia as well as T.S. Eliot and Prufrock. She brings mythological form to the formlessness of modern life, the point being that the present day is an amalgam of the past.

The poem arouses a boy's expectations of achieving harmony with a muse, which the poem then quashes. The boy fails in a quest to find meaning in the muse, but comes away with a minimum amount of light and knowledge.

a. Pythia

Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi, sits in a cauldron on a tripod, making her prophecies in an ecstatic trance state, like shamans, and her unintelligible utterings. The tripod was perforated with holes; and as she inhaled the vapors, her figure would seem to enlarge, her hair stood on end, her complexion changed, her heart panted, her bosom swelled and her voice became seemingly more than human. — Wiki

b. The opening scene is a bedroom of a suburban home which stands for the Sanctuary of Apollo (the god of light, knowledge and harmony) at Delphi, the navel of the ancient world.

c. Smoke and perfume correspond to the vapors at the temple at Delphi. Geologists investigating the fissures in Delphi have found a potent combination of ethane, methane, ethylene, and benzene, and others have suggested laurel leaves (oleander) and fermented honey helped Pythia achieve her trance, as drugs do today.

d. A boy enters the bedroom and interprets his encounter with Pythia by way of the classics, a possessed woman who was a vehicle for the ambiguous messages Apollo delivered at Delphi.

Through her nostrils thick with incense

The Pythia hurls a breath of flame

Panting, howling, drunk...

—Paul Valéry.

e. He reacts with fear and trembling to the question posed by the woman, a temptation to have sex with her then and there. 'Tremble' refers to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.

f. In "Have we spoken," Pythia buttonholes the boy. Also see John 14:9-10 New International Version (NIV). The sacred and profane are again entangled. Pythia and the boy regard each other somewhat differently in the light (see p. below).

9 Jesus answered: Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?

10 Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.

g. "I read Bishop Sheen." Bishop Sheen had a pop TV show at the time. This is a Catholic house, a nod to T.S. Eliot and Christianity. 'Bishop' is also a masturbation reference, as in "beat your bishop." 'Read' is in both the active present and past tense. Catholic doctrine rails against masturbation. Pythia laughs at the joke. 'Bishop' also refers to the American poet Elizabeth Bishop.

h. "I adore Coblenz" is repartee to "I read Bishop Sheen." Coblenz/Koblenz could be misunderstood as a person, but it's a fortress at the junction of the Rhine and Moselle Rivers, a favorite haunt of the poet Jules Laforgue. Coblenz is Old world and Roman, est. 8 BCE by Drusus, who was born not long after Catullus passed. Laforgue influenced Eliot. The woman speaks with a Euro accent since Europe has been the midwife of the modern world from the ancients.

i. "Kiss me" is from The Brian Auger Oblivion Express – Compared to What, live at Baked Potato, Hollywood, 2004, at 3:35
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrkxrgTiVyk>

j. One reader thought he found a vampire vibe in the poem. I agree to the extent that Pythia exhibits a form of metempsychosis — previous lives are buried within her. They suddenly speak and then they're gone:

Thou hast committed —

Fornication? But that was in another country, and besides, the wench is dead.

The Jew of Malta

k. Greece is the location of Delphi and also refers to Lord Byron, among other things.

l. "[Mesopotamia] that's where I wanna go" is from Mesopotamia by the B52s

m. The Caesarian Section, or C-section relates to the Roman Caesarians and Julius Caesar in particular, who entertained at least one poetry reading by Catullus. Her scar marks an alternate entrance to her uterus and is a profane difference between her and the

sacred virgins Mary and Pythia. 'C-section' grounds the poem and may be considered its belly button. It's exotic, like a tattoo. It adds mother, childbirth, pain and sacrifice to the equation.

n. The "cold-hard floor" in the basement of the house refers to the temple floor at Delphi. The line "on a cold-hard floor" is a play on the last line of Ezra Pound's In a Station of the Metro:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

petals on a wet, black bough

Compare my haiku with his (both violate the 5-7-5 traditional form):

White-velvet breasts

C-section

painted nails

on a cold-hard floor.

In the haiku, after a simple description of the woman, she disappears. The emotional core of the entire poem is the connection and disconnection between the boy and the woman. The last line of the haiku prefigures a hard landing for the boy; he will be left in a void.

o. Much of the power and verbal music of the poem is in monosyllables, often in 2s and 3s: old smoke, stale, night, green room, kiss me, stale mint, cold hard floor, C section, white velvet breasts, black spike heels, etc. Most lines end in a monosyllable. I deliberately veer away from the vernacular (Hemingway and company) so I can use sound to override the meaning of words. The speaking voice interrupts the narrator and adds tension, making the action and characters real.

p. The poem opens during a night of debauchment. A boy is invited or perhaps tempted to have sex in the dark. The second stanza introduces Pythia, who had extended the invitation. She appears in the guise of a muse and seduces him. In the third stanza, she gets the tipping she wants and gives him a sexual experience representative of the adult world that he wants. In the last stanza, she leaves him disillusioned, but with a tantalizing image of mature erotic beauty, to figure it out for himself.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Charlie Jacobson is a veteran with a career in computer technology and an abiding interest in philosophy and the arts. He is a published writer.

At Least To Me & other poems...

By Sandra Kolankiewicz

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes...

Wow! I couldn't write this stuff, I'm lucky to be able to read it. There is no earthly reason to quote a single line for 'At Least to Me.' ... We just have to experience it for ourselves " whether we're clay or air." ... So I lied. 'What Was a Dream,' sentimental fools and one-sided redolent reminiscences. And, 'Every Year Since Then,' " I have hiked / and run and pedaled until I've come to / accept all moments are different and / the same,..." (Spacing and font size are poet's own.)HS

Every Year Since Then

I cannot tell you how happy I am
to remember this day spent together:
the early morning up the hill, finding
the stream that trickled down, following it,
what happened at the bottom. I have hiked
and run and pedaled until I've come to
accept all moments are different and
the same, and no matter how hard you push,
you cannot escape others, must come to
understand no matter what happens, one
tries to belong. That's the secret no one
tells: you're not alone. Hard to imagine
when the creek's rising and your engine has
stalled, not the kind of day we sat and watched
the osprey circling endlessly before
they landed as if afraid to arrive,
yet every year since then, they have returned.

What Was a Dream

How astounding still to remember how
 I lay awake for you, wondering why
you left me unanswered in the way of
 an old song. I married someone else, had
four children, managed well enough, better
 than some, and then your call today, wanting
to meet in a hotel bar, needing at
 last to tell me what I'd asked twenty years
ago, whether you'd be my Valentine,
 when you pretended not to hear, though I'd
wrapped myself around you at the time, spoke
 into your ear, too much life between then
and now to consider, beloved stranger
 come too late, having missed what a was dream.

At Least to Me

We all have a unique vibration from before we were born, continuing when we die. This movement of trough and wave has nothing to do with our bodies; in fact, its nature changes moment to moment. Because our tone is the same as our self, resonance is what we are, even the frequencies we don't hear, which move through us whether we're clay or air. We recognize each other in the spectrum where we lose our particles like shedding our skin, not sound nor light, though sometimes I can I feel you, there, at the edge of your universe as you look toward mine. If I had fingers I'd trace the line of your cheek as a lover might, cup the back of your head in my hand while I support your neck as a mother would, protect you from the darkness like a sister. The flying v of Canada geese above calls silently in a world with no gravity, movement in a vacuum needing something to resist in order to be heard, strife merely a part of a life more important where you always fit in and can never be lost. How do I become a pond with fat striped bass rising to the surface for the May flies on the water? Can the soft crab that turns his mate around penetrate her without knowing her name? Just thinking of the ocean makes me coil inside like a spring waiting for some moment I'll always search but never

see, death impossible, at least to me.

THE POET SPEAKS: *At the time I wrote “At Least to Me,” my mother was dying. She was afraid to discuss the kinds of things many of us might want to talk about with loved ones when we sense our lives are coming to an end. Instead, she kept asking when she was going to get better. At that time, when I wrote this poem, I posted it on Facebook for a couple of days to kind of try it out with some of my poet friends. We often do that with one another. My mother had a Facebook account she hardly used because she would click on something and get lost. However, after I posted this poem, I saw that she put a heart (loved) below it. I think it’s the only time she successfully commented on anything I posted. So I think we communicated about her dying after all, just sideways, which is one of the safe and wonderful things that poetry, like music, can do.*

“What Was a Dream” is my friend’s story. She did go meet him because he sounded so sad when he called, and he was there, wanting to just throw the past twenty years away and start over. She said the experience made her a little mournful and conflicted, so I imagined I were in her place, and this poem is what I came up with. I don’t think trying to recreate the life from your youth is unusual for middle aged folks, when all our doors are closing. I am just glad I am not the guy!

“Every Year since Then” is about patterns, how we think we understand what happens to us—and then with time we begin to see our life in a greater perspective. This poem is about how we absolutely need other people and have to learn to get along with others. This crazy COVID has showed us how connected we are—and how lonely we can become. The osprey are us, coming in to build a nest, realizing we can be committed and safe even though we are wild and vulnerable.

AUTHOR’S BIO: My poems have appeared widely, most recently in *One, Otis Nebulae, Galway Review, Trampset, Concho River Review, London Magazine, New World Writing* and *Appalachian Heritage*. *Turning Inside Out* was published by Black Lawrence. Finishing Line has released *The Way You Will Go* and *Lost in Transition*.

The horse in the pasture

By Jack Galmitz

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: High-grade euphoria, another meridian response, I just might abandon all medications and embrace hope—ye who read here... Galmitz's 'The Horse in the Pasture' is both majestic and mesmerizing "and me looking / puny and poorly made" "Those eyes have a way / of looking sideways / and straight away" But don't avert yours... (Spacing and font size are poet's own) HS*

The horse in the pasture

is muscled that way
 its distinction
 from the yellowing hay
 and the flies
 it swishes away
 and me looking
 puny and poorly made
 up at its godly face.

Those eyes have a way
of looking sideways
and straight away
sad as I've been in my worst days.
Seductive into the deep
Of ways and the holes of shapes.
In the embers
of the day settling its score
it is cast iron
that defies the indefinite
mountains their lack of audition and
denouement.

When the furnace cools
and it's darker than ash
you will see the appalling
currents as it gallops past

and be struck by movement

without motion

the movement of the

drifting sky mackerels

a million times

THE POET SPEAKS...*Generally, poems come to me in one form or another. At least an image that starts the process rolling. My poems are always unforced because I find that poems that begin and are worked as ideas usually feel inauthentic, too contrived. I was not thinking of an ideal of beauty when I wrote *The Horse in the Pasture*, but I might just as well have been. The horse and pasture are different things, of course, but importantly all knowledge is based on difference, so this difference in the poem is essential.*

Like those Greek statues of idealized forms of the male and female that remain to us, for me the figure of a horse in the wide open space attracts and requires words because horses, their musculature, their form, is to me perfect. As I write I usually let associations come into play and drive the poem forward. It is not hard to see a resemblance between the form of a horse and a mould of sculpted bronze cast in a foundry. It is not hard to see the horse as a god of a kind-after all Swift used the Houyhnhnms as the elect of a superior society.

Even in stillness there is such muscularity in the figure that there is a type of movement not so different from the stillness and movement of the lines of the poem.

Poetry is a way of expressing a deep love for all that exists. That is why I write.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Jack Galmitz was born in NYC in 1951. He attended the public schools from which he graduated. He went on to receive a Ph.D from the University of Buffalo.

He is the author of *yards & lots* (published by Middle Island Press) and *Coordinates* (published by Impress), among other books.

His work has appeared in such journals as *And/Or*, *otata*, *Otoliths*, *is/let* and many others.

He lives with his wife in Queens County, New York.

XXII & other poems...

By Edward Zahniser

(To maintain the poet's dedicated spacing Hezekiah's' note follows the poems. Eds.)

XXII

—After William Carlos Williams

so much depends

upon

the brain's love-sex

neurons

glazed with hormones

beside

themselves like white

chickens

with their heads cut

off

— Ed Zahniser

Poetics Over Time

In time, poetics is like a diaper
you must change or hazard making
that newest family member fuss. *Wipe her
or else!* Poetics is like aspens (quaking)

who root-sprout after a hot forest fire.
Absent fire, slower-growing trees crowd
aspens out: conifers, spire after spire
up-thrusted like the sky itself needs plowed.

So keep poetics moving down the line
or suffer—it's planned-in?—obsolescence.
Recall how Tarzan swings from vine to vine.
What fails to dawn on us is senescence.

On that I pay heed to Alice Notley
who said "poetics is an industry."

---Ed Zahniser

No Great Difference

Writing as a writer, Zadie Smith says: "There is no great difference between novels and banana bread." She speaks in terms of Coviddities, not some pastries but our use of time. In an earlier epoch Bob Dylan advised: "Strap yourself to a tree with roots. you ain't going nowhere," a useful adage for our politicized pandemic that begs self-isolation in collective efforts to flatten Death's steep curve. As a successful writer, one might well equate a banana bread with a novel. Both mean "food" for Smith. Now therefore may we all write on.

—Ed Zahniser

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry editor Hezekiah writes... For the cherished, rare few who prefer romance to red wheelbarrows here is Edward Zahniser's take, double take . . . stolen glance?—nothing like a bit of pilfered poetry with a savory hormone glaze. I think I just might like this borrowed one better than the barrow one. Scroll down, 'Poetics Over Time' is a great relief to me as I, too, will soon be back in diapers. Zahniser speaks to poetry's place in literature as an ever-changing genre of boundless self-expression; as Aspens, rising like phoenixes in dead forests to make way for heartier conifers to follow, "spire after spire / up-thrusted like the sky itself needs plowed"—what a deliciously non-deciduous line. And just as the timber trades, quoting Alice Notley, "'poetics is an industry.'" And read 'No Great Difference' too, you'll find him equally dismissive and inspired referencing Zadie Smith comparing novels to banana bread." Now therefore may we all write on."*

THE POET SPEAKS:

The XXII poem was formally inspired by the William Carlos Williams titled as "The Red Wheelbarrow," although Williams himself

never titled. In a book of poems he simply numbered it XXII. What caught my eye at this juncture was the phrase “so much depends,” and too often it does, on those hormones. And I also took the “beside themselves” phrase from the poem “beside the white chickens,” whose fauna suggested “with their heads cut off.” That was inspired by an incident my wife and I encountered in Morocco. We were at a shop with other tourists, and there was not room for us to enter at the tail end of our group, so we hung outside. Across the sidewalk on a bench, two Moroccan fellows cut off the head of a white chicken, which proceeded to do backward somersaults, about six repetitions, with no head, spurting blood, but landing perfectly on its feet every time! You can extrapolate how that might redound, as an image, to humans under the thrall of, for example, testosterone. Although I’ve always thought that if we pronounced testosterone as as though it were Italian—testosteroney—it might cut down on bar fights and even wars.

Generally my stylistic influences are John Berryman, Ted Berrigan, Frank O’Hara, Gerald Stern, and the long single-sentence poems of Stern, Howard Nemerov, and a few others.

Poetry is important to read and write, for me, because it’s the way I negotiate the world and, often, figure out the meaning or import of phenomena and experiences. I think the poem “Poetics Over Time” comes specifically out of that impulse regarding phenomena.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Ed Zahniser was a founding editor of Some Of Us Press in Washington, D.C. He is the author of seven books of poetry, recently *Confidence in Being and Other Poems*, Red Dashboard Press, and seven chapbooks. He co-founded *The Good News Paper* and was poetry editor for 40 years. As Shepherdstown Poet Laureate he curates Poem of the Month, posted at Town Hall. His books, chapbooks, edited anthologies, and curated exhibit catalogs of art gallery shows of poetry as works on walls are in the University at Buffalo Special Collection of 20th- and 21st-Century Poetry in English.

she makes me 19 & other poems...

By Jack Henry

In order to keep the poet's dedicated spacing Hezekiah's note follows the poems. All appeared previously in an echap called The Righthand Angle of a Continuous Curve from Blunt Trauma Press, now defunct. Font size is poet's own. Eds.

she makes me 19

she makes me 19 when i stare into her eyes
when i try to form a sentence
when i attempt to speak without stutter -

my mind spins a vast wasteland of mythology,
hope and happenstance;
ignoring the now, the real,
so-called day-to-day mundane activities
we often find ourselves trapped within -

her confessions share no perfections,
each atom, each cell, each breath hangs sweet on my skin,
tells a story i struggle to share -

my days blaze with fire when she connects
by phone or phrase -

there are always lines to read between,
nuance, however subtle,
in my mind she looks at me the same as i look at her,
but my mind is no longer agile, no longer
complete, no longer rational -

a mirror reflects an image only i can see -

when truth creeps in i find myself deep inside craters clawed from
clay and dirt with my own bloodied hands -

i am mistaken, i know this, but from the well of life,
no matter how dry, hope always springs -

especially in the mind of a madman -

fields afire

there is no silence at the center of a garden filled
with dead flowers and falling leaves.
a garden surrounded by armor and brick
and bones of soldiers gone so long from us now -

we stare up through trees bent in relentless wind,
watch for crows & heroes & golden dreams
ripped from pages of porn star memoirs -

sometimes she whispers on my shoulder,
just before tears fall,
just before truth spills across a fresh scrubbed floor,
just before a phone rings,
& a man's voice fills the receiver,
sudden realization grips the throat of a barrister in decline -

once i wept for a woman like that,
a woman whose magic lived between her legs,
whose magic lingered on her lips before fleeing into memory -

neglect and shadows fall across her face -
i open a door -
i take her hand -
i lay her down -
words filter through fly traps,
through black screens & under doorways -

only the moans of her last saving grace fill the room
& we laugh aloud despite a moon overflowing
with blood red rage
& fields afire burning free & close to the soul -

driftwood

TV buzzes some old movie.
undercover angels chase demon dope.
a ceiling fan spins lazy.
winter begins a slow drift in.

i check memories left hidden in the bottom
of an old tee-shirt drawer.
wipe away spider webs and driftwood,
cut free pictures of dead lovers with
a rusty switchblade knife.

she had a name, changed now to something i cannot remember.
once married, settled into default divorce.
two teenaged kids off to college.

an image dissolves in my brain: a woman alone,
settled on a fat, brown couch situated to perfection
in the middle of an upscale Scottsdale house,
a small dog coiled into the crook of her leg.

her smile wavers, just before teardrops fall,
just before a memory shatters and i close the drawer.

atop the bones of dead saints

one by one we place stones atop the bones of saints
felled by the voices of disbelief and disintegration –

and no more to dance in fields laid flat by footsteps
of hooligans and martyrs, carrying their flames and fears
within the clench of trembling hands -

i wait in my gray walled cell, surrounded by barbed wire and prison dogs –

my debt still due to a society no longer holding faith in anything more than the thickening
cock held
before their anguished lips -

east of where i stand

my brain fills with scattershot landscapes,
 tumble weeds blow dead
 across long flat rivers of black asphalt,
 trees and shrubs bend from a ceaseless wind,
 dust carves veins atop dry clay river bottoms –

i cannot begin again down this road,
 travel across the Mojave,
 through ports of insanity,
 past memories etched on bar tops
 and dirty truck stop bathroom floors –

stains litter broken concrete,
 remembrances of escapade and malady –

at a four-corner stop on Highway 72,
 where cars seldom pass,
 trucks never venture,
 where traffickers land and unload Columbian wares,
 where the restless find peace,
 i pull to the shoulder –

swirls of dust peel toward an expectant smile -

i scream out her name,
 if only to hear it breathe to life,
 if only to let the word tumble from my drying lips,
 if only to know a moment of solace –

before the road calls
 and I travel East –

i always travel East,
 she will always be East of where I stand -

a suddenness that cannot be explained

...and this young couple kisses
at the center of a coffee shop,
no one seems to notice me
and i cannot avert my eyes
just as i cannot remember when the simple lust of youth
conveyed so much light and explosion,
a fire from a hidden corner
behind the soul but near the heart -

...and i look away toward a sun
winking atop fat white clouds,
a sun knowing more than should be known
by such a distant friend;
and when i collapse into a pool of words
and monograms and little shiny tidbits,
random flashes of bluster and a wind rip across an asphalt
parking lot in a low part of Phoenix,
a part of town where memories
are best left alone
and leaving becomes the best part of the day -

...and i know i have to return
to realm of normalcy and leave this
fascination alone, return it to its sleeve,
stored away with the LPs
gathering dust in a box buried under clothes
in the corner of a garage
i no longer own -

contemplating discretion

there is a taste in my mouth, bitter sweet,
a reminder, perhaps, of a gun-metal past,
a formless gray future –

an indication, if you will,
of a precarious perch
between reality & the skin of angels
i have long sought –

there is a dream in my skull, a nightmare it seems,
left to fester its damnation upon the last fleeting strands
of casual exuberance & moments of self-realization
left hidden in an old shirt pocket –

demons in Mercedes' drive too fast on Interstates,
talk into cell phones, attempt to rule the world,
contemplate indiscretion, plot the next conquest
from their nesting
between the legs of a whore -

thickets along a dust trail
hiding bombs & marauders,
insurgents filled with black tar intent
& sleight of hand fascination,
skilled craftsmen in warrior cry tradition –

there are miles of road
restless beneath my feet,
rising through green hills,
and pastures filled with indifferent cows
and bellicose farmers -

a road eager to take me east but always reminding me
home is where i stand -

a sound as light as a feather drifting away

she lives beyond a long dead sea -
 past flat valleys and jagged peaks -
 rivers that long to taste water,
 again -

out beyond simple reach -
 beyond grasping hands and fingertips -
 beyond mysteries yet to unfold
 but eager to stretch -

no future except for another breath, another sigh -
 when morning sun bites into the eastern sky,
 i damn its presence,
 for the sun has touched her before i ever had a chance
 and each day shall forever begin the same -

no trust held within veins of coursing blood -
 her eyes alight with passion, fire and strange magic -
 a storm begins to ride across the desert -

and if i ever spilled the truth; broke down past barriers
 and concrete walls; past warriors and demons alike;
 past the very edge of a fading world;
 thunder may crash down pronouncing
 a sudden end to all that i am or, perhaps, a mouse may squeak
 a sound so light a feather would pass it by as
 it simply drifted away -

there's no telling a future
 when the past is not yet done -

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes... Here is some poetry from Jack Henry aka jck hnry who sometimes eschews vowels and one of whose routine duties is fishbowl cleaning. What could possibly go wrong with this? The greatest compliment one can extend a writer is to read. 'she makes me 19' "her confessions share no perfections," "my days blaze with fire when she connects / by phone or phrase -" "a mirror reflects an image only i can see -" This guy is hep: "swirls of dust peel toward an expectant smile -" "...i collapse into a pool of words" You have to have the burn. What if Jack actually lived this life? ...I would like to come back as him.

THE POET SPEAKS:

Ah ja. das ist fantastisch. ich danke dir sehr.

How Did I Start: i have read and studied poetry, and writing in general, for most of my adult life. during my extended internment at University i studied literature, history, cultural anthropology, and quantum theory before discovering writing as a reasonable outlet for my warped sensibilities. eventually, i received an mfa in poetry some years ago.

in my mind poetry is the basis of all writing, all communication, all interpretation of the world us; without poetry we are nothing.

i started writing to understand myself and my own reality. over the years i cycled through different realms of interpretation before returning to a very simplistic world view based on words and sound.

Stylistic Influences: like a great many poets i found my start through Bukowski but stayed in that grasp for a short while. my influences are fairly obvious in the Beats, early Russian Formalism specifically Mayakovski, late post modernists such as Charles Simic.

more important influences are really in the world of film and music. i found influence in the LA Punk scene in the mid-70s and early 80s. and within film i have taken a great deal from David Lynch, Martin Scorsese, and a myriad of others. i believe the visual arts have a great effect upon the written arts. of course, it is a two-way street.

Why Is Poetry Important? poetry is the basis of all human communication. that is why it is important. it is the simplest, and most complex, form of writing to express human emotion and circumstance.

writing poetry is like breathing for me. i think in poetic form. my mind is always writing, subconsciously. writing it down is the only way to relieve the madness.

in the end i truly believe that poetry should be brutally real and deeply honest. life is not always a colorful metaphor or clever twist of phrase and word. it is much deeper, much darker. simple words often convey the strongest message.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Jack Henry (jck hnry) is a writer/editor located in the high desert of California. Jack is editor/publisher/fish bowl cleaner at

Heroin Love Songs and 1870 Press. Recent work has appeared in Red Fez, Horror Sleaze Trash, Bold Monkey, Rusty Truck, Fearless, Cajun Mutt, Dissident Voice, Ariel Chart and others. In the Fall of 2020 Jck's latest collection "Cosmonauts Sing Old David Bowie Songs: A memoir of crazy," will be released by **Punk Hostage Press**. jackhenry.wordpress.com

POST-MODERN PAPYRUS and other poems...

By Liana Kapelke-Dale

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes... The greatest tragedy in editing poetry is that it is almost as lonesome as it is personal. So me, myself and I, are each delighted when we run across something we simply adore. I think Liana Kapelke-Dale, a name for the stage or at very least something artful, has set sail her voice box to parts unknown—"among the swampy reeds." "what must become lost / within the chalk body-outline / of irrevocable classification?" 'Pagophobic Logophobe' cascades, "clinging to a drainpipe / like a kitten to a tree branch" And 'saltwater taffy' "on what i can taste / in this new flavor." (Spacing and font size are poet's own.)*
HS

Post-Modern Papyrus

When everything is new, or maybe old
but newly remembered by my heartbeat –

that's when I lose all use for language.

Every word is a platitude in the face
of something entirely new,
and so I fear the naming of unknown things.
If mere observation inherently changes
the observed, what must become lost

within the chalk body-outline
of irrevocable classification?

Regrettably unaware of its uselessness,
my verbose voice box chatters
in a fluid string of toneless, banal syllables
as I lead it, oblivious, onto a raft
pushing it away from shore,
sending it down the river and through the reeds
like Moses.

Out of sight, the hollow soliloquy fades to silence.
Distracted, I estimate how long it will be before
my little chatterbox is found
spouting platitudes among the swampy reeds
and hailed by the inarticulate as a prophet of rare insight.

Absent-minded, I make a mental note
to expect guerrilla proselytizers armed
with glossy pamphlets printed
on non-recyclable paper, advertising
“The All-New, Tax-Exempt 501(c)(3) Non-Profit
Church of the Divinely-Endowed Voice Box”
(or whatever)
sometime within the next six months or so.

But no matter now.

Everyday objects around me blur
into an impressionistic mess of light
and texture. Words and names
fall away as colors bleed
through me quickly like watercolors
through tissue paper.

Wet and pulpy, I drop
clumps of the sopping paper
(which sobs pathetic rainbow tears
as it nears cellular breakdown)
into my blender, wincing as the blade
rips the sodden stuff to mush.

I spread and flatten the pulp with a rolling pin,
bake it until it's dry
and stiff and thick
and brittle.

Hot homemade papyrus, straight from the oven –
just like the ancient Egyptians used to make,

only probably rougher and bumpier

and overall much more difficult to write on.

There will never be a clean slate.

Words can be lost

abandoned

rejected

recanted

but not erased.

So now I recycle my names and words
for things and record patched-together
insights on my ever-improving
homemade batches
of post-modern papyrus.

Because nothing in this world is ever entirely new

except,

perhaps,

for our understanding.

Pagophobic Logophobe**pagophobic** (*adj.*):

(1) of, pertaining to, or exhibiting pagophobia, the fear of ice and/or frost.

logophobe (*noun*):

(1) one who suffers from logophobia, the fear of words and/or talking.

I'm frightened

Little tremors fumble through

my gut's firmament

I'm so afraid of my words they might

slice downwards

like icicles

tear through paper

I can almost feel cold diamond shards

on my skin

Sometimes my words just

drip

so simply

onto paper

as though from

paint

at the tip

of a brush

or

water from

the eternal

faucet

and I invite breath deeply into my lungs

But now my words are dry frozen daggers

hypnotizing with their wry scintillating points

and my breath freezes as well sharply

below them

My fear is
of the potential to inflict
 mortal wounds
Winter's starry-eyed blades
could crackle down
onto unsuspecting heads
at any moment

and I am afraid

I cower with head in hands
back bowed
spine paralyzed into submission

We learned about this in elementary school

In case of: earthquake

tornado

blizzard

flood

hurricane

nuclear war

etc.

please cover head with hands

because you can live without your hands

but not without your head

nor without your words

Feet sunk deep in snow

I stand below

looking up at sparkling translucence

that could stab to the core

But I reach up

gently tug at the largest

most deadly

icicle

until it breaks off cleanly

at the root

Sheathed in my hand

the icicle shines cold

frozen ripples distorting its clarity

The blood that blushes my skin begins

to soften the ice against my palm

and as I smile
at the thought
that the remaining icicles
are simply water paralyzed
clinging to a drainpipe
like a kitten to a tree branch

the lethal weapon
melts in my hand

saltwater taffy

whenever i learn something new

about you

i tuck the information away

in my wallet or jacket pockets

to salivate over

later

in the sanctity of my bedroom

i'll secretly take it out

like a sweet juicy piece

of saltwater taffy

that demands my attention

it challenges my dry mouth

not to water

i unwrap it

with surgical precision

not wanting to leave even the tiniest

sliver of candy
 behind on the waxed paper

 unable to wait any longer
 i place the delicious morsel
 onto my tongue

 close my eyes

 and focus

 on what i can taste

 in this new flavor

THE POET SPEAKS:

The three poems of mine published here in Fleas on the Dog came into being by way of three very different catalysts. "Post-Modern Papyrus" is in some ways my favorite of the three, and somewhat ironically was written to express how sick I was of my own voice at the time. Generally, I love the sound of my voice (not a joke), but I was really burned out by words for a while, and my kind of sardonic resignation to that fact ended up producing "Post-Modern Papyrus." I don't take myself too seriously as a person, but that fact doesn't always come across in my poetry; I think that it does come across in this particular poem, which is one of the reasons I like it.

"Pagophobic Logophobe" is also about the intense effect that words can have, but it was written more about their potential fallout than linguistic exhaustion.

"saltwater taffy" is definitely the most straightforward of the three at first glance (it's about falling in love), but I'll leave it to the reader to decide why this love has to be enjoyed in such secrecy – and why the poetic voice has only small morsels of their beloved to cherish.

Honestly, generally there aren't a lot of poets who I'm consciously inspired by. I just kind of write. Some of my favorite poets include Pablo Neruda, Federico García-Lorca, Anne Sexton, e e cummings, Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, Blanca Varela, and Tracy K. Smith. (I like a lot of Spanish-language poets; one of my other linguistic loves is written translation, and sometimes for fun (I'm also a gigantic nerd) I'll translate a Spanish poem into English.) The person who's unquestionably had the greatest impact on my poetry is my mother, Kathleen Dale, an excellent editor and poet in her own right. She continues to help me with my process.

*I will say that I rely more on outside poetic influences ("outside" meaning outside my brain, I guess?) when I'm writing in form. For example, I've been experimenting recently with villanelles, and I've looked to Sylvia Plath and Dylan Thomas for guidance there (incidentally, if you like reading poetry in form, check out the journal *Grand Little Things* – they exclusively publish poetry in form, and my villanelle "Feral Love Song" was featured there recently).*

I'm not sure I'd be alive today without poetry. I've dealt with mental illness (Bipolar II Disorder and Borderline Personality Disorder) my whole life, and writing poetry lets me bleed onto the page rather than bleed literally. Then I get to feel the wound heal to pink and scab or scar over. It's similar with reading poetry – whether the blood is surging lifeblood or from a bleeding wound, great poets express emotions in ways that are so precise, you know exactly what they mean. There's a simultaneous uniqueness and universality to really good poetry, and for me there's nothing as satisfying as finding the exact right words to describe a sensation or feeling – whether you're reading those words or writing them yourself.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Liana Kapelke-Dale holds a B.A. in Spanish Language and Literature from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and a J.D. from the University of Wisconsin Law School. Her poetry has been featured in such journals as *Impossible Task*, *The Fabulist*, *Uppagus*, and *Torrid Literature Journal*, among others. Liana's first chapbook of poetry, *Specimens*, was published in 2012, and a second haiku chapbook, *Little words seeking/Mute human for mutual/Gain and maybe more*, was published in early 2020. She currently lives in Milwaukee, WI, with her beloved pointer-hound mix.

3 (Three) Poems

By Edward L. Canavan

Poetry editor Hezekiah writes:

Was it Walt Whitman, they said, who ‘whittled his words?’ I forget. Who was it? If you read nothing else in this issue, see how sharp Edward L. Canavan’s axe is...rejoice in how little time it takes to be inspired...(Spacing, numerals and font size are poet’s own) HS

1. closing bell

emptiness adorned
in latitudes beyond
conception

pieces in the ether
miraculously eschew

heavy lids
weighted secrets

each to each other
and gone

brushing away
the loose ground
of false foundations

to unearth the blank slate
beneath the broken heart.

*

2.
last light

down across the sky

still burning
into the dark

the city dissolves
beneath the tongue

and with it
the bitterness
of love leaving.

*

3.
easing out

pills of poison and milk thistle
whatever works its way to soften
the murderous time

whether hanging birdhouses
or witnessing the ballet of nakedness
the soul performs in the privacy
of broad daylight

most things become a lie
the longer you live

cures cause cancer
death falls in love

we take what comes
convinced we should
carry the weight

when what is actually ours
becomes less and less.

THE POET SPEAKS: *The first two poems are taken from the as yet unpublished collection called “Transmissions from the Red Star”, which are basically just about different perspectives of the heart. Some part of your world is always either beginning or ending, and how we deal with those feelings can make or break whatever happens next. The third poem is from a current collection I am working on tentatively title “poems from the ground floor”. am still figuring out what the f**k that one is about myself. My head’s been all over the place lately and that is just something that came out of it recently. I guess it’s just mostly about how dealing with all this uncertainty while trying to sort out exactly how to proceed in these new dark age is proving to be quite the daunting task.*

AUTHOR BIO: Edward L. Canavan is an American poet whose work has most recently been published in Harbinger Asylum, Poetry Quarterly, and The Opiate.

His second poetry collection entitled "Protest and Isolation" was recently released by Cyberwit Press. Edward's poems were featured as part of The Poetry of Place exhibit at South Pasadena City Hall Gallery in March 2020.

He is a native of the Bronx, NY and currently resides in North Hollywood, California where he practices Buddhism and listens to the Ramones.

POP & BEFORE THE LAW

By Connor McDonald

*Poetry editor Hezekiah writes... I ordinarily find repetition, as a device, repetitious, but I like the comfort of a villanelle. I read slowly and return to lines routinely; so when they are repeated it is a comfort. Perhaps it is my revisiting, undiagnosed autism with a dash of Asperger's. Connor McDonald's 'Before the Law' reminds me of Warhol's Marilyn Diptych or the Elizabeth Taylor or Beatty or Donahue or on and on. It is truly screen-print poetry by an artist who sees something --"4 Minutes to Wapner." I find solace in linear circuitry. Assured to either sooth or unsettle. Note to self: I can't find anything in his labyrinth of lines ungrammatical other than it is bereft of punctuation--after all, I believe he is a lawyer. Now to '*Pop*' it is added for tragic relief. My sights were fixed on the words "not far / or near / enough[.]" (Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS*

Pop

In
the dark
thought(s)
of what
the mind
thinks of
the sound
of a gun
(or fireworks)
not far
or near
enough

Before the Law

The law is the law is the law
 and we will reside
 and we will reside in it
 and in it we will reside
 and it will reside in we that reside
 and in we that reside it will reside
 and it in we that reside will it reside
 and we and it will reside without history
 without history as the history is this
 as without history the history is this
 as the history is this without history
 the law is the law is the law
 and there is nothing outside
 and there is nothing outside of this
 and there is nothing outside of this for it to reside in
 and there is nothing outside of this for we that reside in it
 and there is nothing of it outside we that reside in it
 and there is nothing outside for we that reside in it
 and there is nothing
 as there is no history without it
 as without it there is no history
 as there is without it no history
 as without history there is it
 as it is there without history
 as the history within is this
 the law is the law is the law

THE POET SPEAKS: *Inspirations for *Pop* include the childhood experience of living in disadvantaged neighborhoods and the interplay between reality and imagination. Inspirations for Before the Law include too many hours studying arbitrary rules as a law student. Both works stem from the stylistic influences of Robert Creeley and Gertrude Stein in explorations of the patterns to be found syllable by syllable or idea-phrase by idea-phrase*

in a stream of consciousness. By the same token, poetry is important to me because I find it an enjoyable (beautiful) way of communicating, not only with others, but also with myself.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Connor McDonald received his Juris Doctor from Willamette University College of Law. His poetry has appeared most recently in *Wales Haiku Journal*, *Under the Bashō*, and *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*. His nonfiction has also appeared in the *Dante Society of America's Dante Notes*, *Beatdom*, and *bluntly* magazine.

Flash Bang Boom and other poems

By Howie Good

*Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: Howie Good has an affinity for the absurd and an affection for the macabre. If you're a fan of poetry disguised as flash fiction, he's your man. "We know that something is very wrong and we are living it." "Now I often catch the dog lying on the couch studying me with cold, squinty eyes as if calculating exactly how much a person can bear." Now that I have alerted you too, and spoiled, the first two last lines, the readers who are fondly drawn to Good will know exactly who they are and they are precisely the ones I long to meet. Thinking outside-the-box is one thing, here is a view beyond all horizons. READ '**Chaos Theory**' word for word and don't MISS '**Alienation Nation**'... "“nuts” loosely." (Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS*

Flash Bang Boom

With the encouragement of family and friends, I adopted a retired bomb-sniffing dog. I called him “Flash” – after the flashing lights of a migraine, I would joke to anyone who asked. One day he discovered under the couch the severed head of a doll I didn’t even know I had. Next the piano stopped making sounds when I sat down to play it. Then the tree outside my window appeared suspended like an astronaut in space. Now I often catch the dog lying on the couch studying me with cold, squinty eyes as if calculating exactly how much a person can bear.

The Gray Man

A man covered in gray dust was walking. He was very far away, but he never stopped walking. He was walking to find me. No matter how long it took, he would find his way up the steps to my door. My family was sitting on the couch in front of the TV. I was in the other room. They couldn't hear me. It was as if I was pressed between glass. I felt so lonely, and the gray man was walking up the steps to the door and then knocking on the door and then pounding and then trying to push the door in. It's an old story, told over and over and over again. I'm just telling it one more time. We know that something is very wrong and we are living it.

Sources: <http://idiommag.com/2012/10/the-handmade-luther-price;> <https://hyperallergic.com/578463/beer-with-a-painter-roger-herman>

Alienation Nation

America was once a nest of singing birds. Now the pigeons nesting on the window ledges carry lethal diseases. It's as if the eccentric architecture inside me is turning into the architecture outside me. We need a plan, an intervention, something. I try to be invisible when I see someone walking toward me on the street. You never know the kind of threat they may pose. A tech exec was just found in his luxury apartment decapitated, limbless, with an electric chainsaw nearby. I swear, if this keeps on much longer, even psychologists will be using the word "nuts" loosely.

Chaos Theory

I like naps. As it wasn't too late, I wanted to enjoy a nap under a tree. I started for the door, but a short stocky man with an uncanny resemblance to Stalin, the dictator who put the "p" in paranoia, caught me by the arm. Of all those present, only he had a distinct shadow, and he projected it onto walls, ceilings, furniture, anything. "Fishing," he said, "is a metaphor for Alzheimer's." He sounded pissed about it, too. I promised myself right then that when this was over, I would resolve the things eating away at me.

&

By the time I was 22, I'd already had all sorts of shitty jobs – washed dishes, unloaded auto parts from semi-trailers, alphabetized files in an insurance office, drove a cab. I once even cleared a field for an old farmer who was skeptical at first because of my shoulder-length hair. These days, farmers sing to their favorite crop, and the bearded lady gives serious consideration to shaving her face. One must have some chaos in oneself, like Sartre when he thought he was being followed down a street in Paris by a pair of rare blue lobsters.

&

Some days I walk to think, some days to actually get somewhere. I've been thinking about death a lot lately, whether there are flickering emojis at the end or steel bars on all the windows, whether Jesus appears with the hateful look on his face that my father would give me whenever he sneered, "What are you, stupid?" It's perplexing how much darkness a person can swallow and still function. Even after Hitler was dead, the screams from the gas chambers went on.

&

I was anxious about what might happen next now that transvestite vampire biker nuns from outer space were shooting death rays from their fingertips. So I dove into a visceral beautiful turbulent place. I was soon wishing I hadn't. There were people there who could recite by heart the four rules for the perfect selfie: hold your phone high; know your angle; know your lighting; and no duckface!

&

The beach is deserted this time of year, but the light is particularly beautiful, as if infused with the tenderest feelings for all the bleakness it touches. She gets out her phone to take a picture. I'm standing a slight distance off, the sparkling ocean at my back, waiting for her to tell me when to smile.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I believe a poem shouldn't just be about our experience, but be an experience itself. This is the reaction I at least have had to poems by some of my favorite writers: Charles Simic, Robert Bly, Donald Justice, William Carlos Williams, Donald Hall, Margaret Atwood, Carolyn Forché, Sharon Olds, and even Charles Bukowski.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Howie Good is the author of THE DEATH ROW SHUFFLE, a poetry collection forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.

a shop worker's Christmas and other poems

By Paul Tanner

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes... I find it quite exceptional in the way Paul Tanner carves out slices of life. In 'a shop worker's Christmas' we find a loving wife in contrast to a disgruntled customer—both pinching. His proceeding poems follow a similar theme revealing how trying it can be in the service industry; and how cruel some people can act. I hope they have quelled some of his frustrations and purged some others' thoughts. Courtesies are shared; delusions of superiority and servility are not. (Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS

a shop worker's Christmas

we're sitting cross-legged under the tree.

I can't wait for my wife to see what I got her.

I reach for the present

I want her to open next

and my sleeve rides up,

showing a bruise by my elbow.

I stare at it ...

what's the matter? my wife asks me.

nothing, I say, handing her the present.

here, this one's for you!

oooh, she says, taking it off me ...

I try to live in the moment.

I am living in the moment

and in this moment

it's Christmas day

and I have a beautiful wife

and my beautiful wife

is pinching at the corner

of the wrapping paper

that is wrapped around

the present I got her

pinching

just like

that customer pinched me

yesterday

when I told her

we'd ran out of turkeys,
when she pinched me by the elbow
as she told me
that I'd ruined her Christmas
and her kids would be upset
and it was all my fault
and was I happy with myself?
before she finally let go
of my arm
and stormed out
yelling
that I should be ashamed ...
anyway:

I love it! my beautiful wife says, looking at the present

and we hug.

I live in the moment
and in this moment
my bruised arm
is around my beautiful wife
and I'm thinking

I should enjoy this moment
and every other moment
today
has to offer
because after all

I'm in work again tomorrow.

yeah, sure, why not

it's like this every time I come in here! she says.

IT'S ALWAYS TERRIBLE CUSTOMER SERVICE!

what crime my co-worker had committed

against her

I don't know,

cos I was stacking shelves at the time –

maybe he didn't laugh at her joke,

or look interested enough in her sob story,

or he dared to tell her he couldn't reduce prices –

but whatever it was,

I could hear her resultant victim screams

from across the store alright ...

hours later

I ran across the road to get something to eat

and she was holding up the queue

in there:

it's like this every time I come in here! she was telling the worker.

IT'S ALWAYS TERRIBLE CUSTOMER SERVICE ...

what crime had been committed against her

this time

I don't know, but ...

funny, isn't it, how shops always hire

the worst servers to serve customers?

no wonder she's so angry:

it's too much of coincidence

to ignore:

maybe we really are all picking on her.

snap

the customer reaches over the counter
and snatches the money out of your hand,
scratching you
deep enough
to make you bleed
and you say excuse me,
I was going to hand you your change
if you'd have just waited another second
and they say
you can't talk to me like that!
and make a complaint

so your boss reprimands you
for being aggressive to a customer
and when you suggest that
maybe this is not fair
she accuses you of being
passive aggressive towards her

so you go job centre
where they say they can't help you
and when you dare to ask
why not?

they hold their hands up
and wheel backwards in their wheelie chair
saying woah, wait a minute,
they have the right to work
without abuse or threats, you know!
and the security ape comes over
to escort you out

and then you're on the street
and someone asks you if you can spare
"the price of a cup of tea"
and you tell them you can't
and they say alright,
there's no need to be so stuck up about it!
their bellows echoing across the street
as you walk away:
bully! they cry. heartless tory!

and then you're on a bench
watching all your victims
waltz by

until someone comes over

and tells you

this is my bench

and finally

you snap:

a red curtain comes down behind your eyes

and with it

the need to shred through society

until someone shoots you down

and then it'll all be done with

for you

at least.

there's no punchline here,

this is just how it is now:

the red curtain wafting

behind your eyes,

waiting for the final act

any moment now.

frothed town centre emotional broth

been queueing for half an hour!
she says, plonking her stuff down
on my conveyor belt.
you need more tills, you do!

yeah, I agree with her
and start scanning her stuff ...

“yeah”? she says. that’s it, is it? just “yeah?”

what do you want me do about it?
I ask her. you want me to widen the building
and construct more checkouts stations?

then she made a complaint
about my “attitude”

so they had to take me off the tills
and drag me into the back office
to sign a form
agreeing to the vague charge
that I was a “bad person”

or whatever it was supposed to prove,

while the rest of the staff

struggled with the queues

a man down.

bet the customers loved that.

THE POET SPEAKS: *"I honestly don't know what the hell I'm doing. Obviously, a lot of my stuff has a certain political, class-conscious angle, but ultimately, this is the Muse, and one doesn't go dissecting the Muse: what if I get cured of it? Then I'm staring 40 in the face and earning minimum wage, without a creative outlet! Sod that. So it's an art-imitating-life-imitating-art kinda deal, and I'm locked in for life -today's social setup has seen to that. Still, thanks for the material, ya bastards."*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Novel 'Jobseeker' doing alright on Amazon UK. Shortlisted for the Erbacce 2020 Poetry Prize. Latest collection "Shop Talk: Poems for Shop Workers" is published by Penniless Press.

TOTES **HEAVY** BURDEN

By Joe Sonnenblick

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: This poem has such a curious impact on me: We wind up right inside Sonnenblick's head and it's scribed so beautifully. For me, he is a stranger in a small local bar seeing a not so incidental commemorative plaque, sentimental to few and representative of many, and writes to the family this not-so-anonymous ode... "from Brooklyn, Salud."*

Totes Heavy Burden

I put down my drink,
 The sweat rolling off the glass in this hot room.
 Reflections of a walk I took in Greenpoint
 Passing attached houses full of mirth, truth, rape, excoriation,
 All closed doors.
 A window held a plaque for Stanley,
 A Stanley I didn't get to know
 1948-1969 the inscription read "Always our son and brother"
 Vietnam.
 I can only hope it was quick, Stanley
 All those guys and gals
 All those innocent Vietnamese.
 This is my proclamation
 This my cavalcade
 Fifty-One years later,
 Someone remembered
 Someone cared.
 Thanks Stanley from Brooklyn,
 Salud.

THE POET SPEAKS: *'Totes Heavy Burden' was inspired by one of the oddest weekends of the year. I felt a kinship to a person I'd never met, and*

Stanley who was real, who met his demise in this horror show of a war. It all came rushing to me when I saw the plaque hanging in that lone window. Stylistically I am influenced by Anne Waldman, Robert Creeley, Louise Gluck, Charles Bukowski, and Richard Brautigan respectively. Poetry is important because it feeds something that the normalcy of life cannot nourish. I write because I have to and that's the truth. I've been consistently writing since I was sixteen years old, and I'm realizing that poetry is also the discovery of something new every single day.

AUTHOR'S BIO: My name is Joe Sonnenblick. I'm a born and raised Brooklynite who has been featured in multiple E-magazines such as "The Reject" and "Citizen Brooklyn".

I have read up and down the east coast including being featured at the poets house in Tribeca.

I believe in plain speaking as a poet, and not mucking up the work by trying to please others. Big fan of humanity.

WHO LIKES CHRISTMAS and other poems

By Arianna Sebo

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: Arianna Sebo is a unique voice with something to say. Her observations are original and to the point. I didn't know you could make garlands from VHS tape. "who likes Christmas / anyway." '2 to 45 More' and 'Fat Pets' are each light, artful and humorous with a dash of Ogden Nash...(Spacing and font sizes poet's own) HS*

Who Likes Christmas

VHS tapes

so old

decrepit, really

smelling musty

feeling dusty

should disassemble them

to make garlands for my trees

but it's not Christmas

who likes Christmas

anyway

2 to 45 More

2 more postcards to write

today

45 more minutes to pretend to work

today

2 beers waiting at home to drink

today

45 pounds to lose by summer, but not

today

2 more days to wait for a sale, so not

today

45 more days of Ichiban left in my cupboard to eat

today

2 more lines to write in this poem

today

45 more days of madness, including

today

Fat Pets

I feel bad for fat dogs
 when I see them walking
 down the street
 It doesn't matter if their
 owners are fat or skinny
 a fat dog means you don't
 take care of it properly
 A fat cat on the other hand
 is okay
 Cats have a will of their own
 At least that's what I tell myself
 and my fat cat

THE POET SPEAKS: *2 to 45 More is about getting through everyday life, counting the days through to the good times. The everyday moments of life sometimes lack that mystical feeling of being connected to the rest of the universe. We get stuck in our daily routines, and as we age our social circles often shrink. As a blue collar worker at the time, I was just counting the days till the good times.*

Who Likes Christmas was written after dealing with my outdated television-watching technology: my 28" CRT TV and my dual VCR/DVD player with my stacks of VHS tapes containing taped television shows. I couldn't part with them, but with the newer technology available, it was unlikely I was going to watch those tapes again. Little did I know I would watch all of them late last year to see if there was anything I wanted to keep. I kept one VHS tape with a clip of me being interviewed on a local news show.

Fat Pets was inspired by a portly hound dog I saw being walked by its owner. Its belly was almost scraping across the cement when it trudged along, so I felt bad for it. Then I looked at my fat cat and he was the happiest cat I'd ever seen. Thus Fat Pets was born.

I enjoy lots of different poetry now that I have a free library card and can download new books to my iPhone using hoopla. Some of my favourites are still Russell Edson and Bukowski. I'm enjoying new poetry by K.Y. Robinson, Atticus, Rupi Kaur, and old favourites like Margaret Atwood, Leonard Cohen and Emily Dickinson. I read poetry for fun and I write poetry to express thoughts or emotions that I don't normally express in my everyday life. That's what poetry is for me: a means of expression and an avenue to share the essence of my being. It's often irreverent and/or odd, but that's me.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Arianna Sebo (she/her) is a queer poet and writer living in Southern Alberta with her husband, pug, and five cats. Her poetry can be found in *Capsule Stories*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Front Porch Review*, and *Lucky Jefferson*. Follow her at AriannaSebo.com and @AriannaSebo on Twitter and Instagram.

5 (Five) Poems

By JoAnn LoVerde-Dropp

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes... LoVerde-Dropp has a razor-sharp wit, and she has been kind enough to cut us in. 'Day Job' is hilarious, I can't find a single word I wouldn't highlight. In 'The Guest' the line "How we prepare for the visit / tells who's coming," is such a resonating statement I felt obliged to research it, and concluded it could only be her own. Her works are each a delight, but feast your eyes on this last verse: "Mostly, I keep quiet – / always changing my mind / about how far back in time / I would go if I could. // It's a little further back each time." (Spacing is poet's own.) HS*

Day Job

On the days I don't get much done
it's because I'm thinking
of the life I lead
in a parallel universe.

Not so much
about how sad I'll be
to lose that long-term temp position
at the Museum of Light Dimmers
when Lupe returns
from maternity leave

but whether or not it takes place
in the future and I just have to
wait this life out
or if it's already happening

and I'm missing it.

Driving Home from the Bars

My desire remains contained
within a wave of heat rising
from a ribbon of pavement
as I stare into the convex
warp of the windshield,
my hand already reaching
for yours.

The Guest

For Rivers

How we prepare for the visit
tells who's coming.

Have faith that the guest will appear!
Cook whatever it is you make best
again and again while conjuring

the scene of the two of you:
Erato's granddaughter
mouthing silently as a ghost
asking for the embrace – you
straining politely to make out her words.

The Walking Path

Let's say that the connection we have
with one another is the same tug
that pulls faces from tree trunks

and let's suppose
while among strangers
the barely lit dust particles
floating in between us
suddenly reveal themselves as longing.

Time Travel

I know all of the names of good fortune
 and come close to whispering *the way*
 into the ear
 of a passing stranger or
 anyone who cannot find me
 if I happen to be wrong.

Mostly, I keep quiet –
 always changing my mind
 about how far back in time
 I would go if I could.

It's a little further back each time.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I grew up known for one thing and one thing only – daydreaming. I kid you not, my second grade desk and I alternated between the hallway and a 3-sided refrigerator box because I daydreamed all day long. And yes, I wrote a poem about it.*

Poetry is a pretty safe bet compared to incoming volleyballs, loosely tethered inner tubes, and uniform tagging machines. The poems, “Day Job,” “The Guest,” “The Walking Path,” and “Time Travel” are testaments to the alternate universe in which I exist and prefer.

I was delighted to find “Driving Home from the Bars” accepted. This homage to being drunk and horny for my husband easily rivals latching onto an extended metaphor while in heady communion with the Divine.

My early influences are the poets whose sinkers strain the float. They take the image in unexpected directions through the murk. It's why I love the study of poetry as much as poetry itself. Better take a flashlight.

I don't see my voice reflected in hardly any of the modern or contemporary poetry I love, but it's important for me to find them and read their work; they teach me so much about the world from which I hide. I take them off the shelf and call them friend.

AUTHOR'S BIO: "JoAnn LoVerde-Dropp lives and writes outside of Atlanta, Georgia and holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Spalding University. Her publications include poetry in *Bigger Than They Appear: Anthology of Very Short Poems* and *Gargoyle Magazine* in addition to flash fiction in *The Absurdist*."

WHEAT PASTE and other poems

By Christine Byrne

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes... Christine Byrne fills me. I love the rhythm and sway and the play of this artist...it is interesting to me that the word rhythm is not encumbered by vowels except sometimes 'why' and neither is Byrne (encumbered, I mean). I only wish I was as far out there as she is. She has a lot to say, here are some snippets. "Paper mache me anyday" "Lover kiss the crux of her" "Eclectomania" "I am a pothole / Of suburbia, extricated." "Eat my panic" "Pickpockets my memories—" "—cackerjacker heart attacker..." It goes on and on, just like this, until we finally come to 'Omniscient Creamsickles' Nuff said! (Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS*

Wheat Paste

Paper mache me anyday
 Baby she's a hoot
 She's acidic marmalade bitter
 Stiletto heartthrob (ba-boom ba-boom)

My lover's lover exhales angel dust
 Wears an unlabeled name tag ironically
 Wears gold embroidered

Tablespoons of flour

My lover's lover
 Purple laced uncategorizable
 Brunette artist girl

Four steps behind my lover's lover
 (Following her! I am following her!)

Because her cartilage looks exactly like my cartilage

if I pierced my cartilage
 Because her bangs give her
sex appeal.

I wonder if I have
sex appeal.

Flour handprints on her pants

Hangs left by the mirror
 (dimwit?) (shortcut?) (trying to lose me?) (trying to make me lose it?)
 Hangs left by the mirror image of a mirror
 (my eyes at myself sometimes)

I'm going to pierce my cartilage next Tuesday
on the opposite ear

On a bus, six steps down across
 I watch her choke discreetly
 on a piece of poundcake
 I laugh at her choking

Once I know she's okay
 I wonder if she knows
 I wonder if she's
Boil over heat

I question my rationale, my intention, my
 tolerance for needles

I question my love for my lover
 (unfathomed!)
 I question her love for my lover
 (unclear.)

She gets off the bus
 stop for a sandwich
 scandal she's a vegan.
 A vegan pedestrian.

Water and flour make glue

My lover comes walking toward her
 (eyebrow profile- hand span- paint specs)
 Lover kiss the crux of her

stompy madness (ba-boom ba-boom)
 Adhering voices
 Don't tease me, Wheat Paste (wink)
 I like your
 Piano fingers

(blink)

Summit

I razored your paint off the steel window bars of the Summit
 from the cheapest twelve pack variety & re-Sharped words you painted over words

written before I showed you how to climb the eight floor of the locked building
 to see the horizon is mostly trees cracked my nails for a fistful of paint chips,
 hot films of sweat curling them

People are specs yes, I'm out of my mind, aspects I'm back to & back to
 You, I don't think that anymore. The world's not for, proud of themselves, choke art
 take & be thankful

You're right I'm the equivalent of a dollar pack

I still believe it's mostly trees stretching out conventional, & the little moving
 paint dots the words charred in the ceiling
 it's hot at the top of the world isn't the summit really some-

times You're inanimate you figment, you piece of What I won't say for myself

I won't stop it, if me at nine could see I can't really think about it
 you walked me & when you talked I watched your breath clouds linger
 I reasoned I was going to be someone explain I hadn't always

Been so, chips off the cold I don't wish you
 anything I don't finish *fragile*

Honestly I liked the way you walked the way you seemed to have a right to
talk over me honestly, it's funny I'll keep

the static intermissions of driving a taquito commercial & the new age funk
as the car moves you exaggerate me
the difference
growing pains believe you dead in five *we're terrible terrible*

paint chips palmed sweat of my hands where time won't affect a little
shrivel, maybe

Eclectomania

I am a pothole
Of suburbia, extricated.

Kitchen feeds me, removes my hands, kitchen braids
My light into
Effeminate sneezes. In Kitchen I
Chauffer my battlements,
Work blinkless and tissue wrapped but

The Cat judges
Sitting in yellow as Kitchen's Guard Cat
Gulping all the light

Kitchen says
Tongue up, move tongue
Kitchen doesn't gentle Kitchen needs

And I give my clothes, trace
My appendages
In inverted mirror fog

Kitchen says *swallow kitchen open*
We tuck our demeanors like tails
Kitchen whispers *mend your grievences!*
Deceivences, thievences! I Blink and the Cat
Blinks *weavences blink peevences!*

Eat my panic

Misbelievences! Counterceivences!

Cat knows where Kitchen keeps it but
Cat says no. Cat speaks ir-
regularly, checks his paw-time

Kitchen steals my fingernails
Kitchen threatens
To take the cat away
If I try to leave Kitchen if I cut into
Deliria, as another public servant
Doses me my panic

Even cat (blink)
Nervously overgrooms his hind legs.

I am ashamed. I have been bad.
I have nothing in this businessal medicinal!

Kitchen says *swallow*

Here,

Kitty kitty

Lady Cade

I am already inside when Cade arrives, sits, says: *this isn't business*, just
Checking in and *it had nothing to do with Rife* wearing a wedding ring
 That day I ran into him in the bakery on Damen.
 Or how they married young, fell in and out of it, were settled now. This all
Wasn't unlike him. Younger women.

To become and come from, this is business.

She orders a single pear. Eats politely.
 Pickpockets my memories—
Have you always been such
A brunette?

This can't be measured by lifespan, we both know

How quietly he became healthy again, reabsorbed, I'm sure made
 Promises to himself at the foot of her bed, eased in, explained
 How the pregnancy did not take. There was no consequential change.

I think of my green linoleum childhood
 Countertops, learning certain moves—
 How to move myself with implication or
 How hard it is to move oneself.

Lady Cade: *ordinary fears*.

Yes that's the thing about Rife he would
 Whisper into me
 Present or presence I was
 Unsure always

Lady Cade: *I heard it started with a watermelon sundress?*

Yes it started with my thumb pointed down the road stepping carefully so as not to
 Damage anything bare—breathless from pretending not to be breathless
 See, when I don't look at him I can't picture what his eyebrows look like, which is
 Strange, because they're why he reminds me of when it's cold outside
 And I love it when it's cold—yes,
 The problem was I wanted to become all of these things
 Simultaneously, with childishness, and was too (how to sum it in up)
 For lack of asking...

Little walks. Incapable composition
 Notebooks. Desperate cities. I was having dreams
 About some future son, and would wake clutching belly,
 Renting \$2.99 movies to keep myself awake, talking
 To the prostitute at the bus stop about her
 Organic soap

: *It has been a serious and unnatural mimicking*

Sitting down for dinner with my
 Lover's wife I investigate
 Her nature: small hands. Deviance
 In the eyelids. Intentional wrenching. Scrapes
 At her chin. How did that happen? I can see her as someone
 Accustomed to aprons. Grieving in pears.
 Neither of us would ever be mothers.

Lady Cade: *And how did that make you unmade?*

Love said by looking I paid
 Attention: we met
 In a supermarket I was
 Twenty-two—
 I got Pregnant and then
 Was not pregnant

: *Sorry. Bad question. Let me try again*

I was convinced I was too old
 To grow up with anyone and that meant
 Something about love
 About looking
 About that whole incomparable: *you have been*
Young together. And he never saw me

With those clear plastic dress straps,
 When I would paint in my
 Underwear, skinny enough
 To cast my own ribcage

Crackerjack
 /'krækər_jæk/

Noun:

- Crackerjacker heart attacker *I hear Tina left you*
- Reincarnated plywood with skin cancer
- (v.) A pacified ka-pow

See also: How to belittle a choirboy

Blindingly deniable
overly reliable
Tina never nibbled at the little bits

- Crackerjack you
sicko are pentatonic. Your etymology unravels phraseology
slinky but obscene (& a looker) (v.)
- Intravenously shooting the kool-aid
- Economist of the least great cause (ew)

It's only a matter o' time

Alternative definitions are subject to include:

- A peg leg kind of atmosphere
 —Modern history of barbarian drugs
- A pacifist fascist with immediate regret

Tina took your cookbooks & your diary

Impaled by hails of investment healing
See also:

The sexiest wrongdoing (*verb*)

—Sensationalist Reputationalist (sp.??)

To use you in a sentence would stagnate the numbers
To use you in a sentence keeps me up at night

I wanna be

Locked in your teenage bedroom

Hooked on all your barbarian drugs

I want to

Lethally inject you

Get in bed with

All your atlases, go worldly —

See also: The Prime Meridian Suspect (ka-pow)

—C, if $\frac{A+B}{\sqrt{\text{me}}} =$ an inability

I'd help you track down Tina

You are—

4 percent fruitjuice an

8 month subscription with a late fee telemarketing

on hold in an elevator the framework

of modern technology's receding hairline (noun.)

See also

—Recently single

Omniscient Creamsuckles

Everyone keeps asking how I destrangled myself
rebuilding healthy disdain starting each day naked

And what the hell happened to you

I don't feel that different I guess
my throat hurts. I swallowed a few
rich girls from cul-de-sacs hiking Europe's
goddamn secretaries & carcinogens &
an internet scam seducing the pretense
of running out of air from blowing hard enough

And of course it will come back to our parents,
Our full time entanglements sticking tongues at us—

And we love it. And you've been better

I know it was a damn hard time
pushing around the insides of six weeks ago,
we're just a little bit thinner. Filfthier. And I know
we won't be introspective at museums or offer realistic options
trying to blink out greatness
sitting in sliced sunlight so your face looks
a little more naked. You just
get the supplies
gravelling, groveling, *first a lick*
then the whole thing

It was the middle of the night and you wanted to
Do something with your life

Passing the billboard advertising the sight of God I call the number
greeted by Not-God, commercial breathing intervening

tolling numbers for proof mumbo jumbo Not-God
 has digestive issues Not-God's a little insecure about Not-God says
your legs look so good underwater like that Not-God
 wants to know you better than a phone call is
 Not-God

Then delirious chewing rocks to repave side-
 walks of life tonguing glass so fruit rollup
 my whole face in my mouth & then the
Do you believe me face in my mouth with all your
 voices—I guess I'd pissed myself my eyes
 were so swollen they had to do things to my face
 and my mother said *that's my daughter*
 over other hospital voices. Something else then
 you are gravelly *found her like that*
 gnawing, rawing
 asphyxiate exclamatory catastrophe
 Leaving metal instruments holding my face
 toward your faulty cropped
 Diesels hovering ankles *I'm not*
Gunna touch you

Everyone's leaking bedside brilliance these days
 wanting to know how it feels to be
 recovered. Barefoot & resistant, whether I think
places make us sick

In other words

You gotta get your hands

In my velvet jumpsuit leaning on a fist nodding

Off oxygen in just this spectacular occasion

Then snorting cheeto dust

And cock and my gone toe and all these old plans

Baptized then shoved into the freezer

Embarrassed falsettos of excitement

Frozen ruminants in bottles lifted to coldsored mouths

Releasing to our veins the omniscient creamsickle

Single ceiling-cells crawling upside provocative sucking

Plastic gin jugs & the cereal grave. Erratic but hibernated

We are bugs bugged like labs rats, the aspirated Hoverers

Eating lunches lacking answers as everyone asks

where the hell you are they want to know

who the hell I am now someone says

you can't

heal here

The expressionless walls of faces—

Capped jars of indistinguishable solids—

Tell them I picked the gravel out piece by piece that the indents
texture my esophagus that they can
bring their own flashlights & check inside

THE POET SPEAKS: *It's definitely hard for me to say what inspires my poetry. I think most everything that occurs in my life will end up in my writing one way or another. I find a lot of stylistic influence comes from the wonderful teachers I've had—Bruce Cohen & Darcie Dennigan. & the rest is just life, I guess—things I get to see in whatever specific or peculiar moment.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Christine Byrne is a recent graduate of the University of Connecticut. She was born and raised in Norwalk, Connecticut and currently lives in Chicago, Illinois, where she teaches and writes.

SISTER, SISTER

By Pam Hunt

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: I just love Pam Hunt's poem, while the premise and message appears clear, I think what intrigues me most about these verses is the vitriol followed by a plea. It is so contrastingly aggressive and passive, caustic and plaintive, disdainful and grief-stricken—hostile and wistful. Not hate-filled, but sorrowful. "How could you know that pretty means rapable? / Alone means robbable? And quiet means stupid?" One's greatest misfortune is to have less to give and more to lose. Here is a poet who may have turned adversity into opportunity. Her dissenting ascensions are predicated on something so simple and immutable as skin pigment—Hunt teaches us: It is not how you appear, it is how you present yourself, and the love with which you're willing to fill your heart. I shall now step, and trip, off my shallow platform ...Nothing is black or white, gray cells matter. "It's so easy when you can't feel pain"—Hall and Oates, haplessly white, but still soulful. (Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS*

Sister, Sister

"Black Sheep," "White Trash." Stay away!
 You got too many kids and ya' don't dress like me.
 People will judge me if they see me even talkin' to the likes of you.

But

Sister, Sister, I'm all alone.

Beaten down? Impossible; You're White!

How could you know that pretty means rapable?
Alone means robbable? And quiet means stupid?

But

Sister, Sister, Can't you tell that I am all alone?

You dressed like me today and have no dirty kids clinging to your knees.
Please be quiet and don't tell me that you struggle
To get safely through each day and each night

OK

Sister, Sister I will pretend that I'm not alone.

You're not underprivileged of course, because you look to me to be privileged.
What? You were taken from your parents? Split from your sister and brother?
You say you know violence? No, it couldn't be that bad. After all, you're white.

But

Sister, Sister, Can't you tell that I am all alone?

You're so quiet. You gotta jump in with us to be one of us.
Read the books we're reading to understand what it's like to eat your dinner from a can
And walk your kids through the trash in the alley to the bus stop.

OK.

Sister, Sister I will pretend that I'm not alone.

Abusive husband, no family, no support, no money?
You feel the need to shield yourself with armor in an unsafe world?
But you never had to fight racism so how can those be?

But

Sister, Sister, Can't you tell that I am all alone?

If you just try, you'll pass to be one of us and that's what matters.
 Only talk about funny things your kids do and how you hardly have any 'me time."
 Give us some money to help the poor because that's what we do.

No.

Silver Spooned Sister, I cannot pass and I cannot give.

You may be our neighbor with many of the same day to day plights.
 But just the same, we don't understand you. You look too much like
 The Silver Spooned Bitches and it's just too hard to visualize anything else when we see
 you.

So

Sister, Sister, I really am alone.

THE POET SPEAKS: *Poetry is poignant to me because it can punch you in the gut right away. I was taking a class about a year ago to learn how to write creative nonfiction. When I got back my first paper, my teacher wrote me a note saying "nice poem, but this is a creative nonfiction class." I genuinely didn't realize that I had written a poem. I guess the punch in the gut effect comes natural for me.*

First and foremost, I hope my poem clearly makes the point that I often feel like I don't belong anywhere. This is a very personal account of the harmful stresses that traumas, addictions, abuses, mental illnesses, poverty and neglect inflict on the life of a person. Some of what I have felt for a long time have seemed more pronounced recently, which is why I wrote this poem. We all have pain, and different ways to express that pain, but straddling as an outlier among stereotypes can make finding an understanding ear difficult. My intention is not to make a white "MeToo" statement. The racial atrocities and systemic inequalities in America are horrifying. Again, the poem is about feeling like I don't belong anywhere. I hope my poem reflects

my passion against social injustice in the broadest sense. We all need to be kind and care for each other.

AUTHOR'S BIO: I used to write a lot of grant applications and newsletters when I worked for nonprofits over my career.

I am done with all that now, so writing for pleasure seems like a natural thing for me to be doing.

I obviously hope to write things that move people and make them think.

It's Been A Long Time Since We've Been In Sight Of Each Other

By Mir Yashar Seyedbagheri

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes... Yash Seyedbagheri is a blast, he's been here before, in the past. Read 'Dear YouTube.' It is short and sweet...maybe we can up his likes... "I got 68 likes / why not 69?"... "and let it be a sexy 69" What in the cyber-world is he talking about?(Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS*

It's Been A Long Time Since We've Been Within Sight of Each Other

Long time no see, says the vanilla man, woke

from a long winter's nap in Starbucks,

oh wait, that's too problematic, a representation of anti-Asian racial inequities, hierarchies, patriarchy

a stereotype of Asian inflected English, he proclaims, while he likes a toppled tower on Twitter

how fun you guys

he proclaims before exclaiming his own excommunication

contrite that he couldn't remember

the precise pronouns, the hims and hers, theys and thems

meanwhile he consumes another venti

and likes another toppled tower

THE POET SPEAKS: *The poem was inspired by the present climate and the debates around racism and political correctness. In particular, I've been thinking about the lines between thoughtful conversation and unwitting absurdity and thus the poem was born. George Carlin's philosophy that "it's the duty of the comedian to find out where the line is drawn and cross it deliberately," weighed heavily on my mind in writing the piece. Just insert poet instead of comedian. My own poetry generally falls into two camps: nature or sorrow- inspired Romanticism or societal absurdity.*

Poetry can be a place to cross lines and start conversations about the uncomfortable things in our world. It can also remind us to find the humor in the darkest of times.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Yash Seyedbagheri is a graduate of Colorado State University's MFA program in fiction. His story, "Soon," was nominated for a Pushcart. Yash has also had work nominated for Best of the Net and The Best Small Fictions. A native of Idaho, Yash's work is forthcoming or has been published in WestWard Quarterly, Café Lit, and Ariel Chart, among others. His micro fiction **The Wall** was published in Issue 2.

CURIOSITY KILLED THE LIGHT and other poems...

By Joey Amaral

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: Joey Amaral is radical, I love the way he writes. 'Curiosity Killed the Light' "Where I've come across a bed for the dead. // Stones of stories erect from the earth," 'The Hateful Eye' is just five piercing lines. 'Constant Faucet Dripping Thoughts:' "No, I won't stop, / I'm waiting for my time slot." "As the dark shadows lingers through my soul, / The glistening sunlight glimmers, / Which I cannot behold." This guy is good... (Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS*

The Hateful Eye

By Joey Amaral

You look and you gawk,
 With your hawk's stalk,
 Judging me on everything,
 from my thoughts,
 To my walk.

Curiosity Killed the Light

By Joey Amaral

One random lazy day,
I've decided to explore and go a separate way,
Where I've come across a bed for the dead.

Stones of stories erect from the earth,
For display for everyone to look,
I ponder when my bed will be made,
When my light turns into a somber shade,
And my music quietly fades.

I felt as if I could lay down,
As if my time was now,
But I have too much on my plate,
Oh! For Heaven's sake,
What happened to my lazy day?
My time can wait!

Constant Faucet Dripping Thoughts

By Joey Amaral

Tapp'n

Slapp'n

Smack'n

Oh, the sounds of joy,

Runs through my veins like a convoy,

The drips of the raindrops,

Plop,

Muddy waters,

With puddles,

Slop.

Clean it up with a mop.

No, I won't stop,

I'm waiting for my time slot.

Confusing rhythms,

Trying to convert them into hymns,

But who cares?

I'm with her,
And she's not with him,
Just hope the ball goes through the rim.

One shot,
That's all it takes,
You can hear it in the distance,
For heaven's sake.

It used to be as sweet as mom's chocolate cake,
Now it's just clutter in the gutter,
Without a rake.

But who cares remember?
It's just jibba jabba on a loose leaf paper.

There's no other way out,
It's like floating on top of a cloud,
With the urge of shouting out loud.

Oh,
What's the point?
Mind as well smoke another joint.

The Valley's Shadows

By Joey Amaral

As the dark shadows lingers through my soul,
The glistening sunlight glimmers,
Which I cannot behold.

The black crows I see flying south,
No life,
No food in their mouths.

Just over the mountains,
I can see the sun,
It's there,
Wipe your tears!

But the deep dark valley that haunts me,
Still brings out my fears.

As hope is just over the ridge and waits, my dear,
The voices of gloom however,
manipulates my ears.

The dark valley will enter my thoughts,

I know,

As my dreams through its streams,

Is all that I brought, to show.

Night Awakening

By Joey Amaral

The summer nights hummin,
And buzzin,
As no voices are around.

Piercing thoughts daggers through my mind,
As the soft moon illuminates my dark soul.

The days rage and fires simmers to a cooling
night breeze,
As the sun sets and wonders where the love
has gone,

The stars come out,
And the dreams perk out,

The night has just begun...

THE POET SPEAKS: *For me poetry is emotions through words and rhythm, and because poetry is a way to express what you're feeling, thinking, and believing at that exact moment when your pen touches the paper, it also makes it a vital way to communicate to the world.*

What inspires me to write the way I write are the simple everyday things. From sunrises, to babies crying, to lonely funerals. It's what I do when I experience the everyday things and turn them into an emotion, a certain rhythm, a story, or an idea into a metaphoric way, that gets my fire burning.

I have always been influenced by Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, to Bob Dylan, to Robert Frost, and the whole Beat Generation.

AUTHOR'S BIO: My name is Joey Amaral, and I am reaching out to you because, well not only am I a huge fan of your magazine and the material you represent, but I am also craving to share my poetry about lost love, dark souls, and endless hope to the world. My previous publications have been, "Blood Drive", a fictional novel, published by Newman Springs Publishing Company, about a troubled man trying to run away from his past while unknowingly repeating it and, "Fire Fly", a poem about lost love, published by The Seattle Star.

5 (Five) Poems

By Kendra Nutall

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: We marvel on 'Capernaum Road'

"unsticking soggy swimsuit from skin, / shivering waddles in sloshing flip-flops," The universality of the froth and nonsense of life. Nuttall is soothingly villanesque. I share her love for lists making and taxonomy—just so as they are not to-do lists. 'Don't Feed the Ducks' is a bittersweet treatise. And just feast your eyes on all the Davids... (Spacing and font size are poet's own.)

HS

Bidding War

They don't tell you that gambling happens
outside of Vegas, in every suburb,
every grandmother's azalea beds
and white picket fence:
twenty and thirty-somethings indebted
to student loans and tradition
attempting to buy their first
(and most likely last)
home.

It's a war out there,
at least they told me that.
Now do the math.

It has potential.
It has good bones.
I have good bones too, but
that won't stop the bulldozer.
I have good bones too, but
your best bid is due at noon.

I have good bones too, but.

Capernaum Road

What I hate most about swimming
is getting out of the pool —
unsticking soggy swimsuit from skin,
shivering waddles in sloshing flip-flops,
eating sandwiches with pruned fingers,
cold water dripping from damp hair,
all the while surrounded
by the stench of chlorine and hint of pee.

This is to say, my childhood bathroom had carpet.
This is to say, I don't trust boomers.

My childhood home had an unfinished basement
I was afraid of and a backyard with raspberry bushes.
My childhood home had a bright turquoise bedroom
and a single broken orange tile in the kitchen.
My childhood home had a peeling red deck
and couch held together by duct tape.

My childhood home is listed on Zillow,
sterile and staged like an Ikea showroom.
They've gone for a modern farmhouse look,
popular with every suburban conservative family.
I'm sure it will sell quick, after all,
location, location, location,

yet I can't help but remember
what Christmas morning looked like
in the living room when my childhood home was lived in.

12 Observations While Hiking

1. At some point, graffiti turns into history.
2. Rattlesnakes are anti-social.
3. Fellow hikers only say hi if you make eye contact.
4. Don't make eye contact.
5. Little dogs have something to prove.
6. Big men have something to prove.
7. Squirrels are adorable.
8. Stretching is important.
9. Sunscreen is important.
10. I will never be able to run up a mountain.
11. Will I ever be history?
12. I wonder.

Don't Feed the Ducks

says the sign,
but toddlers can't read; they can only toddle.
Their parents can read but would rather not.

Therefore, our neighborhood pond's once polite
ducks are now plump and happy to stalk
innocent anglers for bread.

There's one duck, however, (call him ugly duckling
if you need a fairytale) who doesn't follow
the zombied flock. I watch him limp

towards the shade of a tree, alone,
abandoned, resigned to his fate of unfavorite.
Every time I think of the cruelty of humans

I remember our animal friends aren't always nicer,
though they're far more cute. At least I know
if I were hurt, a doctor would take care of me (for a fee.)

If I were hurt,
you'd be there with breakfast kolaches
to help me feel better.

If I were hurt,
I wouldn't be alone,
no matter how lonely pain can be.

David

1.

David is everywhere:
in the classroom, in the office,
in my house, in my head,
sipping coffee incessantly,
on the sidewalk jogging shirtless,
in the Prius looking smug,
in the Ford spilling sauce,
eating Chick-fil-a (for the sauce, not the politics),
on the TV screen — both interviewer and interviewee,
in court — both judge and jury,
in park as owner,
in park as dog,
nickname: Dave,
AKA Grilling Master,
AKA World's #1 Dad,
AKA Mr. Cool.

2.

David Arquette
David Beckham
David Bowie
David Carradine
David Copperfield
David Duchovny
David Foster Wallace
David Hasselhoff
David Lee Roth
David Letterman
David Morrissey
David Ortiz
David Schwimmer
David Sedaris
David Spade
David Tennant
David, slayer of Goliath.

3.

David is 5 feet and 11.5 inches tall.
He is usually white.
He is lactose intolerant, but cheese pizza is life.
The Office is his favorite TV show.

Check out his podcast.

4.

I have a few David's of my own:

David, the target of elementary school bullying.

David, everyone's boyfriend at some point or another.

David, the conservative lawyer who reminds me of my father.

David, the Target cashier.

David, my YA novel protagonist.

David, 1 in 28 Americans.

David, my husband.

THE POET SPEAKS: My poems are inspired by everyday topics that I put my own perspective on, like simply going on a hike or walk in the park, as well as unique experiences in my life, and topics that people can relate to like love, aging, grief, loss, etc. Poetry is important to me because it helps me cope and make sense of the world. Without poetry, I'm not sure I could make it through 2020!

AUTHOR'S BIO: Kendra Nuttall is a copywriter by day and poet by night. Her work has appeared in, *Spectrum*, *Capsule Stories*, and *Chiron Review*, among others. She lives in Utah with her husband and poodle. Her debut book, *A Statistical Study of Randomness*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. Find her online at kendranuttall.com

To a farmer and other poems...

By Brian Stoll

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: Stoll is a burgeoning burning light keeping us fresh. 'To a farmer' "Dirt decorates your Levi's gnats worship your sweat" 'BMW Coup' "A woman brandishing the title of wife / without any of the substance." 'She' is equally delightful. 'To you' "I miss kissing / the connection of lips / the sweet fluttering of the eye / the stir in heart and head." Doesn't it make you feel quite extraordinary? (Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS*

To a farmer

You till the fields with a green mechanical beast

from dawn till dusk.

Dirt decorates your Levi's gnats worship your sweat

you raise your crops as your children proudly

giving them to a world that undervalues them and you.

Day to day month to month season to season

until your back is hunched skin like leather

remaining prideful deservingly so in humbled silence.

BMW Coup

What does it take to have a BMW Coupe?

salt and pepper hair slicked back

a gut filled with excess food and drink

 a mortgage on a house with a stone walkway

and two car garage.

A life waiting for weekend after weekend

to tend a few acres of grass to scorch meat on a shiny aluminum grill.

A woman brandishing the title of wife

without any of the substance.

Bills to pay kids to pay for a dog tolerated

until its' spirit finally becomes that of a carpet.

 Waiting for the next day and the day after

to follow the same routine:

push to start the BMW peck the woman with title of wife

 pretend you are happy with it all.

She

had a little Buddha on her coffee table

I don't think she was religious.

Two small dogs

sickeningly cute little things.

Waiting for a love story sex becomes a favor.

Sweatpants and memories from four years ago

she was thinner then.

Yoga recipe results always green

a pyramid scheme motto written on a brick wall painted white.

I would still fuck her

swiping right to the next story.

To you

I miss kissing

the connection of lips

the sweet fluttering of the eye

the stir in heart and head.

Saplings intertwined in continuum against time

growing into one.

Clasping our hands together for the Eucharist our intimacy brings.

Beginning and ending lighting connects

the sky and earth in a flash

our embrace over in a moment.

THE POET SPEAKS: *Usually when I write I write from the hip. I have some emotion or thought in my head that I need to get down on paper. It can be inspired by anything from a horrible break up to a car passing by on the street. Sometimes those emotions or thoughts just hit me and in turn spurs the poems I write. I use poetry as a cathartic experience to help decipher the*

tangled mess that is my own mind. A way to express my emotions and thoughts, or else keep them bottled up inside and be consumed by them. The poems before you are exactly that, an extension of my thoughts and emotions. With these poems in particular I was experimenting with the use of enjambment and line breaks. Poetry like I said is cathartic for me without it I would be lost in a dark place inside my own head. Poetry allows me to say what I need to say no matter how small. It may not be important or moving to some but to me it means to be heard. In contrast when I read poetry I'm not usually reading for any type of cathartic release or to be moved, if it happens it happens and I relish the feeling, but usually I read poetry to write better poems myself. Analyze the poem and decipher what the poet is trying to say and how the poet is using this particular poem to say it.

AUTHOR'S BIO: My name is Brian Stoll a recent Towson University graduate wanting simply to share everything that I am, no matter how small, in poetry form. I am just starting my journey in the pursuit of publication with the first publication of my work to be displayed in the November issue of the Scarlet Leaf Review

6 (Six) Poems

By yours truly, the happy recluse

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Goddamned yours truly the happy recluse, I was trying to close off the issue and he has the sinew to turn up. "...aware bliss is thought-free." "as one's wisdom-eye's / unlidded shell surprise—" His 'advice to a guru' "therefore never assume you / exclusively house view; and / access wordless understanding" "You have pointed out the point of pointing poetry." Too many quotes right? "...focused like a /beautifully singing stringless harp." Ahhhh...this man is one reckoning recluse.(Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS*

don't stare at (central) sun

Indestructible I AM free of egoity...
can't be demonstrated but can be
known directly.

*Faith fulfilled KnowGlowing now
where wordage cannot be?*

Thought-free quality is bliss
aware bliss is thought-free.

Basking in it doesn't stare at GodSun centrally!

surely preordained

Nothing 3D holds GodGlow so wholly shining through:
each one's central view...

relatively sprinkled like sun

seen in drops of dew...

faux-separation quality's

illusory contained...

only dew evaporation's

surely preordained.

unlidded shell surprise

Following imagined gods must crumble
as brain dies,
holy images & words merely mental disguise.
Hatching through senseshell's nested
precisely where it flies—
as one's wisdom-eye's
unlidded shell surprise—
actual I AM aglow (no ego compromise).

advice to a guru

Wholly unobstructed deLight

glows all ways

clear through—

therefore never assume you

exclusively house view; and

access wordless understanding

if folks say you do.

the point

On GodMountain peak of mindcave mated unity,
where has one gone but
right here awakened already?

Aware conception-free!

Of all gifts, this is the one
bestowed most graciously.

*deLightning bolts are best
understood unlinguistically?*

You have pointed out the point of pointing poetry.

3 (three) POEMS

By Laura DeLuca

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes... There is something about Laura DeLuca I just love. She writes her own sequels. You must read, "'Words I Wish I Knew, Pt. I'" and "'Words I Wish I Knew, Pt. II'" I'm up for any works that start off with, "Shove your soul / Down to the tips of your toes" She has even taken the time to make it rhyme which, I think, speaks to its genius as poetry. Here is the bookend line "The road to apathy will already be paved." Part two is as riveting, "Yet our hearts remain riddled with dust." And her next work here is such a delightful departure, "'I Wrote This When I Was Fifteen"'. It is a must read, it makes me wish I was a teenage girl again. Find your own favorite lines, I am filled with mine...

In order to accord with the author's dedicated spacing her poems follow below, each on a separate page. Re: HOTS, we publish all submissions exactly as received. *Eds.*

“Words I Wish I Knew, Pt. I”

Shove your soul

Down to the tips of your toes

Only from a distance will you appear whole.

A diluted crescent of a heart, I suppose.

Rebuttal eye contact

When someone confesses their love as such.

To keep your frame intact

Don't believe them all too much.

Sadness settles on open palms

Keep them closed: you are saved.

However when lovers serenade you with delicate psalms

The road to apathy will already be paved.

“Words I Wish I Knew, Pt. II”

Let's give each other chrysanthemums,

And say our deepest apology.

Mourn the loss we suffer as our echoes hum,

Whispering our goodbyes from opposing ends of the sea.

Let's pick out a matte black casket,

And kiss our love fare well.

We'll collect our memories in a feel better basket,

And shut it tight before lowering it to hell.

We weep when love is gone-

Yet do not cherish it when we must.

We ache with regret just as the sky reaches dawn--

Yet our hearts remain riddled with dust.

“I Wrote This When I Was Fifteen”

I'm writing this because I know you won't read it. Everything I do seems to contradict itself. When I'm with you, it feels wrong. When I'm without you, it feels more wrong. Warm hearts, cold skin. Where do I begin? I'm happy where I am but there is always somewhere I am eager to be. I am both my biggest, most far fetched dream and my worst nightmare, simultaneously. Why do I dress up as a skeleton every year for Halloween? Isn't the whole premise behind Halloween to be something you're not? Cut open facades, peel back skin, and a hollowed out skeleton is all you'll find. My whole life, my mind constantly bounced back and forth between the ideas that I am wonderful and worthless. Why is it always black or white? Why hasn't grey ever existed for me? I can't tell if I am extraordinary, or just another extra, ordinary person in this world. My past selves are shapeshifters. I see them in old photos on my wall, in an uncoincidental, alternating pattern-- worthless, wonderful, worthless, wonderful.

What will I be next?

THE POET SPEAKS: *People always ask me, as they do every writer, what inspires my poetry. My answer is always plain and simple. My poems are inspired by every heartbreak I have ever had to endure. Every traumatic experience. Every phone call sent to voicemail and every word left unsaid. I write as a way to heal and as a means of escape. Writing poetry allows me to reflect on my own experiences and emotions, and eventually abandon them in order to move forward. I write to give myself permission to forget*

about every apology I was never granted and every goodbye I never got the chance to receive. I'm someone who has a real hard time letting go. My poetry does it for me. My stylistic influences include unmatched songwriters like Amy Winehouse and Lana Del Rey, as well as incredible modern poets like Mary Lambert and Andrea Gibson. I think that poetry is important to write in order to create meaning and valuable culture out of all the unique experiences we have, as well as the ones we share. Likewise, I believe poetry is crucial to read so that we can learn from others, as opposed to all navigating life and figuring this thing out on our own.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Laura DeLuca was born and raised in Poughkeepsie, NY. She is currently a senior at Binghamton University majoring in English Rhetoric and General Literature. She is a member of the honors program within the English department, is graduating one academic year early, and was recently admitted into the one-year Master's program at Binghamton University for English. She is an editor of the *Binghamton Law Quarterly*, as well as an editor and member of the executive board for *Ellipses Literary Magazine*, which is her university's official on-campus literary magazine for undergraduates.

Poems As I Fall Asleep

By Angie Raney

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry editor Hezekiah writes: Angie Raney's rhythms pulse like the metered beat of a breathless lover. "the teardrops as they fall / from the ink of my pen." "a shallow breath / just a deep sigh." She has a prosody that rival a perfection all her own, meaningful, harmonic and melodic: "dreaming of you / is a favorite pastime," "i see the ocean in your eyes" Oh to be young! "fig leaves and innocence," "curious and cautious, / chaos descends from desire." I guess all you have to do now is read the lines between. Her words sooth the eye and sting the heart.(Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS*

Emily Dickinson

i am a posthumous poet,
an after-death artist.

my words,
smooth as velvet,
dark and brooding
carry the weight of death
and a sense of urgency.

prestige is tricky,
yet I long for recognition
or for someone to catch
the teardrops as they fall
from the ink of my pen.

i could be Dickinson or Plath,
Bronte or Teasdale.

i could choose now
or i could wait for my words
to blossom from beyond the grave.

I am waterfalls

water falls
just as waterfalls,
a shallow breath
just a deep sigh.

dreaming of you
is a favorite pastime,
but a bad habit
like picking at fingernails

or taking a long drag of a cigarette.

breathing you in,
tugging at your belt;
i see the ocean in your eyes

and i drown in the pressure of your hips upon mine.

fingertips wander,
lips along for the ride,
as we layer by layer find each other in the candlelight of youth.

the whisper of my bra straps
and the cry of your hands
is a symphony of passion,

one that will not be forgotten,

only to be dreamt of the next day.

Eden

fig leaves and innocence,
the pressure builds in my chest.

mind wandering,
coiling,
wrapping me up
in a biblical love story.

all powerful and hungry,
curious and cautious,
chaos descends from desire.

no power equal to God
but the soul
that we share.

THE POET SPEAKS: *As someone with anxiety, sleeping can be really hard. There are always a million thoughts running through my head and I find that poetry allows me to slow down and express my anxiety. Many of my poems, such as these three, are products of sleepless hours turned writing frenzies. Each poem carries the weight of certain ideas and anxieties that run through my mind and each allows me to further understand what I find daunting.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Angie Raney is a soon-to-be junior at DePaul University studying Creative Writing, Spanish, and Anthropology. She hails from Hopkins, Minnesota and is the youngest of four girls. She currently resides

in Chicago, IL, spending her down time time writing poetry in hopes to publish her own book of poems and essays in the future. Angie's poems, "Panic" and "Ocean Eyes" have both been highlighted on author Samantha Schutz's online literary project, You Make Me Feel Less Alone, while her poem, "Ventilation" was published in Silver Birch Press's "Wearing A Mask" issue. Angie's essay, "How to Be Mentally Ill" was also chosen to be presented at DePaul's 2020 Spring English Conference.

those yellow leaves and other poems...

By Emalisa Rose

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes... Emalisa Rose has been everywhere from Calgary to Delaware. "shed of my second skins, i / was dressed up in daffodils" She is short, as in not long, and sweet. " we are songs on the / lips of this summertime / daydream" What a lovely line. "..lush words and / plush words blueberry / slush words" Delicious...(Spacing and font size are poet's own.) HS

1. those yellow leaves

i counted five then
looked away..this
tic of time as Summer
simmers on the front
line, its jaundiced leaves
softly falling, winking with
an Autumn dream.

2. caught in the leaf limbo

on the ninth of November
your leaves became lyricists
vining in violet..cliff diving in
Calgary, double dutching in
Delaware..caught up in the
interlude, i collapsed at the
overpass..laying down in the
conifers..i slumbered in Sicily
waking up in a summer song
shed of my second skins, i
was dressed up in daffodils.

3. to write poems with you

waves rise the flatline
of water..sandpipers
gather the night chorus

we are songs on the
lips of this summertime
daydream

ii.

and i want to write poems
with you..lush words and
plush words blueberry
slush words

to lay in these sand sheets
forever..to dance by the
ocean's concerto.

4. pop art and poetry

here..where the paisley
triangulars intertwine with
with the last of the hyacinths
where petals recline on the
miles of the greenery..we
lay in this mattress of pop art,
red wine and the arms of our
poetry..what else do we need?

THE POET SPEAKS: *Growing up by a beach town provided much of the inspiration for my art. I lived in a housing project development during the 1970's in a very diverse neighborhood. I had a great group of friends, many of whom were artists..i.e. painters, poets, macramé crafters..The artists brushed murals on brick apartment buildings with colors that had names, making the poet in me fall in love with...cerulean..scarlet..chartreuse etc. It was a beautiful psychedelic time coming of age and creating along the way. This joy swirls inside me many years later, along with some early influences..i.e..the Beat poets, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Pablo Neruda, Sylvia Plath, e e cummings. I am humbled to be a poet in progress and to have my*

work appear on the page, hoping it reaches someone, somewhere. Many blessings, Emalisa Rose

AUTHOR'S BIO: Emalisa Rose is a poet, crafts artist, animal rescue volunteer. She lives by a beach town which provides much of the inspiration for her art. Her work has appeared in *Poettree Zine*, *Parrot Poetry*, *Echo22*.