

Fall/Winter
2018

#22
Vol 19



The
Stray Brush

DB

The Stray Branch

Fall/Winter 2018

The Stray Branch

Fall/Winter 2018 #22 Vol 19

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Editor's Notes:

Welcome to the Fall/Winter 2018 issue of The Stray Branch. I am proud to display the artwork of my very talented daughter on the cover of this issue. Her artwork has appeared on the covers previous issues as well as within the pages of those issues.

Submissions resume October 1st. Please read guidelines before submitting.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Debbie Berk". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Debbie" written in a larger, more prominent hand than the last name "Berk".

Debbie Berk
Founder/Editor
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Acknowledgements:

The Secret Of Archery by ~ Alessio Zanelli
Poem first published in *World Literature Today (USA)*

*Cathe Dunn's First Kiss upon Her Death in Monroe City,
Missouri on November 10, 1900* by Sady Mayer First Published in the
Columbia (Missouri) Art League Interpretationsexhibition book 2017.

I keep pecking at the eggshell of this world by Bekah Steimel
First appeared in *Oddball Magazine, 2015*

An aquarium frightens me more than the ocean by Bekah Steimel
First appeared in *pacific Review, 2015*

Backfired by Bekah Steimel First appeared in *The Bitchin' Kitsch, 2016*
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Roll Tape by Bekah Steimel First appeared in *Poems For All, 2016*

Acrophobia by Bekah Steimel First appeared in *Thirteen Myna Birds, 2014*

At the Cemetery and The Night Wind by Sandro Fossemo
Translated by Luca Palantrani

Water and Meant It by Lily Tierney previously appeared in *Hello Poetry.*

Red Riding Hood Writes Back by Archita Mitra
Previously published in *Thought Catalog*

"Such a Good Girl" by Brian Burmeister originally appeared in *River Cities' Reader.*

Cover art by Amber Berk

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2 Poems

She has been writing since 2006. She is taking workshops and finds them invigorating. Her mentors include Brendan Constantine, Tresha Haefner, Tobi Alfier(Tobi Cogswell) and Kelly Grace Thomas. Free verse is her style and her own life has provided plenty of inspiration.

My Mother Did Laundry

She stands over the machine with the clothes on the floor behind her sorted into their separate piles—colors, whites, fragile, washable wool.

The machine is obedient to her old withered hands, bent with arthritis and age but still she sorts and starts the weekly ritual as she has done for more than 60 years.

It is hers to do, every week, rain, shine, summer, winter, fall, spring so that she and my father will have decent clean clothing to wear on their nearly daily rides into town. My dad always drives and she navigates.

Their car will carry them in clean clothing every day down the winding country roads to town, to the stores they frequent, to buy the goods they want to have at home, back at home where they are safe on their property out in the country where they have loved living for many years, where they listen to coyotes bark and howl and to the sounds the rain makes on their land.

Incalculable years away from us, their family, their children, their grandchildren and even their great-grandchildren who have never seen them – in their newly washed and so splendidly fine clean clothes that my mother collects, sorts and washes and dries every single week

until now.

So I leave her standing there, her hands full of the clothing that made them live.

The Garment We Wove

the thread uncurls from
warp and woof
it spirals down in the dust –

there is no chance
it will stop

we're unraveling too –

you from me
me from you

The light from your eyes dims
I can no longer see
what holds you
near

my heart unravels
red drops fall

stitch by
stitch

~ *Peggy Carter*

Richard King Perkins II

2 Poems

Richard King Perkins II is a state-sponsored advocate for residents in long-term care facilities. He lives in Crystal Lake, IL, USA with his wife, Vickie and daughter, Sage. He is a three-time Pushcart, Best of the Net and Best of the Web nominee whose work has appeared in more than a thousand publications.

Note Found in a Garage Sale Book

YOU'RE SO UGLY AND EVIL

I HATE YOUR STUPID GUTS

written in fat orange crayon
which either takes away or adds to
its impact.

THERES NOTHING LEFT
BUT TO DECAPITATE YOU.

On the other side
it continues

AND EVEN IF YOU BEGAN TO LOOK
AND ACT DIFFERENTLY

YOU'D STILL BE UGLY AND EVIL.

WHY COULDN'T I EVER BE ENOUGH
FOR YOU?

And yes,
those spots that have rippled the note
are where one person
or another
has cried over the paper.

Unsheltered

When Uncle Mike was out riding his bike
and got smacked in the head
and killed

by a passing pick-up truck
with a blue PVC pipe sticking out of the bed

his niece Becky wailed for a good thirty seconds
about cultural injustice and oppression

until her mom told her to shut-up
and said that life wasn't all about dildos, fairness
and binge-watching past seasons of Glee.

~ *Richard King Perkins II*

Roger Singer

3 Poems

Cabanaph424@verizon.net

EVERYDAY WAITING

The buildings are rocket ships,
fueled with people, seated and waiting
for 5pm when their ship lands and
they tumble out onto sidewalks like
overflowing streams, fish of lively
colors gliding past buses and cars with
radios blaring the songs of summer
where sounds melt onto black streets
and sides of tired buildings and
pigeons take flight into clouds as night
rolls darkness over everyone and the curtains
of day close down.

CLEANING UP

Rain waxes the sidewalk to
an earthy shine. Black clouds
spell out a beating. Rivers open their
mouths. Streams pray to grow.
Umbrellas begin to appear, preparing
to spring into action. Women begin
to hurry for cover. Men walk as if
the sun were shinning. Kids splash
the anger out of puddles. Eyes look
down to the regular paths followed.
The bones of shoes catch a separate
motion for each of the travelers.
A little rain won't hurt you, a lot of it
will kill you.

A WAY THROUGH

There was a buzzing
in a heaven of clouds.
A horn from the alley
brought down the house
of pigeons. The air
transformed into a night
beauty. Neon's and back
doors offered a refueling
of the psychological
mortgage. Voices from the
second floor rejoice between
the folds of buildings. When
night and dark mix, the full
skin of the city bandages
itself. Nursing the sad of day
with refreshing drinks satisfies
the anxiety within.

~ *Roger Singer*

Photography



Into The Unknown by Lester Majkowicz

Lester Majkowicz is a New Jersey native whose interests revolve around photography, jam bands, and 60's science fiction. His photos have been published in Sonic Boom and Edify Fiction Magazine, he is also the author of the blog Around The World Cheese which can be found at www.aroundtheworldcheese.blogspot.com.



Into The Abyss by Lester Majkowitz



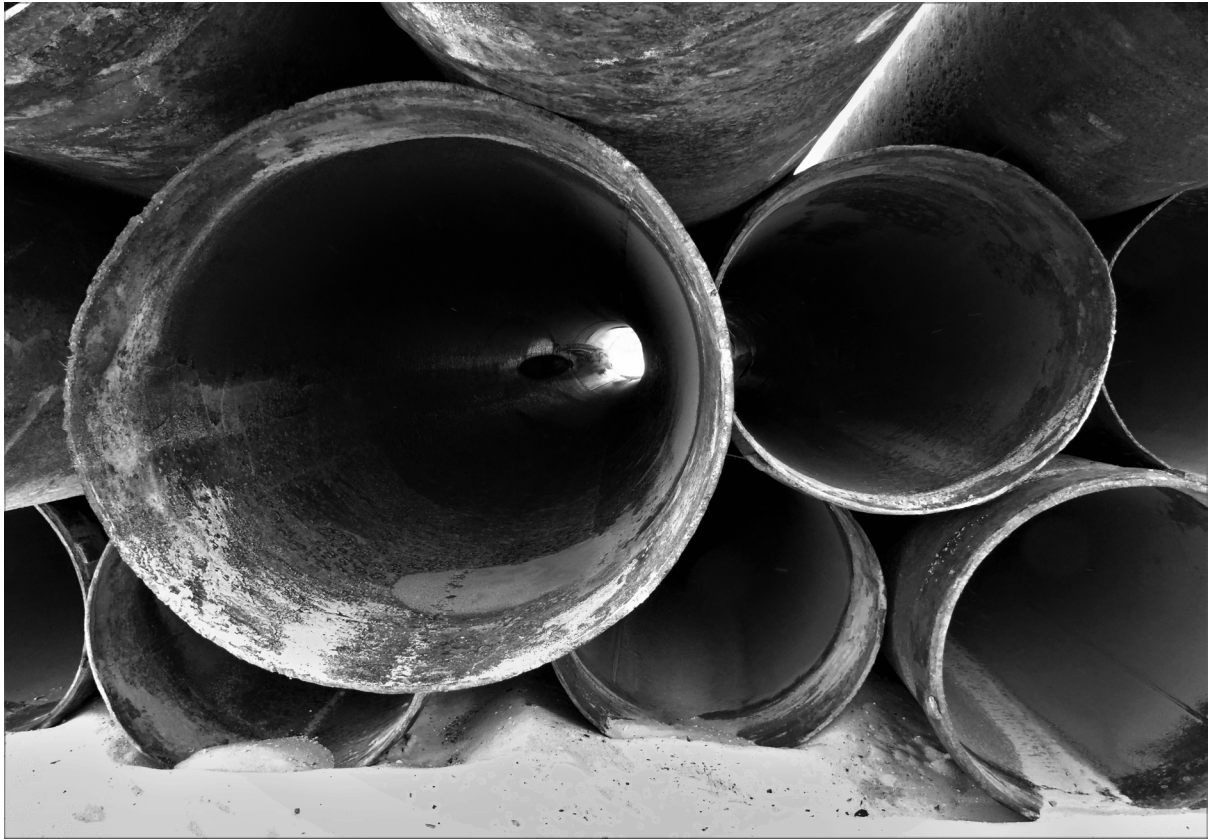
Empty Bench by Lester Majkowitz



Pine Barrens NJ by Lester Majkowicz



Progress by Lester Majkovicz



Window To The Future by Lester Majkowicz



Words by Lester Majkowicz



2 Poems

Ron Larson is a retired community college history professor (Ph.D.), and one of his hobbies is writing poetry in the manner of Gerald Manley Hopkins. His horror poems have appeared in Danse Macabre, Bloodbond, HellFire Cossroads 6, Aphelion, The Horror Zine, and, of course, The Stray Branch.
His website: ronlarsonclassics.com.
His email: patronlarson@gmail.com.

The Lost Button

Adapted from a story by James Francis Dwyer

He foolishly started a prison-yard fight,
And now he was in a cell devoid of light.
Soon the darkness closed in on him like a pall.
He was horrified that he'd be there till fall.

But he didn't pull his hair or even swear.
He ripped off a button and tossed it in the air.
Then on his hands and knees, he sought the object.
This activity kept near madness in check.

Then one day or night, the item made no sound.
When it wasn't found, the man at last broke down.
He's now in a place where there's little healing.
The button's in a cobweb near the cell's ceiling.

A Circus Story

Adapted from a story by Jack London

The two lion tamers hated each other.
Each wanted to be Sophie Brocca's lover.
Then one of them thought of a malicious trick
It was slick and quick and made some sick.

The old lion was as gentle as a mouse.
For years, each had placed his head in its mouth.
But one day this event went terribly wrong.
A loud crunch was heard by the shocked throng.

At first, Sophie's now sole suitor was well pleased
Due to the fact that the old lion had sneezed.
But now the perp is in a prison somewhere.
It was learned he'd put snuff on his victim's hair.

~ Ron Larson

Heavy with Consequence

by R. E Hengsternan

I

am struggling.

Wedge between a long-drawn-out high and a never-ending bout of insomnia. For weeks, my sleep's been patchy. Nothing new. Goes with the territory. To lessen my insomnia, I micro-dose cannabis to make my time spent staring into blank space less monotonous. Half the time it does the trick. The other half I lay watching the exhaled smoke become ensnared by the whirl of the ceiling fan, dissipating into nothingness. The mindless practice of gazing into nothingness is hypnotic, prompting hours of obsession. Tonight's no different. Around 2 a.m. I find my rhythm and slip into a state of lucid dreaming.

I float. My arms and legs have detached from my body and drifted away. The separation is painless: - my limbs from my body. Still, I fear my death is moments away. The physical me clings to life, juxtaposed against the dying me in

in my dream - a peevish and taunting nuisance. To find oneself between life and death triggers an ancestral panic. A repetitive, uncontrollable wallop explodes beneath my ribcage. The tiny hairs surrounding my dimpled skin stiffen. *Chicken skin*. The sensation travels to my face, lips. Followed by a warmth that numbs my torso; without restraint, I piss myself.

The slow dismantling of my body continues as I sink further into the unknown place where nothingness exists. I refuse to surrender. Instead, I pull myself together. My arms and legs splay out in a desperate search for something firm. Pots and pans clank in the vastness, and the tinny sound of running water drums an empty sink basin. I shift toward the noise, neck lax, head whirling in confusion. The rift grows until warm hands take hold of me, a gentle coddling as if they held a limp rag doll. I'm terrified. I try again to make sense of my presence in the vast space, but I cannot.

I am five years old again, perched on the edge of the kitchen sink and wearing my favorite footie pajamas. From above, frigid water drenches my head. The wet soaks through the cotton fabric of my pajamas. The insult of the water snaps my eyes open. I see my mother. Her soft face, drained of color. Melting, as if made of wax. Her lips are moving, but her words are silent. I squeeze my eyes tight and try to refocus. She responds by tightening her grip, flinging my body back and forth - as I become the broken rag doll I feared. I force my eyes back open and see the tight, narrow movements of her pursed

lips. After a few seconds, the tension in her grip relaxes. Into a pool of sadness, her face falls.

I take inventory. On my upper lip is a massive split, filling my mouth with the salty, metallic taste of blood, as if copper is coating my tongue. The bleeding means I am alive. Underneath my scalp, the pooling blood pulls my skin taught. I hang my head to ease the pain, take several deep breaths, then raise it again to find my mother. Her pupils are large black pits the size of olives. In a measured gesture, she extends her arms wide, pauses, and drives her hands together. A thunderous clap explodes just inches from my face. My ears ring with clarity. Without hesitation, the nothingness fills with noise. The nameless void closes.

“What happened?” I ask.

“You ducked,” my mother said. “And you embarrassed your father!”

“I ducked?”

“Yes, baby. It was time for punishment, and you ducked. You need to take your punishment. How else will you become a man?”

“A man,” I say.

My mother brushes the hair from my face before dabbing at the blood on my lip with a tissue. She places a single kiss on my forehead and squeezes me tightly one final time before releasing her grip and slumping back into herself.

"You scared me," she whispered. "Please don't duck next time."

I nod.

"Now go upstairs and get yourself ready for bed." I slide off the counter and tramp upstairs, each step leaving a squish and a small puddle.

Mamma's right. I need to take my punishment proper. I lay in bed and wait until I hear heavy footsteps on the stairs. They come with consequence. I throw back the covers, quiet my arms and legs, and lay rigid as steel in the small bed

In a place indistinguishable between life and death, boy and man, dream, and nightmare, I whisper, "I am ready Mamma. Going to take my punishment like a man."

My whisper rises, ensnared by the whirl of the ceiling fan, before being dissipated into nothingness.

R. E Hengsterman is a Pushcart-nominated writer, film photographer and flawed human who deconstructs the human experience through images and words. When not engaged in self-flagellation he's often writing beneath the Carolina blue sky. You can find more of his work at [www. ReHengsterman.com](http://www.ReHengsterman.com) and find him on Twitter at @rehengsterman.

Poetry / The Stray Branch; Fall/Winter 2018 #22 Vol 19



2 Poems

*Darrell Epp's poetry has appeared in 100 magazines on 5 continents. His third collection, *Sinners Dance*, will be released spring of 2018.*

Fragmentation Grenade

gave gerald the 40 bucks but he never
gave me the two caps he promised,
just old jokes and crackpot theories
about gravity strings and leprechauns,
subcutaneous microchips and falling
angels. i'd still prefer the two caps.
i want hard results, an explosion in
slow-motion reducing me down
to a gaggle of singing shrapnel. so
much for summer's hydrocodone:
lick the bag, make a wish. a ghost
is always stuck in that moment
before the paint dries, that hour
before the luggage clears customs.
squeaky cloud cogs. sci-fi lego sky.
bramble and thistle sabotaging the
construction site. stuttering pirate
parrot. the courtroom drama's
shocking twist, the beat cop
just looking to make the quota.
how close we come to mystery,
with only algorithm standing
between being human or a
burger king beef cow! moo.

Seed of a Rose

thought i'd finally got on top of things
but then i heard about those two black
holes eating each other out in the centre
of the galaxy and all bets were off.

this is your brain. this is your brain
on fire. this is a rose, with height,
width, the whole nine yards.
imagine it! before thorns drew

blood, before subterranean
roots clawed at the sun, a
seed lonely and dreaming
in a world gone ravenous.

and my seatmate back from gatwick
drinking too fast and ranting about
area 51, his stories didn't add up
but oh how i loved him,

at least he was dangerously alive,
his mind wasn't owned by disney.
after the fourth bottle of claret
he told me i was beautiful,

told me the captain was a lizard.
only his fire mattered, not the
facts, not the arcane physical
laws that kept us from crashing.

~ *Darrell Epp*

g emil reutter

1 Poem

g emil reutter is a writer of poems and stories. Nine collection of his fiction and poetry have been published. He can be found at: <https://gereutter.wordpress.com/about/>

The Price of Change is Often Loss

For Bob

I knew you when you were young and again when old not old in age but in body. There were the good times rousting about the taverns and pubs, sweating it all out at the mill. You a mentor, a character they say. As the furnaces grew cold, unemployment ran out, hard times took their toll. New jobs in different places yet we remained close, you my daughter's godfather.

The price of change is often loss. Events being what they were, we began to forge ahead on different roads and although we kept in touch, our friendship faded as the days, months years pressed on. I thought of you often.

Lupus took its toll on you, yet you continued on. It was not a kind day, thunder bursts rumbled in the distance, trees bent in wind. The call came. We traveled the interstate our speed slow, horns beeping, cars weaving about us.

You, who I thought indestructible lay on a carpet of a room in the home you brought me into when I was a young man. I spoke to you, closed my eyes and for a moment I saw you alive again, six foot four, working the electric furnace greens and yellow hard hat on. Stick with me kid, I'll show you the ropes!

And you did. Your goddaughter and I climbed back into the car, a part of us now gone. We drove the interstate home, a thunder burst above, the skies opened, rain tumbled down upon us.

Sneha Subramanian Kanta

6 Poems

*Sneha Subramanian Kanta is a GREAT scholarship awardee, with a second postgraduate degree in literature from England. Her poem 'At Dusk With the Gods' won the Alfaaz (Kalaage) prize. She is co-founder of Parentheses Journal, a venture that straddles hybrid genres across coasts and climes. Her work is forthcoming in VIATOR project, former cactus, Verdancies and elsewhere.
Letters on s.sneha01@yahoo.in*

On A Flyover

Shifting weather is not like a cloth --
you cannot tear it, touch its unbridled
strings or smell the temperature change.
Cars pace about the long flyover
like ants on an anaconda's skin
evening is the purpled-black sleet --
green is the remainder of smoke fumed
trees. Everyone thinks of how harmful
passive smoking is for human beings,
none think of nature, though everything is
linked. We arrive from the arteries of a river
into a land of organized chaos. Birth does not
come with warning notes.
We are layered.
We manage to keep some intact,
some, like loose teeth, fall.
The mountains are pink with dripping dusk --
these things spread far and wide while
helicopters raid the sky, full of fire.
Its oars are full of the verbs Dante used --
its territory is full of forces that encircle a bonfire.

Metropolis

Cities are made
of roots, leaves,
vast spaces, claustrophobia,
familiar smells, damp spaces,
harvest, weeds,
flowing crowds, empty
railway stations,
vertigos, tall buildings,
rainbows, rotating floors,
hospitals, aspirin boxes,
shampoo sachets, water-heaters,
Y.M.C.A.'s, soccer grounds,
disposed shawls, old calendars,
computers, typewriters,
flesh, bones,
highways, underground paths,
moons, suns,
schools, crèches,
twigs, branches,
stained glasses, transparent windows,
the hunt and chase.

Quantum infinity

Melville had his answers by the sea –
my head is full of soup and neo-Aristotle
and the flem from cold contracted last
evening, that imbibed with thoughts full
of catharsis. The pagans are alike in certain
aspects like ships kept by the bay. They
rise like yeast and young crabs and clutch
grains of sand. The part of two wholes are
two semicircles and one circle. That is as
much arithmetic I learnt in school. Now I
use geometry to measure and fail theory.
Every element is interconnectedness from
one measure of irrelevancy to one more.
The thermometer has its digits right

Jallianwallah Bag

we walk in
 brittle shadows
that pour out
 in the wall.
we are invisible
 cloaks of existence
writing our tale
on the weight
 of the earth.
the tired exigency
 of mourning
and history are our
everyday followers.
 the translation
of its volume isn't as
dense as it was.
we walk among the
 danger of flowers
and blankets of walls.

bloom

in the stimulus
of a pollen
memory is born.

it takes root
within deep folds
of the being

where you dance
in free quarters.
where our selves

mitigate bones
as though a far
migrant looks

homeward closely,
slowly lifts, carries
on the journey.



Artwork by Amber Berk

Skeletal Sketches

An empty womb
of foliage fossils
windswept with winter.

Lost photosynthesis
hibernates within cold,
black lines over the sky.

The barren back
of thin fragments,
a language in translation.

~ *Sneha Subramanian Kanta*

Robert Halleck

2 Poems

Robert Halleck is a retired banker living in Del Mar, CA with his muse Della Janis. He fills his days with poetry, hospice volunteering, golf, and autocross racing. He has published three volumes of his poems. Recent poems have appeared in San Diego Poetry Annual, Paterson Literary Review, and The Galway Review. In 2017 he attended the Kenyon Review's Poetry Workshop.

A Heineken Bottle, A Queen Of Spades, A Broken Lock

I walk the neighborhood
and resist the urge to pick
something up, to bring something
home. Something to show
for an hour of my time.

Field Study At Panera Bread

It's lunchtime.
A man speaks on his cell phone
while he eats a ham sandwich.

His voice is loud,
profanity laced,
powerful.

"Ram it up
his ass.
Make him bleed.

No one can tell
us no.
Make him bleed."

Everyone is listening,
moving their chairs
further away.

A woman
stirs her coffee
and stares.

Lloyd Wheatley

1 Poem

Lloyd Wheatley (born in Scarborough, England, 1985) moved to Spain at a young age before returning to the UK and the Isle of Wight, which he describes as having the landscape of a poet's dream. Since leaving school at the age of sixteen Lloyd has gone from job to job saving money to travel and write whenever he can. Enjoying to create both fiction and non-fiction as well as poetry. He currently has one novel available named "Among horses and wolves."

a sun yet risen

Inspired from the disorder 'depersonalization.' But it relates to the way we all sometimes rush through parts of our lives with our eyes closed, only waiting for the future. And the way we sacrifice days of our lives that we will never get back for things we do not need.

.....

awoken to a sun yet risen sky
birds yet to sing their morning melody
a day awaits to savour and delight
yet mind to still rise from haze, wake from dream

march into night to wait for light to come
to only run a path well worn and loathed
as ears fail to hear the birds forenoon song
and to again ignore the new sunrise

forsake this moment for the days beyond
in mindless stride devour this fleeting life
as time is hoped to pass and left unmourned
what cannot be bought sold for iron and gold

see only cloud ignore the autumn leaves
numb to sense a mind pushed deeper in dream
thus voice without thought answer spoken words
and action mere reflection of that seen

no sight now to hope to see, sound to hear
all that is left is all that is known well
with closed eyes and ears a bed is found near
having marched through light waiting for the night

ayaz daryl nielsen

2 Poems

ayaz daryl nielsen, veteran, hospice nurse, ex-roughneck (as on oil rigs) lives in Longmont, Colorado, USA. Editor of bear creek haiku (26+ years/135+ issues) with poetry published worldwide (and deeply appreciated), he also is online at: bear creek haiku poetry, poems and info

un-sculptured endings
darkened necessary
without whys and
if only's

.....

The cauldron of sunset
Slight rain across the forest
A tree's calm presence, its roots
deep under the surface of things,
hidden within earthen mold
and a mightier silence
A tree's calm presence,
a tree's calm presence
A mightier silence of earth.

Erren Kelly

1 Poem

Erren is a Two-Time Pushcart nominated poet from Boston. Erren has been writing for 25 years and has had over 300 publications in print and online in such publications as Hiram Poetry Review, Mudfish, Poetry Magazine(online), Cacti Fur Ceremony, Cactus Heart, Similar Peaks, Gloom Cupboard, Poetry Salzburg and other publications. Erren's most recent publication was in Black Heart Literary journal; Erren has also been published in anthologies such as "Fertile Ground," and Beyond The Frontier." Erren's work can also be seen on Youtube under the " Gallery Cabaret," links.

Erren is also the author of the book, " Disturbing The Peace," on Night Ballet Press

Erren recieved a B.A. in English-Creative Writing from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Erren also loves to read and loves to travel, having visited 45 states and Canada and Europe. The themes iErren's writings vary, but have always had a soft spot for subjects and people who are not in the mainstream. But never limits themself to anything, always trying to keep an open mind.

Coffeehouse Poem # 248

A tall girl enchants
Me from afar as jazz
Is the the perfect soundtrack
For the first of the month
Her straw hat is as lovely
As her skin
Her cotton dress moves
Like music when she
Moves

Alessio Zanelli

2 Poems

Alessio is an Italian poet who writes in English and has appeared widely in international literary journals.

Call Upon Myths

I'm lost.

Electra, Dionysus, Morpheus—
please help me
find where I come from
and go back there.

Only,
I mustn't
follow lights,
fall into ecstasy,
have dreams—
at night.

Just whisper in my ear,
make sure that I can hear,
deliver me from fear.

Do this and nothing else.

I'll do my duty
once you three do yours.

We'll all get our due or die.

The Secret Of Archery

Most have it
that they trace their course,
set their targets,
decide when and where
to aim the arrow.
A tiny few realize
that others string the bow,
then nock and draw it—
so hard a fact to accept.
All grow old
buying or fantasizing
they're the masters of their lives,
and they go on and on,
convinced it is themselves
that set and keep them going.
Once gone that far,
nobody can stop them
or turn them away from their mark.
They know no love, no hate,
nothing at all;
they have no real will,
no wishes, hopes, scruples, regrets,
insight, first or second thoughts.
They're not the brain in this,
they're not the eye,
they're not the hand,
they're not the bow,
they're not the string.
Yes—they are the arrow.
And the wait, the wait ...

the wait once drawn,
while shaking in tension,
is wearing them out
more than the fear of missing.
But much less than the one
of never being released.

~ *Alessio Zanelli*

Poem first published in World Literature Today (USA)

Ann Christine Tabaka

2 Poems

Ann Christine Tabaka lives in Delaware. She is a published poet and artist. She loves gardening and cooking. Chris lives with her husband and two cats. Her most recent credits are The Paragon Journal, The Literary Hatchet, The Metaworker, Raven Cage Ezine, RavensPerch, Anapest Journal, Mused, Longshot Island, Indiana Voice Journal, Halcyon Days Magazine, The Society of Classical Poets, and BSU's Celestial Musings Anthology.

Junkyard of the Mind

Bottle-necked dreams
hidden in stagnant ideas
progression in reverse
botched plans piled high
in a rotting junkyard
complete with black flies

Trash and garbage everywhere
almost impossible to escape
the gaping wounds
of festering thoughts
and putrid lies
that turn day into night

Dark secrets buried deep within
all the results of
mental depravity
and moral decay
things rarely change, if ever
in the junkyard of the mind

Who will be Left to Perform

Refined phrases,
sculpted like a statue.
Abstract images,
tickling the mind.

Becoming lost on
the road to nowhere,
sidetracked by the
mourning dove's song.
Questioning the outcome.
Was it worth the effort?

The man in the front row
just stood up and left;
wandering off into unknown territory.
Will he find his way back?
Are you lost forever?

Rain falls down,
Washing away the confusion.
Where have you been
the last hour of my life?

What is real, and what is not?
I continue on my journey.
Now it is my turn to
withdraw the knife
and bleed on the crowd.

~ *Ann Christine Tabaka*

Photography



Streaks of Lighting by Harshal Desai

Harshal is an artist, entrepreneur, and writer that loathes the typical 9-5 existence. He documents his thoughts through writing and photography as he takes on societies norms armed with nothing more than his cheeky wit and undeniable charm. His work is published in Verbal Art, Phenomenal Literature, National Geographic, FineFlu, The Type Image, 805Lit, Door is a Jar, Asian Signature, Spark, and SickLit Magazine. He is a co-founder of Parentheses Journal. Email him on hersheydesai@gmail.com

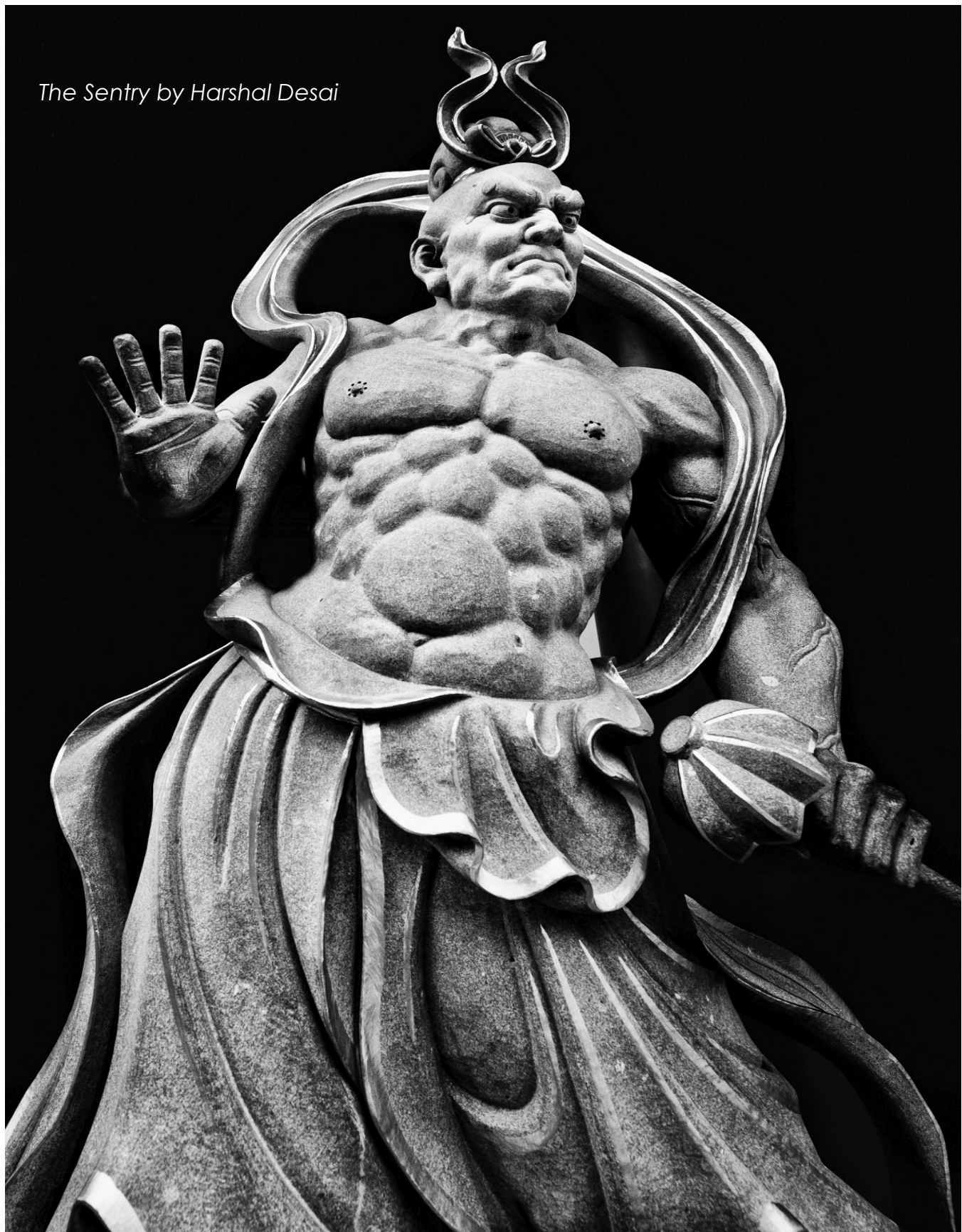


Predator by Harshal Desai



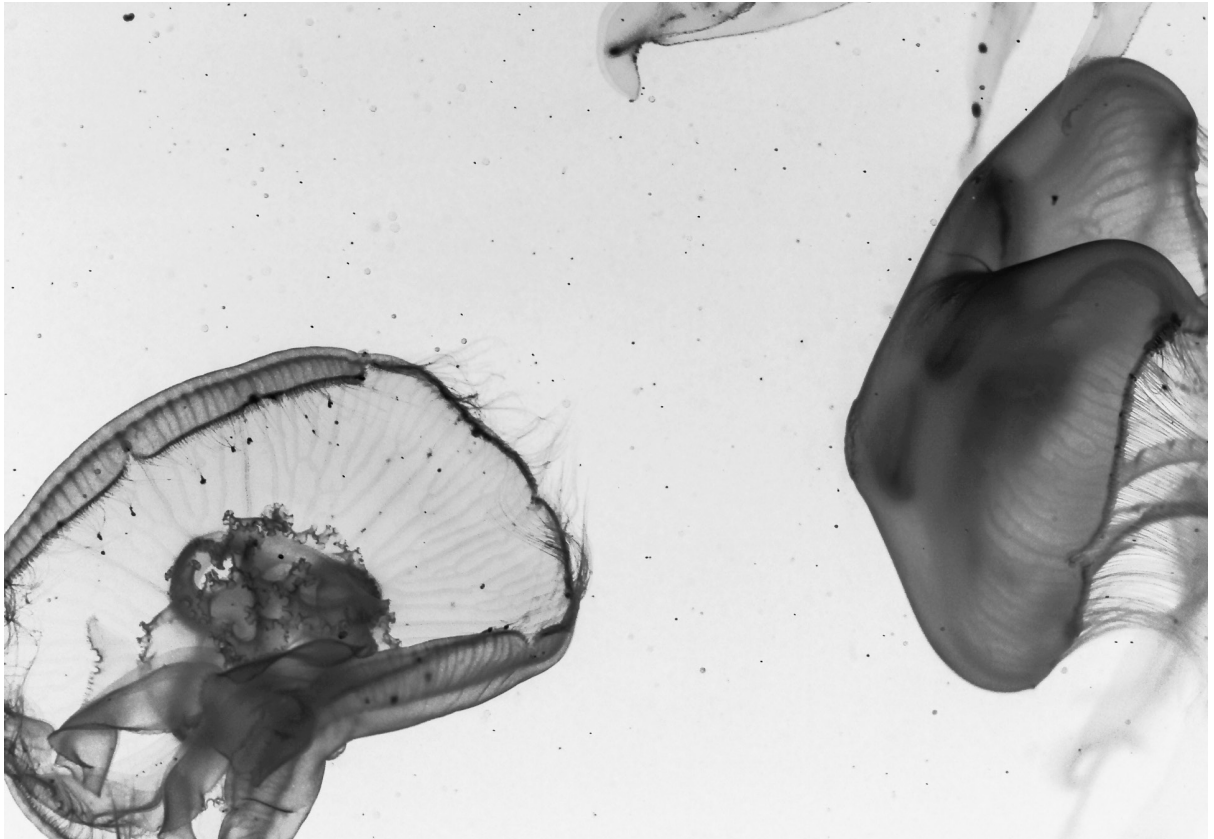
Reflection Over Glass by Harshal Desai

The Sentry by Harshal Desai



Telescope World by Harshal Desai





Jellyfish Waltz by Harshal Desai

Featured Contributors

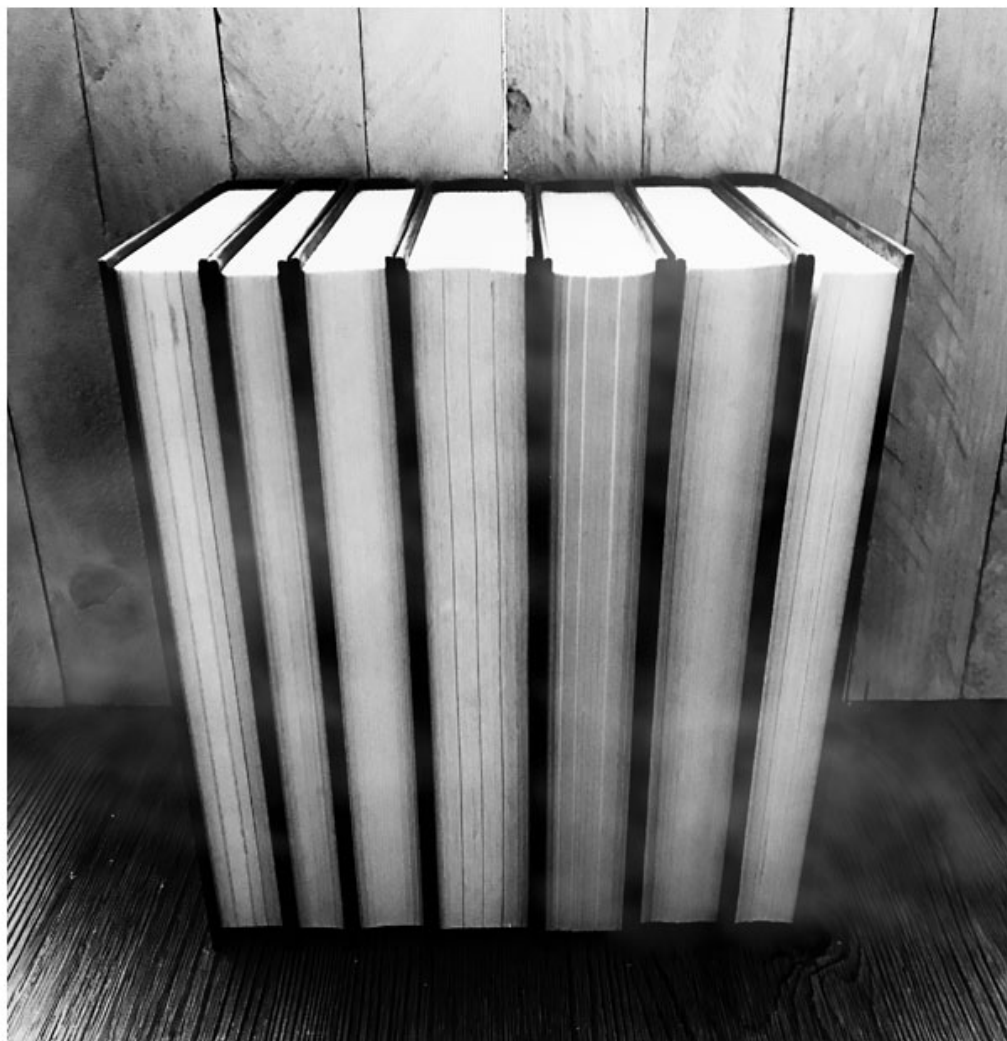


Photo by Debbie Berk

The Stray Branch; Fall/Winter 2018 #22 Vol 19

Savannah Slone

Featured Author ~ 1 Poem /1Story

Savannah Slone earned her bachelor's degree in English: Professional and Creative Writing from Central Washington University and will soon begin her M.F.A. in Writing at Lindenwood University. Her poetry has appeared in Manastash Literary Arts Magazine and Creative Colloquy. Savannah lives in Skykomish, WA, where she works a handful of part-time jobs and cares for her toddler with autism. She enjoys reading, writing, knitting, and hiking.



Positive

Inspired by Carolyn Forché's, "The Colonel."

AFTER EIGHTH PERIOD, I went to the walk in clinic. I was alone in the cold, white room. Her alligator shoes approached, leaving echoes on the sterile floor. Her frail, harsh hands clutched a document. She sat down on her lavender stool, avoiding eye contact. There were tissues, soap, and boxes with hazard signs beside her. The rubber gloves waved at me from their cardboard enclosure. On the paper was the word "positive". It was in tiny print. A stethoscope hung around her neck to listen to her patrons' heartbeats or lack thereof. On the walls were photographs of dense forests and raging waterfalls. She had taken my blood pressure, heart rate, temperature, height, weight, a sample of blood was drawn. Dr. Alligator Shoes readjusted the document, an inked upon piece of printer paper. I was informed that my pregnancy test had come back positive, "unfortunately", as she put it. There was a stillness in our shared air. Her words had stolen my future. There was some empty talk about my options. The waterfall on the wall raged on. The owner of the alligator shoes spoke my name and asked if I was listening. The wind through the trees said to me with their breath: speak what you wish. Dr. Alligator Shoes returned me to reality by tapping her pen in agitation. Her hand released her pen on accident. The pen dropped onto the floor. Its plummet was like an echoed scream in our silence. I can't put it any other way. She picked the pen up with her hands and gave it one final tap. It was laid to rest with that dying beat. You're in shock she said. As for your options, it appears that you might be interested in scheduling an abortion. I revolved my neck in line with hers to meet eyes. Because I'm young and afraid, you assume I want to terminate? I said. Her pen clicked again before the tapping resumed. The tapping tapped on until it dropped to the floor.

ACCEPTED

by Savannah Slone

Looking back now, fifteen years later, I can finally comprehend what a monotonous life I was living. My father fed me Dollar Store purchased, off-brand junk food at home, so most of my meals took place at school. My peers made fun of my bland clothes and constantly expanding waistband. My curly mess of hair, chopped into a pixie cut, served as another reason for harassment. I loathed going home to my boring dad after leaving the flock of ruthless ridiculers. I couldn't talk to him. The death of my mother doused all fire remaining in him. He was fun, playful, and loving—full of life. The vibrancy that once made up his spirit faded to a lifeless gray. His faraway eyes were understandable. They are to be expected when you lose part of yourself. His grayness spread throughout our home.

My weatherworn black rain boots trudged through the lifeless leaves as I walked home from school one Tuesday afternoon. As a Washington resident, rain boots were always a sensible move. When I say I was walking home, it should be noted that I wasn't walking to my house. The local library was home to me. My house wasn't full of culture, community, or love, like I longed for it to be. It didn't feel like a home. It wasn't the silent space that I needed to concentrate. My house was just as quiet, but a more intense level of quiet. I could better focus among the ambient noise of scratching pens, flipping paperback pages, and keyboard clatter that lived inside the library. The musky scent of books and the overall ambitious vibe drove me forward.

I meandered up to the library's front door and used my back to push it open while closing my saturated umbrella, before marching over to my self-assigned seat. I perched the closed-up umbrella against the table leg. Every day of the week, I sat and studied in the same black ergonomic chair.

"Hey, Alex," said Tina, the library page. Her vibrant curly hair was tipped with purple. She beamed at me from her step stool, as she alphabetized the classics. "How was school today?"

"Oh, the usual. Two essays, 300 flashcards, and at least four hours of studying ahead of me today."

"You amaze me, honey. We're all so proud of you. I hope you know that." Her bleached teeth contrasted exquisitely with her melanin rich skin.

I tried not to let my embarrassment show through my smile before my eyes returned to my Spanish book.

"I'll leave you to it, then." She gave my shoulder a maternal squeeze as she passed by. "Off to young adult lit, I go." She performed a curtsy for me, before walking off through the rows upon rows of books.

There were regulars at the library. A man who always wore a fisherman's vest and galoshes came in to drop off and pick up Pacific Northwest outdoorsy books. Several days a week, a congregation of middle school aged children came in for homework help. A few others were blurred pieces of furniture, always there and always silent. However, there was one who stood out to me. A woman in her 70s sat near the window every day, without fail. She held a book in one hand and a palm sized magnifying glass in the other. She wore bizarre clothes and had chin-length, wavy hair, dyed copper orange, which flopped every which way atop her head. She wore rose quartz cat eye reading glasses. She would sometimes pull out a flask and take a swig.

One day, I went into the bathroom where the mystery granny stood with puckered lips, forcing her mouth into a frown, as she applied crimson lipstick. I looked her over, my admiration apparent and awkward, before she made mirror eye contact with me. I made my way to the stall and was too nervous to pee until the slamming of the shutting door sounded. I flushed and exited my stall to find that she was still in the room.

“What’s your story, girl?”

“W—what?”

“I see you here every day, just like me. You’re a young little thing. What are you doing in a library every damn day of the week?”

I shook her voice away and began waving my hand in front of the automatic sink. It didn’t activate. I reluctantly moved over to the sink closer to her.

“I do homework here, ma’am.”

“Ma’am?” She cackled. “Baby, don’t call me ma’am. I don’t need your respect.”

“Don’t call me, baby.” I retorted, mirroring her sassiness. I ripped a paper towel from the dispenser’s mouth.

She shadowed me to my table and motioned to the chair across from my own, as to ask, “May I?” I nodded.

“So, let’s hear it.”

“Hear what?”

“Let’s hear why you’re wasting your youth away in here.”

“Well, if you *must* know, I’m in my senior year in high school. I do homework, study for the SATs, and apply for scholarships. Okay?” I didn’t understand why I had to explain myself to her. What a nosy old lady.

“Okay.” She lifted her hands as if to surrender to me. She bit her lip, trying to hold back giggles. Her recently applied lipstick was stuck on the edges of her teeth. “So?”

“So, what?” I let my pen drop onto the table dramatically.

“Do you do, you know, anything ... else? You’re here every day.”

“I don’t need to do anything else right now. This is my time to be preparing. I’ll have a life after college. Plus, you only know that I’m here every day because you’re here every day.” I retrieved the pen.

She shifted in her seat. “Listen. I approached you because you remind me of myself.”

I choked back a laugh. “I remind you of yourself?”

“I wasted my entire life shutting out experiences in the pursuit of ‘success’.” She did air quotes with her arthritic fingers.

I glanced up and offered a courteous straight-line smirk.

“I’ve seen you here for a long time and have just been ... curious. I won’t be around much longer. I just wish some weird old lady had reminded me to make time to live. And I’m here every day because I’ve lived my life. I’ve seen what I want to see and now I want to spend my time among words.”

“I—I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. We’re all dying. You’re dying right now!” She set her wrinkled chin atop her hands, as they cupped her cheeks. She looked at me and grinned. She reminded me of what I imagined my mother would

have been like.

She told me her name: Isla Armstrong. When I told her mine, she asked if it was short for Alexandra. When I responded yes, she slammed her hands down. She didn't understand why I would go by Alex. She, apparently, would have killed for a four-syllable name. "Four syllable names are utterly dazzling, my darling", she said. She was 77 years old, diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer, and was given three to six months to live. That was seven months ago. She wore a peculiar, unexpected outfit every day. I remember one that was exceptionally incredible: a mustard yellow turtleneck sweater dress with a lace trim lingerie slip over top, red tights with golden polka dots, and floral Doc Marten's boots. She pranced around the library while I studied, practically burying me in recommended books: *The Alchemist*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Wild*, *The Four Agreements*, *White Oleander*, *The Bell Jar*, and *Letter to My Daughter*. I told her about my dad and our lack of money. I told her about my deceased mother. She told me about the loss of her daughter -- suicide. Following her daughter's death, she believed she had failed as a mother.

The only thing that I had been told about my mother was that she died before I was even capable of forming a memory of her. My dad didn't like to talk about her. He didn't like that I looked like her, which is why he rarely looked at me. I thumbed through pictures of her long, flowing brown hair, the same color as mine. Even as young as eleven years old, I could tell that my dad couldn't bear our similarities. My face seemed to be a replica of hers. To try to

to make myself less repulsive to him, I cut my hair into my trademark pixie cut for the first time.

During my junior year in high school, I stumbled upon her old clothes in plastic tubs in the garage. She wore bold, colorful clothes. My dad did the clothes shopping. His taste was plain; therefore, my fashion sense was equally flavorless. I owned a few pair of stiff blue jeans and blue, gray, and black Hanes shirts.

I snuck into the garage late one night and stuffed some of my mother's clothes into my backpack. I showed them to Isla the next day since they reminded me of her style. Her aged fingers drew up to her pearls in awe. She dubbed my mother her new style hero. "You should be wearing these!" She exclaimed as she laid a fuzzy, plum shaded sweater over top my shoulders.

As I modeled it atop my gray cotton hoodie, I felt connected to the woman I had never had the pleasure of meeting.

Every day, after I finished my homework and visited with Isla, I stayed at the library. The doors closed at 9:00 p.m. Isla blew me a nightly kiss from the doorframe, which I returned dramatically. It's so funny that my first close friend was a woman approaching 80. We could have starred in a best friend version of *Harold and Maude*. It was after everyone left that I went into the back, clocked in, and began my nightly janitorial work. While it wasn't the most glamorous of jobs, I was paid above minimum wage for work that I could perform with ease. As I dusted and scrubbed, I would listen to SAT prep audio

on my iPod. Tina and the rest of the library gang bought it for my 16th birthday. I never told my dad that I had a job. Though I knew that we were hurting for money, I didn't want any pressure to pitch in. I was worried that I would have to start buying my own food when I ate too much or, yet again, outgrew my clothes. By keeping it to myself, I was able to save up for my necessities for when college time came around.

Later that night, when I got home, my dad was sitting at the kitchen table, rather than sleeping like he usually did at that hour.

I stood there, frozen and unsure what was going on.

"Why do you get home after 11 o'clock every night?"

This caught me off guard. I could feel my palms perspiring. "I've told you, Dad. I go to the library after school to study."

He swallowed audibly and nodded, brushing his absurd question under the rug.

What I didn't know at the time was that he went to the library that day to drop off a flier for an upcoming sale at Les Schwab, where he worked. He read the white decals on the front door that stated that they closed at 9:00 p.m. and grew curious about my whereabouts.

The evening following my lie, he parked across the street from the library. He watched as everyone left and locked up the building—everyone but me. He watched me go into the back room. I returned, pushing a trolley with rubber gloved hands. That night, he was at the kitchen table again. He was wearing

his plain baseball cap, as usual. He needed a shave.

“You need to get a job.”

“Uh, okay, well—I don’t know of any places that are hiring, Dad,” I said, pushing my side bangs behind my ear while walking to my room.

“I hear they’re hiring a housekeeper at the library.” He shouted down the hallway at me, leaning back in his chair.

I stopped in my tracks. He stood up, walked over, and leaned against the wall across from me, his arms crossed.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I—I thought if I told you, you’d want me to pitch in or something.”

He scoffed and rolled his eyes before staring at his feet with a clenched mouth.

“I know we’re poor, Dad, but I need to save up for school. I’m going *off* to college and I will need money. I don’t want to put that stress on you. I want it to all be taken care of.”

He ran his fingers through his short hair as his bent knees slid him down the wall. I sat down across from him, apprehensively.

“I’m not cut out for this,” he choked back tears. “Your mom had skills. She was fierce, man.” He squeezed the insides of his eyes, relieving their dampness. “Now, I’m just—I’m nothing. Without her, I’m nothing.” He broke down again. “I got us on Welfare and went to trade school for a little bit and am still just barely scraping by.”

“I know, Dad. It's okay. I'm going to make sure that we're both taken care of.”

His jaw tightened. I looked away. In our silence, a mere whisper would have been alarmingly loud.

Every day that week, after school, I went home first to see if I had received any college related mail. On a Wednesday afternoon, I opened the mailbox to find a heap of large envelopes. I ran as fast as I could to the library. Isla was the one person I wanted to open them with. For once, I wasn't wearing my rain boots when it rained. At the library, the sky was gray and my feet were soaked through the socks. I went in, my letters protected within my raincoat. I pulled my books that were due out of my backpack and released them in the drop box. I jogged back to our appointed armchairs, but she wasn't there. For the first time, she wasn't there. The vibrant piece of library furniture that became my idol was missing. I knew she was gone. My entire body was numb, but I remembered what she had said about her death, which gave me comfort. “We're all dying!” She had said. For the first time, I didn't sit in my assigned seat. I sat in Isla's chair, or more accurately, Isla's throne. I wiped away the tears that welled up in my eyes and began opening my acceptance letters.

I slumped my head into my lap as my tears emptied from my eyes, my emotions fiercely conflicting, Tina walked up and kneeled beside me. She held me as I sobbed and, after a few minutes, handed me an envelope that was

labeled "For Alexandra". Within the envelope, there was a key and an index card that she most likely had stolen from me. The index card listed an address a few blocks away and the message: "Raid my closet, my darling."

While my time with Isla taught me so much, it was her death that most profoundly marked my soul. I experienced the bitter and inevitable taste of life that comes with one's entry into this little place we all refer to as home. However, it should probably be noted that I am referring to the universe, not my local library. I decided on UW and moved to Seattle the September following my high school graduation.

The three months before moving to Seattle were rough. My dad would hear me sobbing in my room in the middle of the night. He would tenderly knock on the door before sitting next to me on my bed, holding me securely until I would drift to sleep, at last. My father helped me through my loss. I hadn't been able to mourn my mother alongside him, so it was a healing experience for both of us. As time passed, he peeled back his layers and, as he let me in, his grayness was replaced with his prior self that I had heard only glimpses of, over the span of my lifetime. My dad further explained my mother's death to me. When my mother went into labor, the umbilical cord was wrapped around my neck and my heart rate was dropping. They wheeled her in for an emergency C-section. They cut me out of her and I made it. "Unfortunately, she did not," he said. "She hemorrhaged."

“She was the breadwinner, your mom. We, uh—well, weren’t always poor,” he muttered. She had been brought up in a strict home full of successful people. At seventeen, she met my artsy, stoner dad. He wrote her poems and painted her into the landscapes he so exquisitely crafted. “She had Ivy League schools lined up. Her parents had it all mapped out for her, but she turned everything down.” He looked down at his hands, as he cracked his knuckles. With furrowed brows, he inhaled deeply before swallowing the lump in his throat. “She gave it all up for me. She was always saying that she wanted to be more like me—wanted to be free and travel and create.”

Her parents had obviously disagreed with the decision, so she was forced to live as a lower-class American for the first time in her life. The family’s wealth was never a consideration until she found that she couldn’t travel without their money. She worked two waitressing jobs and went to community college in the evenings. She supported my dad, so he could work on his art. She put herself through school and ended up getting her MBA. Although it was a state school, rather than Harvard or Yale, she earned it herself. Just like I would.

I had applied for and been offered a two-week internship on the other side of the state that left me with only a day at home before moving into my dorm. When I came home, I found that each of the walls in the house had been transformed into individual murals. When I asked what happened, he told me that he was building a portfolio to start doing murals on commission.

“This is—this is incredible, Dad,” I said, as my purse and duffel bag involuntarily fell from my grasp.

“Go take a look at your room,” he instructed while holding back a smirk.

I anxiously walked toward my room, taking a deep breath before turning the knob. My room had remained untouched. The walls were still blank, reminding me of the monotony that made up so much of my past. My brows creased in confusion but rose when I turned around to my dad holding a bouquet of paintbrushes out to me. We moved my things into the living room, before taping down tarps and getting to work. The only noise in the house was our breaths and our brushstrokes. We both examined the wall and simultaneously knew that we were finished.

Without success in mind, I allowed myself to get to know myself by going into school with an undecided major and an open mind. On my first day, I sat down in a lecture hall. I wore my mother’s fuzzy purple sweater over a black dress with Isla’s red tights with golden polka dots underneath. I smoothed my dress and retrieved a notebook and pen from my bag. As I began taking notes during Orientation, I spotted a stroke of paint on my thumb and smiled.



Sady Mayer

Featured Poet ~ 1 Poem

As a Missourian, my writing is often inspired by ancestors who rode out their their lives somewhere between the Mighty Mississip and Wide Missouri. In addition to writing creatively about my Midwestern roots, I teach vinyasa yoga, and I also direct the Stephens College Student Success Center, an academic resource and writing support hub for the College's undergraduate and graduate students.

Cathe Dunn's First Kiss upon Her Death in Monroe City, Missouri on November 10, 1900

I am
a firebird,
free from smoking gravel bone
five feet from the farm's well,
four thousand miles from Erin.
Free of featherbone, fabric, and him,
I am a crow so black,
I am all things and none—
with no cloud gate to greet me.

I am breath at the bend in her neck
when I find her at the fence line
wringing washing.
I am firewater, fall sun,
and winter fever on wet sheets
when my mouth that isn't touches
the place in her neck that still is.
Oh yes. Heaven's a fine place
not to be.

~ Sady Mayer

First Published in the Columbia (Missouri) Art League Interpretations exhibition
book 2017.



Photo by Debbie Berk

Seth Jani

Featured Poet ~ 6 Poems

Seth Jani currently resides in Seattle, WA and is the founder of Seven Circle Press (www.sevencirclepress.com). His own work has been published widely in such places as The Chiron Review, Pretty Owl Poetry, El Portal, The Hamilton Stone Review, Hawai'i Pacific Review, VAYAVYA, Gingerbread House, Gravel and Zetetic: A Record of Unusual Inquiry. More about him and his work can be found at www.sethjani.com.



Emotions are a Marsh at Sundown

Like a sundial
These alterations are worn
Across the body's facades:
The little light of rage,
Big light of love,
And death with his cool hands.
Sometimes, there is happiness,
The true kind, that is a pale light
At sundown.
It falls on the flowers
And causes them to undress
Their yellow skirts.
In the pools of brackish water
A disinherited moon
Shines like memory shines.

Dependency, Window

The mineral-light, catatonic voice
Sailing through the wall,
And the medication in the blood's
Dark plasma,
Are two spindrift lovers
Crossing the road at night.
And the galaxies spinning
Their milky branches
Through the window, like a pore
Unto midnight,
Are a kind of salt
Attending to the heart's
Need for solace.

Verandahs

One day, you'll go out with eyes wide open.
The birds in the cages of the brain
Ripped free by the gun's migration.
The cock-eyed dance of time
Ending for your body.
Whatever it was that felt the world
Swept off to that final city,
To all those sad verandahs
Filling up with snow.

Packing Up

No out today,
And the father of all grief
Is coming to touch the glass
Of what you are protecting.
Like water forming lines
On the day-lilies in their
Fight with death,
You won't get through or home.
A permanent stranger in this place
Of longing,
You empty your room of reminiscence,
Hug the grasses, the cactus displaced
By autumn,
Ask nothing more of life.

The Taste of Burnt Water

The taste of burnt water moving through the mouth
Is also the taste of death.
We can't know these things until the final fleeting,
Just like we can't know the reason she hurt your heart
That day in August,
Or why the dahlias are black as well-holes

We can't know the picture the fading neurons paint
In their exposure,
Or at least can't relay the shriveled light,
Can't eulogize the tongue with its
Dead mechanics.

All we can do is disappear one morning
In the flats of summer.
All the ecstasy and bitterness blooming
From our bodies.
The coffee red as a raven's eye
In the brain's confection.

Olly Remembering His Brother

"The wind is my brother's voice
Forming grammars in the air.

A frequenter of dead leaves,
Abandoned hollows,

The old barn where our mother
Held the cows, one November,

When the milk fairly froze
Their udders."

"That was a cold winter" Olly thinks,
Remembering how even then

His brother was a wisp,
A soon-to-be-shadow

That seemed ready to perish,
Even as he propped up a ladder

Or followed his father
Down to the river

Whey they would sometimes sit
Like two conspiring thieves

Idly discussing their latest deceptions
On the green and fatal shore.

~ *Seth Jani*



Brian Burmeister

Featured Author ~ 1 Story

Brian Burmeister teaches communication at Iowa State University. He is a regular contributor at Cleaver Magazine, and his writing has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. He can be followed on Twitter: @bdburmeister.

Such a Good Girl

by Brian Burmeister

If I'm being completely honest, I don't remember much.

I could feel fingers on my head. Petting, swimming through my hair. One hand after the other.

That much I remember.

Then the whispers: *Such a good girl. Such a good girl. Granny loves you very much.*

Some minutes or hours passed in this way. The syrupy-sweet words poured atop each caress of my hair.

Whatever she'd done, I couldn't move. I don't think I was bound, and yet I didn't leave. Didn't sprint. Didn't struggle. Didn't spit in her face.

Eventually she kissed me. First on the eyelids. Then on the cheeks. Then on the lips. When it was over she wiped at her mouth and said she would let me go *today* if I promised never to tell anybody. If I promised to send my pretty little sister to her tomorrow.

Whether from drugs or magic, I was unable to conjure words.

So I nodded, nodded.

And with that, she seemed pleased. With that, she held my hands, softly, as she helped me to my feet.

I stumbled some as we walked down the steps of what I then learned was an old train car. Everything, everywhere else I looked was forest.

She pointed. And when I didn't move, she waved with her other hand repeatedly in that direction. No words passed between us.

That's where she left me.

I walked and walked through the woods. No idea where I was or where I was going. Or what just happened. Eventually I exited near an old farmhouse I recognized near the edge of our town.

An hour or so later, I returned home. I walked through our front door, through the kitchen and past my mother on the phone. She laughed and smiled and didn't even see me.

I went to my room, grabbed clothes, showered. Took many deep breaths.

I entered my sister's room. Shut the door. Whispered sweetly to her, "How'd you like to go on an adventure tomorrow?"

"Such a Good Girl" originally appeared in River Cities' Reader.

Bekah Steimel

Featured Poet ~ 6 Poems

Bekah Steimel is a 37-year-old writer living in St. Louis whose poems have been published globally. Her pastimes include flirting, drinking whiskey and making people uncomfortable. Find her recent work in literary magazines such as Oddball, FIVE:2:ONE and Crab Fat. Visit www.bekahsteimel.com and follow her on Twitter and Instagram @BekahSteimel.



I keep pecking at the eggshell of this world

every dose
is a down-payment on death
even an avalanche begins with a flurry
with accumulation
I'm killing myself with my own friendly fire
one white bullet at a time
I have no desire to be a cautionary tale
a narrative
of excess and extinction
but the itchy sweater of sobriety
has never fit well
and always unravels
at the most inconvenient times

First appeared in Oddball Magazine, 2015

An aquarium frightens me more than the ocean.

Give my fins freedom, not a fence built of glass.

I would rather be at the bottom
of the food chain, than queen of my
own plastic castle.

Give me rows of entitled teeth.
Give my death a purpose.

Do not make my final swim
a quick ride
through the canals of a toilet.

First appeared in Pacific Review, 2015

Backfired

I was baptized in gasoline
and taught to play with matches
I was told everybody burns
Even so
Burn in silence
No show and tell
it is impolite to speak of the flames
it is improper to reveal the scars
But the arsonists miscalculated
when they lit me
because instead of burning me
into defenseless ash
they actually ignited my voice

First appeared in The Bitchin' Kitsch, 2016

Down to the nub

to the filter
to ash
to the bottom of bottles
wasting nothing but my life

First appeared in Too Much: An Anthology About Excess (UnKnown Press, 2014)

Roll Tape

PLAY

in this game, the bottle spins me
until I'm kissing lust delivered
the omnivore addict- leaving no stone untried
I am a pharmacist
I am a bartender
and then I am myself
as untouchable as the horizon
watch me rise

REWIND

fourteen calendars stacked like kindling
doused in cough syrup and morphine
lit by my first joint
all pills had halos, synthetic angels of mercy
forsaking balance to trip and roll
blind to the omen of my first overdose
the future was a fairytale I did not believe
I watched myself stumble without concern

PAUSE

All wishes are comprised of regret and hope
I need two clumsy stars
I regret biting the shiny lure of temptation
now I'm hooked
I hope I can learn to breathe on dry land
then I'm free
watch me struggle

FAST FORWARD

I will be pissed at the clumsy stars
I will be filling and emptying prescriptions
my tolerance will be higher, my self-control lower
I will be angry and turn to the bottle
then I will be sad and turn to the bottle
I will never be what I could have been
watch me watch you with envy

STOP

watch me die.

First appeared in Poems For All, 2016

Aerophobia

My fear of heights
has kept me off the highroad
and middle ground
is not my style
the scum of the earth
is always stuck to my shoes
just another addict
to look down on
from the safety of elevation
but I know how to rise
without the luxury of wings
and I know how to crash
without the safety of landing gear
so today you hover and shine
while my filthy habit
gets me messier still
but we all end up
under six feet of dirt

~ Bekah Steimel

First appeared in Thirteen Myna Birds, 2014



Photo by Debbie Berk



Matt Duggan

Featured Poet ~ 4 Poems

Born Bristol U.K

Poems have appeared in The Journal, Osiris, The Dawntreader, The Stray Branch, Prole, Ink, Sweat, and Tears, Algebra of Owls, in 2015 I won the erbacce prize for poetry with my first full collection Dystopia 38.10 (erbacce-press) and in 2016 won the Into the Void Poetry Prize with my poem Elegy for Magdalene.

Drinking with Hemingway

Break the midnight

when the summer chrome melts into a cacophony of voices,
where neon alley ways smell of cigarettes and cooked lemon grass.

Dealers with oxycontin smiles

street walkers tout the same space that their great ancestors
once paced for their very own pleasure seeking,

enter into a bar that looks like a brothel with the curtains drawn
where cocaine is exchanged in palms outside
and the whores are busy sweating in doorways and local hotels

I felt a oneness with Hemingway after my fourteenth sip of absinthe,
the wallpaper a cabinet of empty green bottles
ceiling peeling in dark mahogany as a swinging chandelier turns black and white.

The many faces add colours to the room,

come break the midnight with me watch the vessels clamber to madness,
see what he saw from these tables in blood bleached oak

The Spaces Left Bare

The only human figures to pass on these walls
are the shadows in opposing rooms
those reflections during the summer months
bounce from the ceiling like ghosts dressed in black suits.
Air is stale and needs recycling
windows gleam with no visible fingerprints,

immaculate laminated tiles - underfloor heating
the spaces are left bare. Where beneath the plush gothic balcony
a homeless man sleeps in the open air,
at night the room lights up for no one
then fades as dusk wakes the clock;
where guests will never reserve or stay.

In The Belly of Massachusetts

Lungs - giant tanks of iron

skyline gathered in cement tracers

traffic lights hovered in metallic yellow huts

above freeways that swerve and breathe,

like obese concrete circles of eight.

The Liver a swinging hinge

hanging from a waterfall where dead coats of seahorses

danced with dehydrated salmon skins.

Along sidewalks where veterans with no legs

jibe for dollar bits among the shaking junkies

where cuts of beef as large as window frames

simmered on plates of plastic gold.

The Dark Forest

Our blue covers a homely rain land
where summers come in minutes –
the clouds hang like maps of countries
as each day grows a darker layer.
The sky painted grey wings
where the sun was supposed to see –
our heads were looking at the gutters
when nature lost its confidence in being a friend.

I saw the forest get ever so darker
during the first summer of blood –
the light jittered with the beginning of day
as maniacs ridiculed the essence of humility and love.
The forest was leaking bare light
shadows in the heart of its core,
darkness would remain and cover the land
as hope is the dwindling light in our palace of wood.

~ *Matt Duggan*

Martha Strom

Featured Poet ~ 8 Poems

Martha Strom's poems have appeared in New Letters, Passager, Common Ground Review, and Straylight Literary Arts Magazine, among other journals. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.



A Trip to Trader Joe's

do you

hear voices

tell me

the truth

sheer nonsense

attacks me

my perceptions

crucify me

but beliefs

crazy as they are

give us power

over death

My Always Me

i saw my spirit

just now

something hovering

something dark

outside of light

something old

i

t was ever new

ever renewing

it was there

no matter how words

pulled me away

no matter how worries

emotions like fear or loss

grabbed at me

calling me away

into the world again

it was there

it was like water

it was like

there are four elements

water air fire earth

and something else

me

my soul

this clinging clangy

word making mind

has trouble telling of it

we are all water/ we are all earth

we are all fire/ we are all air

we are all spirit always and forever

Devils

this is happiness--
jimmy crack corn & i don't care--
a hot radiator--sleeping til 8--
iced coffee with almond milk

i got friends
saw willy
yesterday

out my window
little puckered puddles
tell me it's wet out
bleaker skies look down
like devils

empty words
fill up with meaning
fill me up

nothing comes in
nothing goes out

i want to say

i have nothing to say

i write down my dreams--

last night black & orange gold fish
swimming multitudinous as salmon
in a yellow bathtub

when i was in college

all i had to wear were my mom's
khakis from her time in the marines
and a few colored t shirts

a guy asked me

marty, why don't you get
some clothes?

i say my prayers and meditate
at midnight, or one or two a.m.

the devils quiet down--

transformers

Panic Attack

god

attacked me

last night

i was lying there

thank you god

i love you god

and whoosh

god answered

i have been tricking you

everyone hates you

i will never

talk to you again

you are a louse

you are a fraud

you are fake

you are shit
and all you do
is poop

nobody loves me
everybody hates me
i'm just going to eat worms

Stone Soup

never was a floozy--

not yet a hag

but the frustration

of an elderly woman

knows no bounds

just try to make poetry

out of water and a stone

hey ray you may say yay

hiya ria why a freer beer

(said with a maine accent)

that's as far as i got

with my rhyming wedding sonnet

suck on a straw

and it pulls up

whatever is at the bottom

but can i turn
nothing into something?

a cloud has fallen
over the street

a white sky renders dull
and weak the colors
of plants
and buildings

the light gone out
completely

The Light of the Sun

Cover up, cover up,
My body says to me.

Cover up in fat.
Cover up under the covers.
Cover up who you truly are.

Don't let him see you.
He will laugh at you.

Wear loose clothing.
After all it is summer.

I will walk naked on the beach

*I will throw my bikini down
Into the sand*

*In a crumpled ball
Next to my crumpled towel*

*And I will walk naked
Into the sea*

Williamsburg Koan

a vow of poverty--
or failure to handle money
like a grownup--
which is it?

jack says one thing,
willy says another

boredom or serenity
call it what you will
either way i am quiet
and alone

skinny or fat?
i can't tell any more

starving for beauty
or fasting for god?

one or the other
either way i'm hungry

and i sit in the sun

under a hat

and sunglasses

wasting my life

or striving for god

consciousness

time to sit and do nothing

some more

excuse me

that's called

transcendental meditation

either way

it's what one says

that lasts



The east village
Looks gray, smells like exhaust,
Houses weirdos, and it's where I go.
There right now, tanking up
With a soy latte, listening
To "Beautiful," looking for enlightenment.
Somehow this is better than my kitchen.
This is where I have fallen in love,
So, tied to it, I seek love or something
Else, a sense of truth, of the real,
Of something that pokes a hole
In my ennui, lethargy, boredom,
And the dull, dull, dull beating
That goes on in my brain
Saying die now, my aged queen...

I escaped all this when I moved out
To Williamsburg after eleven and a half
Years of tears, beer, and wrinkled,
Cheaper beer cans sold at a discount

At Chosky's Deli on First Avenue--
A numbers outfit, somewhere to go--
To escape the paradise of an apartment
On St. Mark's Place near Avenue A.

Then I loved Willy-- I love Willy now.
I still go to meetings, and I see Willy there.
But I no longer smoke cigarettes, drink beer,
Eat swiss and bacon and tomato on rye toast,
Or sleep next to Willy, snoring.
In fact he too has changed-- he hooks up
To a machine that cures his sleep apnea.
I get here on the L train, and I come
Every day that I'm sane enough to see
It is my cure: it pokes a hole
In that sleep I walk in, it tells me I can love,
It looks beautiful-- and this is where I find friends.

I go to yoga class on the west side though
And there I will go for my next mecca.

~ Martha Strom



Milenko Županović

Featured Poet ~ 3 Poems

Milenko Županović was born in 1978 in Kotor (Montenegro). By profession he is a graduate marine engineer, but in his free time, he writes poetry and short stories. His stories and poems have been published by many magazines, blogs and websites, mostly in the Europe, U.S. and in Latin America.

In 2010 he wrote and published his first book, a collection of stories, and he also written and published few collections of poems (ebooks).

*In 2015 he wrote and published his second book , a collection of stories and poetry.
In 2016 he wrote his third book , a collection of poetry
(published in USA, project "Poems for all")*

*His book "Martiri" was published in italian language.
Milenko is an ethnic Croat and lives in the town of Kotor (Montenegro)
with his wife and 3 sons.*

Shaman

The road through the jungle
was very difficult
discover the mystical religion
in the heart of Brazil
light we saw the other day,
In the distance
we could hear the sounds
of drums echoed
through the forest
Skeleton danced
and formed a circle
in the corner stood a man
and in his eyes there was despair
He wanted to escape
from that place
only when the music mute,
he could see the real picture
rhythm of drums
echoed through the woods
Everyone danced as delirious,
green light is covered all,
Amazon had a heart
that was beating
the rhythm of the music
and the lyrics
that are repeated
' ' Daima Force daime amor. ' '

Stone soldiers

The place of the nameless
through the gates
into the memory
of the space
a man with dreams
about the past
the fear of the people
of the unknown
the dreams of his work.
the bloody dreams of a place
without names,
looks back to the memories
of the architects of the past
in the eyes of a man
who is no longer there
the bridge that only exists
in his dreams
the river of books
eleven soldiers hold the stones
on their backs,
the writer of the creature,
their birth, eternal life,
the guard of the ages,
the heart of the creator
in the eye of the bridge.

Atlantis

Lament on the land
pinch the flower
from the book of civilization
I cry every time
When I see dry land
bandaged in black
suffering for homeland
I cry and pray
last trace of beauty
hidden within us.

~ Milenko Županović



Photo by Debbie Berk

Harry Singh

Featured Poet ~ 1 Poem

singhharry621@yahoo.com





Image by Debbie Berk

Kid asked what's night

For a kid to mark iotas.
Someone waits for first light
When he be out of irons.
Courter thinks hard and long on tryst.
A painted woman waits for visitors.
Test takers for trial.
Severed souls ache for reunion.
Fraught with machinations for someone's ruination.
A holy person taken to HIS eulogium
Night dreamers become victim of day dreamers.
A marauder in the quest of break-in
Sometime sub-groups whiles away with groups
New bride wakens with her other half for few nights
But he has to waken nightly with the classics.

~ Harry Singh

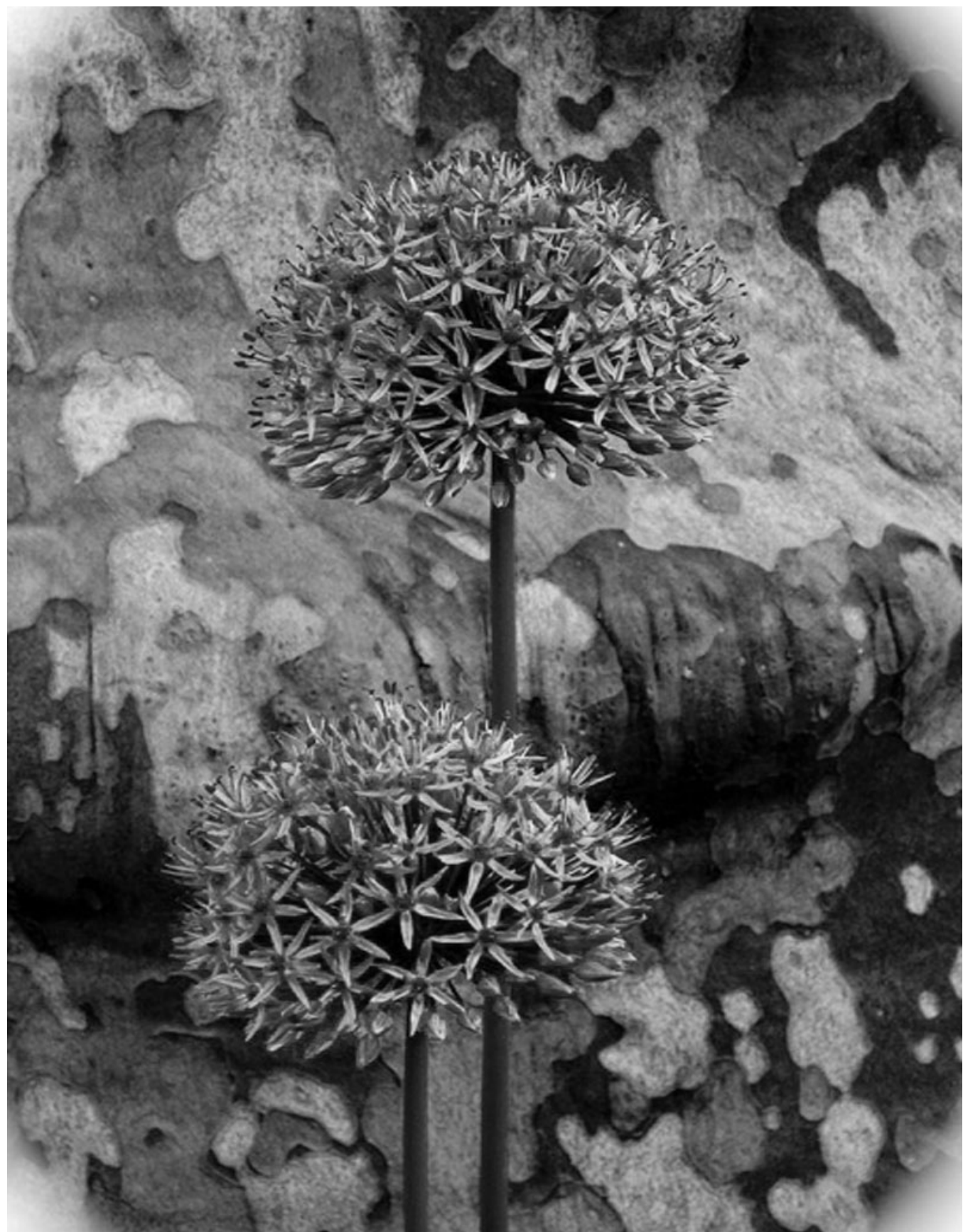


Mark Burchard

Featured Author/Photography, Memoir Excerpt & 2 Photos

Mark Burchard, a former Motion Picture Costumer, was inspired by the slaphappymoments in his 29th film, "The Silence of the Lambs," to try his hand at writing comedy. He quickly moved on to include poetry, fiction, and memoir. Now with over 90 pieces in print, Mark is proud that his work has appeared in such diverse publications as THE BATTERED SUITCASE, WESTWARD QUARTERLY, AUDIENCE MAGAZINE, LITTLE EPISODES, KEROUAC'S DOG, DO HOOKERS KISS?, SKIVE MAGAZINE, and THE STRAY BRANCH. Mark's photographs were shown at the launch of Little Episodes in London, and can be seen on the covers as well as within the pages of many of the magazines mentioned above.

His filmography can be found at IMDB.com.





A MEETING

BY MARK BURCHARD

AN EXCERPT FROM THE UP-COMING MEMOIR

A LIFE BELOW THE LINE

THE PRINCE OF TIDES

NEW YORK CITY, MAY 1990

“She’s here,” Ruth Morley, the costume designer, said with a sigh of resignation as she hung up the phone. The expression on her face told me that she was not looking forward to this meeting or dealing with this woman in anyway. Our star had a reputation for being difficult, incredibly difficult, if not down right impossible.

“Let me finish this page,” I said. I was sitting at my desk doing the script breakdown. “Then I’ll come and wait outside the fitting room in case you need anything. Just give me a shout.” This was to be a ladies only fitting.

"Fine," Ruth and Deb said in unison. They looked at each other with a start and ran out of the office.

A few minutes later, as promised, I followed. As I settled in and leaned against the counter that separated the office from the reception area at Grace's, Jimmy Holder, the office manager, ran through the door from the bustling workroom and rifled through some papers on his desk. This rather handsome, lean, and usually the calmest port in the worst of costuming storms, seemed to be shot with adrenaline if not a hefty dose of speed. He pulled something out of a folder on his desk and looked at me.

"How can you just stand there and look so cool? I've been hiding ever since she arrived with her entourage." Jimmy looked at the fitting room door as if it there were a hideous monster behind it intent on devouring him whole. As he ran back into the workroom he turned and spoke once more. "And I'm not comin' out again 'til she's gone."

Jimmy may have thought I looked calm but on the inside I was a nervous twit. I was a fan, a very big fan, in fact she was my idol. From the moment I saw her in her first black and white television special, *My Name is Barbra*, I was in love and envious. I wanted to do quirky things like stand in the middle of Bergdorf-Goodman-one of the highest priced clothing stores in the world, in a pair of pants made out of a shag rug and sing, "Brother Can You Spare A Dime?" I liked the idea that she could be outlandish and unconventional and get away with it. She was everything that my conservative Catholic upbringing

wouldn't allow me to be. On some deep psychological level that I could never allow myself to fully explore, I must confess I wanted to be her.

Meeting her seemed to be out of reach, something that only happened to other people. Knowing that she was in the next room, only a few feet away rattled my usually staid demeanor. To me, unlike Jimmy, the goddess of comedy and song was on the other side of that door. Still I could hear my late Irish grandmother say, like she did with so many other stars I was associated with, "What would Barbra Streisand want with you?" Rather real or imagined grandma's words always made me feel very small, utterly useless, and a bit of a fraud. After she spoke through her alcoholic haze I believed that I could never live up to anyone's expectations including my own.

Then I remembered that I hadn't been introduced. So the chances were fairly good, I reasoned, that she'd fly by on her way out without saying a word even though I had a signed deal memo that said I would not only work on her film until the end of principle photography but that I'd also do the wrap. I took a few deep breaths as I tried to pull myself together. To distract myself, I looked around the reception room.

The reception area in Grace Costumes was designed to impress. Costume sketches covered the walls. Of course, these were the best of the bunch and showy. They stood out from the forest green walls in gold frames and they were lit to great effect. My favorites had always been the renderings done by Jose Verona of the costumes worn by Beverly Sills when she sang

the Donizetti Triple Crown, the three Queens of England. For a few minutes I was lost in the memory of those happy days at The New York City Opera, when she reigned supreme on the stage of the State Theatre, and I was getting my start in the depths of its sub-basement.

The voices in the fitting room suddenly rose and my blood pressure followed. Then there was a loud “Then I’ll ask him myself!” It was her voice. No doubt about that. The dressing room door flew open, and out she came shrieking my name.

“MAAAARK!”

“Yes.” I responded in the calmest voice I could muster and then I gulped. In an instant I found myself nose to nose with...well, the nose. “What are we going to do about Nick? He stinks!”

For a second her words didn’t register. All I could do was feel the pain in my hand. It was tightly gripping the counter for support because my knees were beginning to buckle. I could see nothing but her and the nose, and all I could hear were the words that were pounding in my head, “Barbra Streisand is talking to me. Barbra Streisand is talking to me.” Her perfume was gardenia something. I wanted to nip at the air. I couldn’t help wondering if this was real or just a fantasy.

“Well, what are we going to do?” she asked.

The question as she presented it was loaded. What does she mean by,

“He stinks?” I asked myself. “Was I supposed to give him acting lessons or a bath? What?”

“Can’t ya get ‘em to shower or somethin’?” Her voice slid up and down the scales as her hands and those dragon lady fingernails poked at the air in all directions.

I silently thanked her for answering the unspeakable question. But then again, I knew that this wasn’t just any old question. This was my test. I had to impress and establish myself as an experienced and knowledgeable professional right then and there.

“Don’t worry,” I said. I was as calm as I could possibly be. “I’ve dealt with the problem before and believe me, I’ve had to do more than just tell an actor to take a shower. By the time I’m done with Nick he’ll smell like a rose.”

She looked me square in the eye. “Promise?” she asked.

“Promise!” I replied.

She punched me on the shoulder lightly, walked back into the dressing room, and slammed the door behind her.

“Ba...Ba...Ba...Barbra Streisand gave me a love tap,” I mumbled as I slipped into a euphoric high. “Ba... Ba...Ba...Barbra Streisand gave me a love tap.”

Jimmy popped his head through the shop door. “Is it safe?” he asked.

“Ba...Ba...Ba...Barbra Streisand just gave me a love tap,” I said to him. My smile was so broad and stiff that my face was beginning to ache.

"I will die a happy man."

Jimmy shook his head and laughed. "You're nuts."

"And so are you...but Ba...Ba...Ba...Barbra Streisand just gave *me* ma love tap."

In all fairness I have to add that Barbra and Nick's physical trainer made him run from his hotel to the rehearsal studio through New York City traffic every morning to help him get in shape for the role of Coach Tom Wingo. Who wouldn't be a bit spritsy?

~ *Mark Burchard*

DOROTHY ALTSTATT BURCHARD

Featured Poet ~ 1 Poem

Dorothy Altstatt Burchard is 92. Mother of 10, Grandmother to 32, and Great Grandmother to 30, and there is at least one bun in the over, as she says. She has three college degrees and is the reader of thousands of books. She is a plant and garden aficionado who knows the names of every plant in Latin! Jigsaw puzzle slayer! Pick-up truck driver! When she receives calls she answers on her smart phone as she drives around town running errands. She finds no time to be lazy or get self-absorbed. Her 2 activities are love and go.



I WANT TO STAY

I DON'T WANT TO GO
I WANT TO STAY.
LORD HEAR MY PLEA
DON'T TAKE ME AWAY!

A GOD SO CRUEL
HE TAKES AWAY
THOSE WE LOVE.
WE CANNOT STAY.

HE GIVES US LOVE
SO STRONG IT WEEPS
BUT LOVE CAN'T STOP
HIS LOVE TO KEEP.

I'M OLD,
I'M UGLY,
I'M EVEN POOR,
AND MOST OF ME DON'T WORK NO MORE.

MY TEETH,
MY EARS,
AND EVEN MY EYES,
SO MUCH HAS GONE I'M BEGINNING TO DIE.

WE SUFFER.
FATE LAUGHS.
TO LIVE ONLY IS HARD,
YET WE HOLD ON SO TIGHT
THOUGH THE BODY IS TIRED.

TIRED BUT UNWAVERING
WE STILL WANT TO STAY.
WE PRAY DAY AND NIGHT
DON'T TAKE ME AWAY.

NO, I DON'T WANT TO GO!
I STILL WANT TO STAY!
LORD HEAR MY PLEA
DON'T TAKE ME AWAY!

I WANT TO STAY!

~ Dorothy Altstatt Burchard



Jennifer Courtney

Featured Author ~ 1 Story

Jennifer Courtney (jl courtney) is the aging mother of three children, two dachshunds, and a cat named Schrödinger. In her spare time, she uses rejection letters to decoupage distressed furniture.

Point A to Point B

by jl courtney

T rains thundered by, the winds from their passing sulfurous or sweet. Where the scents mingled, the air sang of honeysuckle and hard decisions. Breathing it in, a soul might shift, bare foot stamping the dingy platform, but mouthless, they couldn't speak.

The dead stared at the endless tracks, at others like themselves, at the trains. They waited.

Now and then, fractures broke the gloom and revealed a brighter world. Some spirits closest to these cringed, but for every soul that leaned away, one hundred pressed forward. Too many dead, not enough space.

Trains slowed, scarred doors opened and the dead shuffled on. Off they raced to parts unknown.

One unfortunate, caught by the door, ended up shredded. His tatters faded into purgatory's landscape.

Routes were unmarked, and yet the dead climbed aboard. There was nowhere to go but the trains. Ahead, behind, to each side; tracks, trains, and the silent masses.

In South Korea's Pyongtaek station an old woman with no legs hawked satsumas, chilies, and fish shaped bean-paste cakes. She gap-tooth grinned at customers from her braided rug, griddle close to hand.

A crack opened. The aging entrepreneur became a blotch of color on the spirit's platform. Souls squeezed back, tried to edge around her, and found no space. She raised her tongs to turn a fish on the griddle, brushing one of the dead.

The spirit ripped into mist.

The others had no tongues to plead his salvation or to wish him safe travels.

At the platform in Itaewon, near Seoul, twenty souls were lost to a crack when a soldier on leave strode through. Her boyfriend followed her head through the crowd, juggling coffee and a camera. He took out three more dead with his elbow, before the crack closed and they disappeared back into their own world. The crowd of dead hadn't thinned.

Stateside, near Houston Community College, a child waited with his mother on a bench near the light rail. A train stopped—its doors opening. The boy jumped up and ran toward those disembarking, arms lifted. “Daddy I missed you.”

A crack yawned. A dozen spirits, touched as he ran by, shredded into spider-silk.

Always, there were others pushing to fill the space.

A foot away, one among the crowd watched the crack narrow and the child vanish. Its eyes held no relief.

Their stories hung like a question marks, unresolved and meaningless. Mouthless, not one complained as rain dripped from the rusty gutters. Drops turned to deluge, drawing a curtain between the silent dead and the tracks.

~jl courtney

Photography



by Matthew Barron

Matthew Barron has worked as a naturalist in the Blue Ridge Mountains, a construction worker for Habitat in Washington DC, a school counselor and teacher in North Carolina, and presently as a special education teacher in South Carolina. He lives in Travelers Rest, SC with his wife and their seven children (pets). In descending order by age – Duncan, Beckett, Murphy, Doc, General, Otis, and Gryla.

www.lookingglassphotos.me



Photo by Matthew Barron

Featured Poems



Photo by Debbie Berk

I Edit my Life

I edit my life
clothesline pins & clips
hang to dry,
dirty laundry,
I turn poetic hedonistic
in my early 70's
reviewing the joys
and the sorrows
of my journey.
I find myself wanting
a new review, a new product,
a new time machine,
a new internet space,
a new planet where
we small, wee creative
creatures can grow.

~ Michael Lee Johnson

*Michael Lee Johnson lived ten years in Canada during the Vietnam era. He is a Canadian and USA citizen. Today he is a poet, editor, publisher, freelance writer, amateur photographer, small business owner in Itasca, Illinois. He has been published in more than 930 small press magazines in 33 different countries or republics, and he edits 10 poetry sites. Author's website <http://poetryman.mysite.com/>. Michael is the author of *The Lost American: From Exile to Freedom* (136 page book) ISBN: 978-0-595-46091-5, several chapbooks of poetry, including *From Which Place the Morning Rises* and *Challenge of Night and Day*, and *Chicago Poems*. He also has over 130 poetry videos on YouTube as of 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/user/poetrymanusa/videos> Michael Lee Johnson, Itasca, IL nominated for 2 Pushcart Prize awards for poetry 2015 & Best of the Net 2016. Visit his Facebook Poetry Group and join <https://www.facebook.com/group/s/807679459328998/> He is also the editor/publisher of anthology, *Moonlight Dreamers of Yellow Haze*: <http://www.amazon.com/dp/1530456762> A second poetry anthology, *Dandelion in a Vase of Roses*, Editor Michael Lee Johnson, is now available here: <http://www.amazon.com/dp/1545352089>*

RED SKY APOCALYPSE

It's the end of the world they say
as desert sands turn the sky to a blistering display
blowing Saharan dust to make the moon
turn red inspiring words to be written

But alas all this is whilst I am away
down here sweltering in the empty hole where it's
as hot as the desert air, today it reached
thirty-five degrees, not bad for an October day.

I sit outside in the shade and
looking up I see nothing but a
blue soaked sky and a gleaming iridescent sun
until that is I'm locked in online
Where pictures of red skies dominate
but me well I'll always be the
odd one out sitting here grateful
that the apocalypse ain't coming here today.

~ Bradford Middleton

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In moonlight so bright

In moonlight so bright it casts shadows
trees, eager for attention, flirt
shamelessly
like ill behaved schoolgirls
walking there gives ideas
best left unimagined
things that would be regretted
forever with shame and guilt
our old favorites.
Fertility is a curse
an all consuming burden
leaving brides seething
succumbing to life long dreams
with partners chosen badly.

~ Michael Plesset

Michael Plesset has published poetry, flash fiction, short stories, non-fiction, and wrote material for a stand-up comedian. He did graduate work in mathematics and philosophy, and also attended seminary at one time. He worked in high technology and taught English to Chinese students.

Waters Still and Green

Waters still and green, not of vegetation but of night and winter...
Umber washes canvas the sky, cradling fusion's great seed while moon
dust descends over waters still and green.

Lost cities anchor upon the leys and send their women like mirrored images in
dance beyond your reach, taunting as crows will chide the fields they have cleaned.
You wake besotted and mad, seated cross-legged with beggars and cads, wishing
just once to taste waters still and green.

Silence, a man-print in the snow, his far voice carries through the darkness and trees.
Stars needn't guide one whose origins are so near and terrifying. "My blood is burning!"
he cries...then drinks from waters still and green.

~ Melvin Litton

Melvin Litton's stories have appeared in Mobius, Foliate Oak, Floyd County Moonshine, Pif, Chiron Review, First Intensity, with poetry forthcoming in Broadkill Review and Spartan Press. He has two published novels: Geminga, a man/raven fable concerning the Shining Path in Peru (Ill Publishing, 1993); and I, Joaquin, a fictional memoir of the Gold Rush bandit, Joaquin Murrieta, as told by his head encased in alcohol (Creative Arts Book Co., 2003) – both available in new editions from Crossroad Press. He is a retired carpenter and lives in Lawrence, KS with his wife Debra. He also writes and performs songs solo and with the Border Band: www.borderband.com

SHARE YOUR SILHOUETTE WITH ME

Her neck is frozen centaur, and wings of necklace, and knots of thread at her spine,
half of the world are scissors to her, shaken down by the rust on warping fins,
the ship sails A turtle sky,
unfinished by marble paint,
a pearl stalactite sings,
the peddlers
In a net play their star,
fish in a glass maze –

~ Fin Sorrel

Fin Sorrel is the author of Caramel Floods (pski porch, 2017) and the founding editor at MANNEQUIN HAUS (infi2.weebly.com) He is a surrealist

AMPHIBIOUS HORSE

Eased by the confluent still and
dun feathered shroud, she gentled
down the hunt of a sandpiper's
call, haloing the island with steps
turning haste. The sea gave
back to shore of an amphibious
horse, hitching ride on the flesh of
her at the burden of swift marrow.
Sidestepped over the shivering
down of its torn wings, hand traced
lattice strip reaching for wisps
of neigh in the silt, she put ear to
air to horse to the bones inside
holding the stiff giving of its chest.
Softly, she wrung out the equine sea
from her moan until the last drop,
croaked and hurt as some wayward
shift abraded in rocks, setting
to carcass her darlings of sadness,
seeing to magpies calling high on
the dead trees.

~ Lana Bella

A four-time Pushcart Prize, five-time Best of the Net & Bettering American Poetry nominee, Lana Bella is an author of three chapbooks, Under My Dark (Crisis Chronicles Press, 2016), Adagio (Finishing Line Press, 2016), and Dear Suki: Letters (Platypus 2412 Mini Chapbook Series, 2016), has had poetry and fiction featured with over 430 journals, Acentos Review, Comstock Review, EVENT, Ilanot Review, Notre Dame Review, Rock and Sling, & Lampeter Review, among others, and work to appear in Aeolian Harp Anthology, Volume 3.

Temptation

I was tempted,
and I did so.
I did as the darkness
requested.
I did as the darkness
wanted.
Now my soul
has departed.
Now my soul
has answers.

~ Peter MacQuarrie

*Peter MacQuarrie is an enigma. He lives in a darkling forest of northern California.
Follow him on Twitter @PeterMacQ darklingforest@gmail.com*

SEVEN AM WATERCOLOR

A gray ship slides
past low, gold fog.

Straight morning rays
shape a scrim and

kiss the empty
prison with amber.

The bay is still.
A black pilot boat

carves through water
that's flat and silver

as a young girl's mirror.

~ Mark J. Mitchell

Mark J. Mitchell's latest novel, The Magic War just appeared from Loose Leaves Publishing. He studied writing at UC Santa Cruz under Raymond Carver and George Hitchcock. His work has appeared in the several anthologies and hundreds of periodicals. Three of his chapbooks— Three Visitors, Lent, 1999, and Artifacts and Relics—and the novel, Knight Prisoner are available through Amazon and Barnes and Noble.. He lives with his wife Joan Juster and makes a living pointing out pretty things in San Francisco.



Photo by Debbie Berk

Featured Fiction

Family Tree

by Dan Klefstad

Ghildbirth hurts because a woman's organs force a living thing from her body. It's a pity mortals don't feel this pain more often. If you did, you might have some idea of the crescendo of agony we immortals suffer. Every night. Until I consume ten pints of human blood.

If I don't reach this quota by dawn, I go to bed with my insides screaming.

The contractions begin soon after rising, at dusk, and increase gradually along with an awareness that my skin is deteriorating. I wear perfume to disguise this putrefaction; there's not much I can do for my thinning hair. When my hunt is successful, however, my skin and hair and eyes radiate with a glow that makes me irresistible for days. It's nice not to have to make the first move. The last, however, must always be reserved for me.

By the time your first child learns to walk, I will drain more than seven hundred adults. By the time your first grandchild arrives, I will claim an entire city. Still, you have incredible powers at your disposal. If you and every mortal stopped reproducing, my entire race would be wiped out in a matter of weeks.

Fortunately for me, I continue to have a purpose.

When I was human, a little girl, I watched a family of rabbits behind my parents' house. It's the only memory I have of my former life. They hop around their hole, nervous and excited, unaware of the fox carrying their mother's limp body away. The adolescents stuff their mouths with clover and seem to grow right in front of me. Then their numbers shrink as a hawk arrives each day for his lunch.

I spent the whole rest of the year worrying they might go extinct. But they returned and so did my fear of the fox and hawk. Now, of course, I empathize with those who prey.

I think I had a child once but I might've eaten it; the centuries make remembering difficult. But the future – that's full of promise given the particulars of your family tree. I think I'll wait a generation before calling again at your house. Just continue watching *Dracula* while your son has sex with his teacher and your daughter gets high with her boyfriend. Right now, though, I can't stop looking at the fur on your slippers.

Is that rabbit?

Dan Klefstad is the author of "Shepherd & the Professor," a novel, and "The Caretaker," a short story. He writes in DeKalb, Illinois, and Williams Bay, Wisconsin.

Take it Easy

by Niles Reddick

When Angela's divorce was final, she invited the ladies from the insurance office to meet her at Las Padres for margaritas, but only Hilda could go. They wore Burger King paper crowns she'd saved from lunch and smoked Virginia Slims.

"I'm glad he's finally gone," Angela said.

"You deserve someone better," Hilda told her. "Took me a couple of times to find the best apple in the barrel."

"He and his trash girlfriends can take their goings on somewhere else," she said.

"The city ain't got a trash truck big enough for all his," Hilda said.

"You got that right," Angela said, knocking back another margarita on the rocks.

Not understanding the piped in Mexican music, Hilda and Angela sang along a while, smoked, and laughed. After happy hour, they stumbled out, and

headed home. Hilda, used to driving after happy hour, swerved a little and turned too quickly in her driveway, running over the border grass. Angela wasn't used to driving after happy hour and hit a light pole. She kept blaming her ex the entire time she was in the emergency room as they sewed stitches in her forehead and even later at the police station where she was booked for driving under the influence.

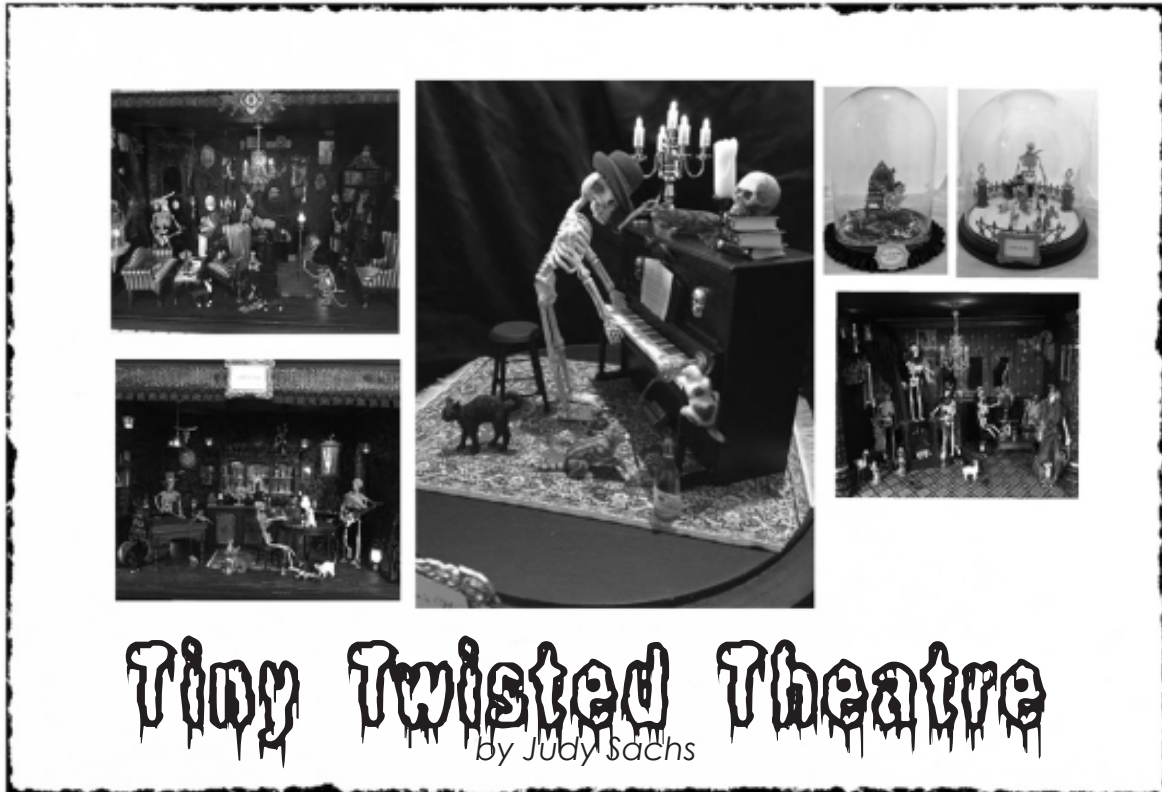
"It's all his fault," she screamed. "He's a trash son of a bitch."

"Honey, they all are. Best thing you can do is get revenge. I stabbed my man, but he won't press charges and I'll stab him again when I get out," said Angela's cell mate.

Angela wasn't quite sure how to respond to her cell mate, and when they let her use the phone, her call to Hilda for bail went unanswered because Hilda was sleeping her tequila off in a recliner, her cat at her puffy feet. Angela fell asleep on the cot and when she didn't show for work, her no nonsense boss decided to end her employment. With DUI and termination now in her back ground, she'd have a tough time finding work at another insurance agency and feared a return to minimum wage in fast food or a convenience store, all because of her ex. She planned to take the cellmate's advice and would figure out a way to get revenge.

Niles Reddick is author of the novel Drifting too far from the Shore, a collection Road Kill Art and Other Oddities, and a novella Lead Me Home. His work has been featured in over a hundred and fifty literary magazines all over the world including Drunk Monkeys, Spelk, The Arkansas Review: a Journal of Delta Studies, The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, Slice of Life, Faircloth Review, among many others. His new collection Reading the Coffee Grounds will debut in spring 2018. His website is www.nilesreddick.com

Featured Artwork



Judith creates miniature dioramas and vignettes using her former jewelry crafting skills and clever storytelling. Her love for putting together puzzles facilitates the creation of these room boxes and bubbles or cloches, finding the perfect piece to fit into each of her story lines. Judith possesses a profound sense of accomplishment in re-imagining her world of miniatures and tiny creatures when she feels the piece is complete.

Judith's themes embody haunting nightmares and a taste for dark humor creating somewhat macabre but magical stories. By using skeletons as her dolls in her strange, dark and amusing creations, Judith transforms even the most mundane daily event into an experience of wonderful nightmares and amusement. A side dish of crazy, quirky cats keeps the observer's eyes roaming around the scene to try and catch every 'Tiny Twisted' moment of these amazing scenes just like Theatre! This is where and how Tiny Twisted Theatre becomes real.

Understanding that her work appeals to a limited audience, Judith's scenes give her the opportunity to feel like a story-teller giving her curious spectators something to think about, laugh about and hopefully delight in. Judith is not a dollhouse kind of girl but wishes to embrace her love for horror films and expand upon that genre in her designs.

PROCESS

Judith's artistic process comes in different forms. At times it begins in a dream state; a fleeting glimpse of scenes from her dreams, at times it is something a person says when she is away from my work which pushes her back into the studio to sketch or research a scene starting to develop. Sometimes she remembers reading a horror novel or watching a horror movie and begins to see pictures and ideas in miniature. Judith will then go through her inventory and pick what works and then research what might be missing to finish the puzzle.

Each piece dictates the materials and set of skills necessary to complete the story whether it is a tiny piece of satin or velvet for a Vampire cape, some wooden sticks for the floorboards, or simply some paint or a stain to finish some floors or walls. All the while Judith is thinking of ways to bring in her quirky cats to throw off the story line.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Recently, she submitted her work to the Beverly Hills Art Show, her first time exhibiting in a juried art show. The Beverly Hills Art Show has been going on for 45+ years and is produced by the City of Beverly Hills each May and October. Spanning four blocks of Beverly Gardens Park in the heart of Beverly Hills, the artSHOW features 250 fine artists and draws crowds of 40,000. Judy is proud to have won Honorable Mention for Tiny Twisted Theatre in the Mixed Media 3D category. Her work also garnered a great deal of positive reactions and praise from the crowds visiting her tiny booth.

<http://www.beverlyhills.org/exploring/beverlyhillsartshow/?NFR=1>

<http://www.beverlyhills.org/cbhfiles/storage/files/4249481291739822973/SpecialFeature-Ghostly.pdf>

[http://www.beverlyhills.org/cbhfiles/storage/files/716535129565780826/Awards-October2017_with_pictures\(1\).pdf](http://www.beverlyhills.org/cbhfiles/storage/files/716535129565780826/Awards-October2017_with_pictures(1).pdf)

Judy has also been published in 'The Horrorzine' an online magazine for all things horror. I am The Featured Artist for the month of February.

<http://www.thehorrorzine.com/Art/Feb2018/JudySachs/JudySachs.html>

Who is The HorrorZine...

> <https://thestorybehindthebook.wordpress.com/2013/05/28/the-story-behind-shadow-masters-by-jeani-rector/>

1. Ghost Bar - Ok basically a compilation of my favorite bars from the 70's. Who wouldn't want to experience a dark, underground bar made of stone walls. Lovely dungeon effect! And live music. Someone has to clean up the kitties sloppy drinks however...or not.



2. Evening in the Music Room - Friends and family gathering together in a lovely safe environment to play, sing and pass the time away. Cats reading tarot cards, a steerhead skeleton playing guitar, something for everyone. (Watch out for the guy poking his head out from behind the bookcase...I think he has a knife in his hand, and I do believe there might be blood on it! All the whilst in the back of the room is a black cat with a knife taunting a fellow cat on the floor next to a bunny. Dinner should be ready by 9:00.



3. *The Masked Vampires Ball* - A very special evening presented by Dracul and his bride to be with assorted vampires drinking and lounging about whilst hiding under the staircase is a killer with a gun holding silver bullets.





4. Cats on Ice - Not just frozen kitties but lovely cats skating across ice with their master at hand.



5. *Skeleton's Waltz #2 - Ready...begin...Classic!*



6. *Ghost in the Mirror - My lovely skeleton seeking her own reflection in her powder room is met with a terrorizing Ghost in the Mirror whilst getting ready to go out for the evening. Wait,,its ok I think they know each other. Cats are enjoying themselves minding their little ones, playing with the Ouija board and generally looking for trouble.*



3 Poems

Archita Mitra is a wordsmith, visual artist with a love for all things vintage and darkly fantastical. A student of English Literature at Jadavpur University, she also has a Diploma in Multimedia and Animation from St. Xavier's College, Kolkata. Her work has appeared or been profiled in *The Statesman*, *Thought Catalog*, *Maudlin House*, *Rising Phoenix Review*, *Luna Luna Magazine* and elsewhere. She also serves as the Poetry Editor at *Quail Bell Magazine*, occasionally practises as a tarot card reader and is still waiting for *The Doctor* and the *TARDIS* to show up. You can follow her Twitter at @archita_mitra and check out her blog here: <https://architamitra.wordpress.com/>

ghost-memories

1. something scurries off the dusty floor, maybe a rat or a ghost. i'd play here once, an ancient princess writing love letters behind the skin of walls, days spinning out like golden thread.
2. grandma still makes cakes sometimes but they don't taste like childhood anymore.
3. the nurse keeps pictures of her dead daughter in a bible with yellowed, moth-eaten pages. i want to tell her, that she's alive somewhere, somewhere else. not here.
4. grandpa doesn't talk much now. we'd sit in the verandah, learning superstition & language, tasting the hint of forever in those afternoons. we once tried to repair a gramophone but when we put on the beatles, it only stuttered & hissed. now our conversations are so silent that you can hear the house s tutter & hiss. sometimes i think the house talks more than us.
5. i thought ghosts lived in books that people don't read anymore. the servant woman tells me of a shadow she saw, as she was sweeping the floor, a shadow shifting up the stairs. my grandma says it was a cat. but cats don't come here anymore.
6. my grandpa's seen too many ghosts. he knows who the shadow really was, an ancient spirit of a housewife who lived & dreamed in this house, long before we came here. she forgets sometimes that she doesn't exist & comes looking for her dreams in the dusky light of evening.
7. grandma likes to weave but all her sweaters have holes in them. old threads do not hold. when she sits beside me, i'm not sure if she is really here or still trapped in the time when i was a princess writing my secrets behind the wall & she'd comb out the dust from my hair.
8. last winter, we took them out to witness the city celebrating. faerylights shimmered goldenly. they twittered like baby birds tasting the sky for the first time.

9. (i don't like to think of dying. i think not thinking about dying keeps us alive. i'm not so sure anymore. perhaps the shadow people can tell me the truth.)

10. when i walk down these old lanes, past the houses with no light at the windows & dimly-lit amber street lamps, i see the world flicker & shift. i'm so afraid to turn back, because if i do, i might see the endless black of not belonging, not remembering.

11. i write things down. if i don't, they will never have been real. the walls are shedding their skin, baring the secret letters to the mist.

12. i ask grandma for a story. her hair is ashen & her thin fingers are milky-skeletal. she is repeating a myth, breathing an old goddess to life. when i remember, the myth has changed.

13. i ask grandpa for a story. as he mumbles, i struggle to dream the past in sepia. our claustrophobic memories are trapped in old perfume bottles that have lost their smell.

Red Riding Hood Writes Back

i. how old were you/ maybe three or two/the colour of childhood/ stumbling upon stairs or roots/ bitten by a werewolf/ smiling his ivory teeth/ and hair black as piano keys

ii. the new moon is a woman/ whimsical and full of careless lies/ she does not know /what it is to love the stars/ the old moon knew/ that's why her sun burnt her face into darkness/ some say she is still there/ black as shadow/ still looking for herself/ did she find her face, mum/ will the wolf get me in the darkness, mum/ sing me to sleep, mum

iii. the forest is full of ancient magic/ ask the skeletal trees and you'll know/ ask the lumberjack you spy on everyday/ but no one notices/ notice his tight jeans/ a fading blue, stained with mud and blood/ notice his face/ young but lined/ as though the wolves have sunk their teeth/ and carved their promise on his white flesh

iv. you are wearing grandma's red dress/ the basket is in your hands/ the forest is dark and you don't want to go/ listen/ you can hear the wolves/ singing to the old moon

v. you've read that story before/ perhaps the first girl told it when she became the second grandma/ perhaps she confessed it to the fireplace/ and the smoke whispered it to the trees/ and the trees told the birds in their dreams

vi. the lumberjack's smile/ reminds you of a mutilated puppet/ trapped in the attic/ his fingers are rough but warm against your skin/ his tales are different

vii. sometimes the wolf strips her naked/ burns her red dress/ and eats her/ even as the moon watches without heartbreak

viii. you're older now and you know that's why the old moon lost her face/ but you let him lift your red dress all the same/ in your dreams the dress is white and the blood came tumbling afterwards

ix. in the moonlight he is glinting silver/ like a polished knife/ in that moment on the cold forest floor with his teeth sinking into your skin/ ivory against ivory/ you know the stories were all wrong/ red riding hood never lost her way

x. you can go to grandma's house tomorrow/ the secrets in the baskets can wait

xi. grandma doesn't notice because there's nothing wrong with your face/
sometimes you think grandma isn't there at all/ only a barren warehouse for the
ghosts of your sins/ to hide in shame

xii. the lumberjack is knocking on the wooden door/ the stories shall say he's
coming to save you/ he leaves a trail of wolf prints for the new moon to trace

xiii. your red dress burns in the fireplace/ for a moment you hesitate/ the mirror
catches your wolfish grin/ just before you let him in

Previously published in Thought Catalog

death of an imaginary friend

i.

you, a midnight sonata, a shadow dance, a shower of stars, an untethered black balloon drifting into empty space/ i, an island ghost, a green lake forgotten by the sky, a piano key never touched, a summer storm/ together you & i, a myth, the moon, the white between words, a basin of dark flowers, blooming, an ending-

ii.

you, a dream writing itself into my past, a fading cheshire grin, a name in my yellowed journal/ you, a washed out colour, smelling like childhood, promising that some seasons never end, look at that enchanted sky, full dark, this is where the swans come with their melting songs/ you, eyes the smoky-yellow of street lamps stuttering a code i, i cannot remember(forgive me), a restless empty city i dream to life/ tell me to stay & i will, beneath this pegasus-shaped cloud, this whispered vow, this sunless hope-

iii.

i, a mistake you wrote over to correct, a tattooing of a scar, a melancholy love/ i, real here, unreal elsewhere, like you, like us/ we kissed once remember (a misty mirror, icy-cold, electric like a favourite song played the first time)/ we lived & bled the only way there is to live & /we, imperfect & starlit, a medieval forest dappled with birdsong, a sliver of a gasoline rainbow/ we an echo of our own bleeding voices/ tell me to stay & i will, like a chant, like dusk, like a melody in your mind-

iv.

we , a black box, a dark drowning, that whirlwind age, that painted-over graffiti, dust/ we, a lighthouse with no light, a nightmare-black ocean, lonely as a dying star/ we, who were forever once, constellated & perfect, manic-eyed/ perhaps in this universe, there are worse ways to die/ faeries sing on the other side, you say (said)/ fade, leave (left) like a love letter unsent & crumpled, like autumn/ we, a song i loved once but love no more-

v.

you, who taught me to sing & i voiceless as a memory, a night sky.

~ Archita Mitra

Sandro Fossemò

6 Poems

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At the Cemetery

Translated by Luca Palantrani

Old gravestones bid farewell
to wintry gloaming,
past eerie black gate
of a cemetery,
guardian of dreams and mysteries.

Fluffs of snow
tumble on sepulchral monuments
like frosted tears.

Grieving hearts
weep crystals of blood
in hereafter.

Marbled angels,
who never were born
who never were dead,
silent, observe us from eternity.

Their majestic,
dazzling wings
descend from a timeless kingdom.

The snowy mantle
endows enchantment
to divine sculptures,
sole defenders of dead.

Howling of wolves
is a glorious chant,
for damned
in darkness buried.

O beloved skull!...
You who lies in abyss,
can't hear devil's melody
through the depths of hell?

Burning candles dissolve
the dim light
and warm bones
in snow veiled graves.

Gaudy chrysanthemums
shroud crosses
engraved in the soul.

The Night Wind

Translated by Luca Palantrani

Through the rustle of trees
I hear a creepy melody...
Accompanies me
along the path.

Roofs scream from the blue sky,
over frightened leaves.
Windows whistles,
lighted and mysterious.

Where is from
the macabre music?
It's the night wind...
Comes from the stars!
Fills in the bones.
Pierces darkness.

An ancient fountain
lonely weeps inside thorns,
glowing beneath a street lamp.

Crickets sing a dance
to night's demons.
Princes of our nightmares.

Wind of hell...
your rage enchants the night.
Come and howl like a savage wolf.
I want a dawn of darkness!

Night Rain

The tower clock
strikes midnight,
in a wind strong enough to chase
the shadows from the walls.
The moon's bright crescent
pierces the black clouds.
The cold rain pours down
Water rushes
from the roofs.
Age-old lightning
tears the shadows.
Comet trails
on the wet road.
An orchestra of stars
lights up the bell's song.
It shines happy and festive ...
Someone is pounding at the roofs and the windows.
Something wild is ringing
in the darkness.
It is Orpheus strumming his lyre
in the tumult of the storm.
The water symphony
screams in the air and freezes the blood...
What joy to be immersed
in the rain,
when it suddenly shatters
the silence of the night!
What joy the thunder's havoc
in the infinite drumming
of the rain!
Bats are sleeping
in the ruins of abandoned houses.
Vampires hidden in
a fulminous sky
that lights up the abyss.
It is raining on the window

of my castle,
where my heart beats
in the immensity of the night ...
Rain is pouring down
on the lights, in the marvellous darkness,
where the smell of blood reigns.

Halloween Hell

Between the prongs
of my rusty pitchfork
I am dazzled
by a light as white as the sun,
in the golden twilight
of my barn.
The peeling walls are lit
by the devilish smile
of a gleaming and orange face.
It's the Halloween pumpkin!
Popped up from hell!
The spectre lies
on the wooden cart...
It looks like a lantern
simmering in the straw.
How splendid!

Famished wolves
roam like demons.
The howling echoes
inside me like thunder.

A deer skull
dangles, suspended from a chain,
in the bowels of the forest.
The air is light and pestiferous.

Witches fly above
faded horizons.
The mirror of a colourless world
draws in their dead.

Warriors in the afterlife
advance to the beat of drums,
in the cemetery of simulations.

The fire reigning
in the pumpkins devours dreams.

The torches burn in the cellar
like stars shining in the sky.

A fog of smoke
engulfs a merry-go-round
overcome by mummies.

A green gelatinous liquid
oozes out of screens.
Dummies break the window
of a video game gone crazy.
Empty and synthetic masks
writhe on the ground,
impaled by a pitchfork.
The monsters disappear
in the chasm of darkness.

The Black Cat

In the forlorn darkness
of a thunderstorm,
a lightning pierces
like a spear
the heart of the night.

An ancient street lamp
surveys the lonely
walls cramping the
wet cobbled street
of a medieval village.

The lamp bathes
a black cat in nefarious light.

In its glare is
the beast of the devil,
seeking shelter betwixt a tangle
of dry autumnal branches.

The spirit of the night
guards the kingdom of the dead...
It scours the blind alley
with two diabolical lanterns
and a black coat,
in the midst of the storm.

It fixes its eyes on me
with cunning and they gleam in the darkness
of glowing amber.

The cat arches its back
and its fur bristles
as my furtive shadow
slowly approaches.
It draws back its ears
and growls with my caresses.
The damned feline
spits and bites
my fingers with bloodstained canines.

My soul shudders
to the plaintive chant of the bells
announcing death,
clashing with the cat's strangled cry.

Dracula

I felt the pangs for blood.
At midnight,
in nocturnal Transylvania,
I rose from the tomb.

In the gloom
of my castle
I spread my black cloak
and took nefarious flight
in the dark and starry sky.

I spied the town
with its vain and solitary lights
blinking in the cold night.

How I then loathed
that electrical,
mechanical sight!
There was no blood
in the veins of those automatons.
I hung alone in that void
and in that death.

In fury I flapped
the dusky cloak!
I flew away, with haste,
towards a distant
and solitary moon,
warm and burning bright.

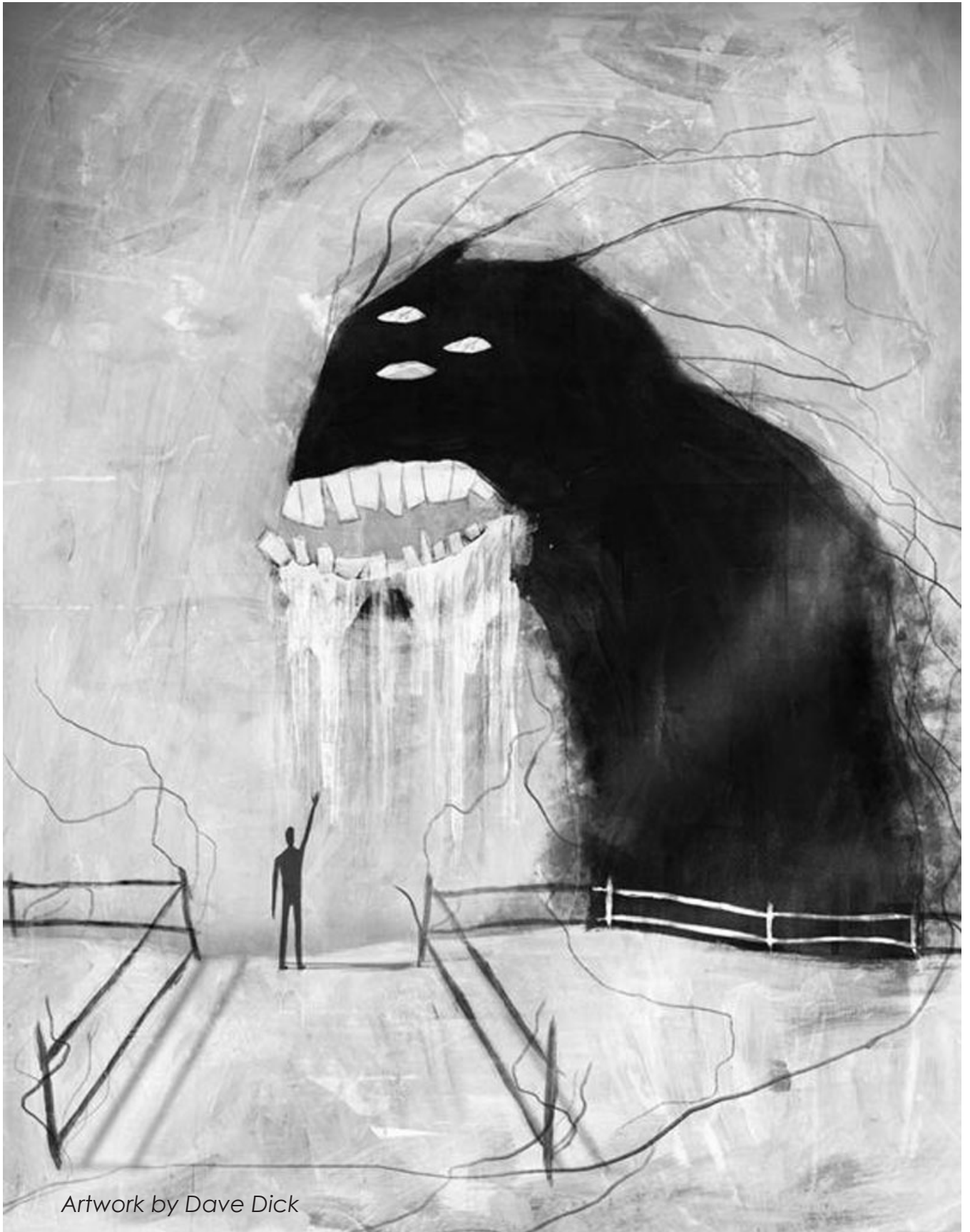
~ Sandro Fossemò

Artwork



by Dave Dick

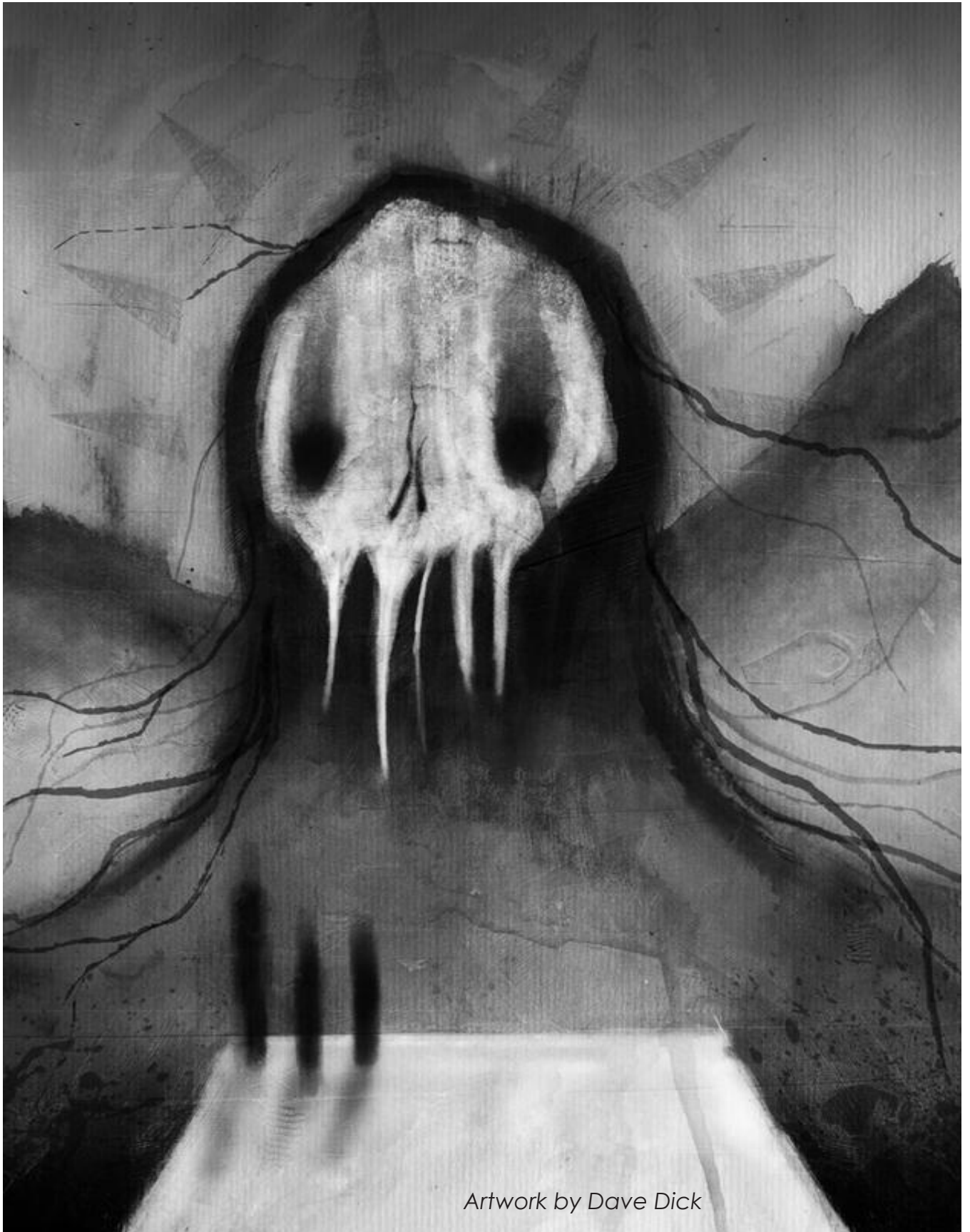
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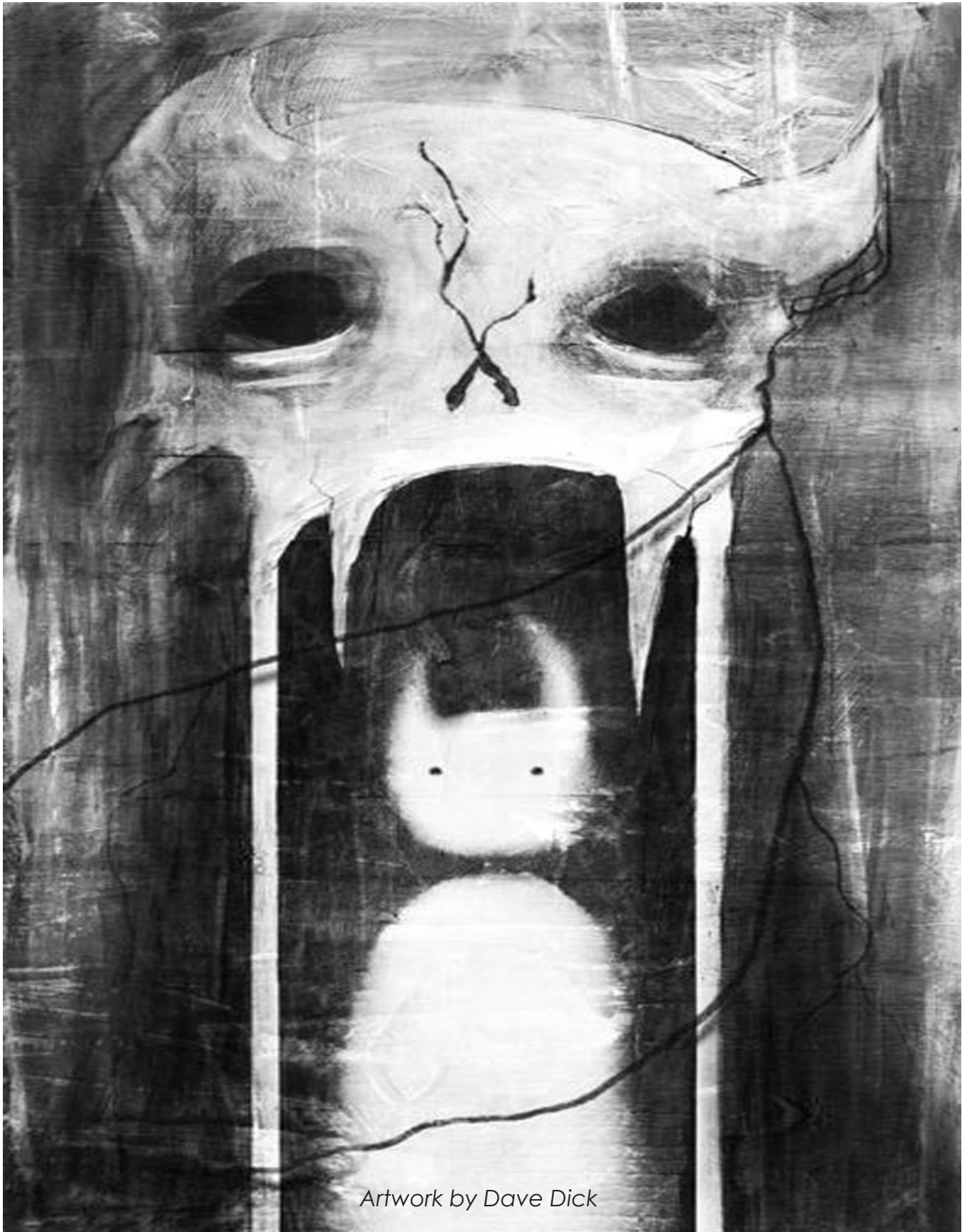
Artwork by Dave Dick



Artwork by Dave Dick



Artwork by Dave Dick



Artwork by Dave Dick

Did You Hear That?

by Patrick Trotti

P

ritchard Reynolds used to drive drunk to clear his head. It wasn't that he enjoyed doing it. Not quite. Pritchard knew it was against the law. Hell, he didn't even have a driver's license. But he needed to take the risk, put others on the road in jeopardy, if he was to find any relief. There was nowhere else to turn. A shrink was out of the question. Pritchard wasn't about to declare his problems to a stranger, not yet at least. So he drove, onward and ever fast. He wanted to see if he could outrun the voices that rang out in his ears. He liked to think that if he could step on the gas pedal, floor it on a back road, and hug the next corner that he could escape the trail of whispers that so voraciously followed him. And he found that he could, that if he turned the car stereo up just loud enough and kept the windows down just low enough, drown out all the excess noise. It was really about control. To gain some semblance of it back he'd have to be willing to lose it all. For Pritchard, the cost benefit analysis was well worth it.

There was nothing about that day that signified to Pritchard anything out of the ordinary was about to happen. No ominous warning from above or even eerie feeling in his gut. He had the duplicate set of keys that he got made up at the local hardware store on him and his parents were napping upstairs. The voices were back, the open road called out to him. He didn't have the stamina to fight them off at home, by himself, all day.

Pritchard took the side roads that led to the highway a few miles away. He'd put a dent in the bottle of alcohol, it didn't matter what, by the time he reached the interstate. Something about getting out into multiple lanes of traffic, of having the road just sort of unroll, open up, before him appealed to Pritchard on a basic, almost primal level. The freshly tarred blacktop came alive under the afternoon sky. Pritchard liked to pretend that he was Mr. Pac Man and his car was picking up the white lines that separated each lane. He referred to them as cocaine warnings. You see he was a good driver, his hands were steady and true and his reactions were razor sharp no matter how slurred his speech, how stiff his breath, but out on the highway, under the sleepy, hazy sun and monotony of the open road and clear sightlines and relatively straight driving paths, he liked to play these little games to keep himself occupied, to keep the voices at bay. From time to time these games got Pritchard a honk of the horn and a glare as the car next to him rushed to get past the weaving minivan.

On this day he played his usual games but traffic was a bit more congested than normal and soon Pritchard found himself a foot off the car's bumper in front of him. He was merging in and out of lanes, decisively cutting back and forth, bolting through the movement that surrounded him. It was as if he were a move ahead of everyone else like he was one of those Russian youth chess prodigies who saw the board differently than his opponents. A State Trooper came out of nowhere and flashed his lights and got behind Pritchard for a few hundred feet before he zipped by him and pulled over the car in front of him. Pritchard took a swig from the bottle as he smirked and felt bad for the sucker about to be given a ticket.

Perpetual motion, always forward, never relenting, never giving an inch. Pritchard lived by these guidelines on the road as he knew that if had any chance at quieting the voices in his head that he'd have to keep going, keep pushing the limits, keep hitting the gas, keep pulling from the bottle. He felt like Keanu Reeves in that movie where he had to keep the bus speed above fifty or risk it being blown up. Pritchard's mind would implode; the ringing in his ears would melt away his ability to discern the real from the hallucinatory.

He referred to them as auditory hallucinations instead of hearing voices. The weight of the words, the formality, the number of syllables marked it as significant, somehow less crazy and unbalanced and full of more subtlety and nuance. If he could present his problem as something complex, something more than the crude sum of its parts, something more than a mere crutch than maybe he could elevate his situation...to what though? What was his end game here? There was no end game, just shades and gradations and degrees of tones and whispers and voices. And all Pritchard knew was that he'd better

try and find some beauty, some meaning, some higher truth to this broken and fragmented reality that he was living if he were to have any chance at keeping what little sanity he had left.

Pritchard grew accustomed to the voices. As much as one can anyway. He was still scared shitless of them but he knew enough to be able to distinguish the authentic inner voice that everyone has and the made up sounds that barked out to him. The police scanners and strangers' voices whispering his name, mouthing bad things about him like they were following him, got to Pritchard every time. In the moment, while the voices were present, they felt as real as anything he'd ever experienced in his young life. It was only afterwards, looking back on these individual instances, that he could rationally shuffle through and determine what was and wasn't his own thoughts.

Ownership was the name of the game for Pritchard. If he couldn't take control of what he thought, if he gave up possession of one of the most basic of human functions, if reality and fiction were so fundamentally blurred, then how could he trust anything else in his life? And what did that say about him as a person that he could so easily lose power of his own mind, the only thing he really owned in his short and rather unremarkable life? Was he worth the trouble of seeking help if these thoughts, these voices, were just an inevitability? Each new appearance of the voices brought about these questions and dozens more but the only answer Pritchard had, for the time being, was the road ahead and an open container.

"Patrick Trotti is a freelance writer based in Rochester, New York. To find out more go to www.patricktrotti.com."



3 Poems

Grant Guy is a Winnipeg, Canada, poet, writer and playwright. Former artistic director of Adhere + Deny. His writings have been published in Canada, the United States, Wales, India and England. He has three books published. He was the 2004 recipient of the MAC's 2004 Award of Distinction and the 2017 recipient of the WAC's Making A Difference Award.

I Can No Longer Tell What Is Broken

I can no longer tell what is broken

she whispered in loud anger costumed as regret
she cut me in two like god cleaving adam

i do not know if i am & broken whole

the orchestra of love is playing off key
for so long in the cubbyhole of my life

i no longer call tell what is broken what is whole

in the eternal stillness where forever would be kinder
my refugee soul has walked too long on an armoured avenue
of truant optimism of one sad love poem after another
w/o beginning of end in the eternal stillness

when i look forward i see what is behind me
when i look backward i see i see i see

the eternal stillness

o
i must go on
in the rare o so rare hope
that a de novo love will cleave the fusion
of the broken & the whole

even the dead must die
& out of the tenement basement love again

maybe

& then i will know the difference again

SHE LIVED BY HERSELF

She lived by herself

Her old Chevy pickup truck
Sat idle during the visits

But she was not lonely
The rancher down the road
Visited her at the end of each month
She liked that

Other days she had only herself
She liked that

Being Broke

Being broke like the old woman in the shoe
Has created jealousy in me Jack without the bean stock

My friends who can afford to dine out at McDonald's

You can find me in car dealer salons
Sipping on complimentary coffee
And munching their chocolate cookies

~ *Grant Guy*

Ian Mullins

6 Poems

*Ian Mullins bails out from Liverpool England. The chapbook *Almost Human (Original Plus)* was released earlier this year. The music-themed collection *Laughter In The Shape Of A Guitar (UB)* escaped from captivity in 2015. *Number 1 Red*, a self-published novel about pro-wrestling and property wars, also waits to snare the unwary.*

A Breath Of Night

Even at midnight the light
is too loud: is there no switch
I can throw that will dial down
the streetlights, dim the dull moon?

There is, at my fingertips;
but to take that short journey
means no trail of breadcrumbs
will ever lead me anywhere
but deeper into the dark forest
where paths are old trails
of dead DNA

halting suddenly here;
where leaves smell of blood
and trees are bound
in bone.

Absence

It hurts here.
It hurts just to
be here, to walk
down the street
and tie a loose
shoelace. It hurts
to take a deep breath
then breath it out
as slowly as a stomach
being pumped.

Here is an overdose
without drugs
or drink. Just words
and more words:
a spider's web so dense
with the dead
that the little light is effectively
extinguished, no more

than a memory of a dream
a stranger had
the moment before
he stepped off the chair,
said hello
to the great unknown.

Eyes To The Front

Tired now, but that
doesn't mean I can sleep.
In a rational world
I would eat when I'm hungry
and sleep when I'm tired,
but the world doesn't turn
that way; it spins and re-winds
then puts your plans on
fast-forward, so dinner is as cold
as your bed. You have to wait
on the world, serve the Pharaoh
before you serve yourself.
Stand in the corner watching
richer people eat, wondering
why it's no consolation
that they have masters too,
bosses who bring down the whip
until the pyramid is finished.
Only then can we lie down
with Pharaoh
and finally get some sleep.

Fear Of Light

I can dream more of life
in ten minutes sleep
on the bus
than in ten years
wide awake
in the black spotlight
picking out letters
scarred on my face
so why not stay below
and down periscope?
There's more going on
below the waterline
than even the iceberg knows.

Hopeless

A 'yes' in the in-box?
But hoping you'll dig in
and bale me out
only plays your game
your way. Saying no
gives me back the energy
of the anger I've wasted
on too many blind alleys
and beckoning whistles.
I'll take no more crumbs
slapped from your table:
death will silence my ears
to your mooing.

Walk with me old friend;
indifferent to my every word,
you alone tell me truth.

You Have No Business Here

Best be a puppet then,
and imagine yourself strings.
If no-one pulls you can
pull on your own
- you know how that's done -
caper and dance and puppet
the old show. Your lines
can be read by the simple
expedient of cracking your bones
free from their prison,
then reading the manufacturer's
guidelines stamped on
every one. Bend here,
break there. But when you're done
be sure to return them
where they came from,
so the next puppet can
be re-cycled
and the old adage proved true.
Even after the curtain,
the show must go on.

~ Ian Mullins

Stephen Mead

4 Poems

A resident of NY, Stephen Mead is a Outsider published artist, writer, maker of short-collage films and sound-collage downloads. In 2014 he began a webpage to gather links of his poetry being published in such zines as Great Works, Unlikely Stories, Quill & Parchment, etc., in one place: Poetry on the Line, Stephen Mead For links to his other media and even merchandise if you are interested please feel free to Google Stephen Mead Art.

Author Central Page:

http://www.amazon.com/Stephen-Mead/e/B002P5TVQC/ref=ntt_dp_ep-wbk_0/178-9316259-8711759

Wallflower

Becoming the wall,
this plaster alive, breathing to bulge,
grow over stems, yet the stems
weave through & petals keep curving
& roots shatter the base, dancing in air...

Maybe this is you
crying in another language
with no subtitles to explain.
Maybe someone of an equally alien tongue
understands that sound & starts
crying right back.

Maybe this is what it's like for those
Who have had strokes, the budge budge
of the yes buzzer, the effort of the no,
& all of Shakespeare curled in that wheelchair,
drooling through the teeth...

Out, a way out, to rise, an expressive rose
over the chain link wall, & to hold it,
an open fence, to be held as interdependent
instead of just wheels spinning...

Friend, time is wild. Run with it
as you'd outrun the one who'd beat you
& then say, "Come back here."
Run with it as charted stars compiling
History through genes-----
Need seeking tenacity
to flower on the nature

of your will alone

Tracks

Each night with the train whistle
I will think of your arms,
Spare & Spanish, living on in my eyes.
Joyous the veins will be, & invisible
even beneath the hairlessness where biceps kiss
tattoos, & each finger writes a letter:
Your hand in my palm...

That was needle enough
for the locomotion through the blood
when I played Maria Callas & you waltzed
to your own "Philadelphia", the I.V. pole
as microphone 'til your narration stopped
& to me you held on...

Hold on then,
Lo son divino,
Lo son l' oblio,
Lon son il dio,
those words that you spoke, you the oblivion
Divine & the god of tears that I gather
here in the rain on these rails

'til the next train comes.

Your Suicide

attempt never quite left us.
There are days, there are nights
when it wears nothing but insides.
That skin is a testament my eyes
keep confessing.
How many times I've wanted to be done
with it, to take the gaze and, with
comprehension, kiss each lid
towards its rest.
This is not to discount vengeance,
getting back, the wrathful tongue.
Never see you again.
That was particularly blasphemous
for you were going to marry
& I couldn't congratulate,
thinking how one month before
you were the first, you were the only,
though of course we were young
& no one understood
the country never before visited
of infatuation & hate.

Too late, this returning
& still in the dark about methods.
Memory. Ignorance.
Who's the more knowing ghost
with a picture of your death
superimposed on my face?

Still, many exist so,
with simply something that happened,
& it's over, the long ago, the rehearsal
for the other route
we both tried.

The Eternal March

We don't mind the cold
here where mile-high-waves hurl
ice the colors of agate. They're a shift,
those hues, attempting to stay put.
Haven't they been good to the winter?
Why should they leave?
Having experienced such starkness,
deprivation, having adjusted, we might
ask the same question.

There's a beauty to this vast expanse,
the limits stripped to clarity,
How abundance is absolute
when hands possess nothing!
Rose water is as pristine
after its petals have left.

Just so, we're predisposed
to the climate's undiluted light,
the piercing evergreens, a nakedness
perfected.
It's not something private but,
say more a scar where a cross has been
lightning struck to the skin.
That searing is to be held, worn in pride.

Let spring, let summer come and these waves
of raging wreckage grow calm and lush
as a portrait by Renoir.
He too knew what we've lived
and was able to create
because he endured.

~ Stephen Mead

Image by Debbie Berk

Lily Tierney

2 Poems

roseprey3064@gmail.com

Water

The water looks inviting
it is rather hot outside
splashing into the water
would be fun.

I am still standing here
looking at the water
recycling my thoughts
until they pushed me
in.

Meant It

He never said it,
because he would
not of meant it.

She said it,
but wasn't sure
if she really meant it.

Both poems have previously appeared in Hello Poetry.

TS Hidalgo

1 Poem

TS Hidalgo (44) holds a BBA (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid), a MBA (IE Business School), a MA in Creative Writing (Hotel Kafka) and a Certificate in Management and the Arts (New York University). His works have been published in magazines in the USA, Canada, Argentina, Chile, Germany, UK, Spain, Ireland, Portugal, South Africa, Nigeria, Botswana, India and Australia, and he has been the winner of prizes like the Criaturas feroces (Editorial Destino) in short story and a finalist at Festival Eñe in the novel category. He has currently developed his career in finance and stock-market.

Estrangement

Years later,
20-odd
(and that's something,
hard as it is for
tango to take),
I was made known
that I have two children.
To my surprise,
both have good appearances
and refined manners.
They also have
Ulysses's stare:
it left in them a trace
love of books.
I would have expected two outsiders.

Ryan Dodge

3 Poems

Ryan Dodge is a writer of poetry and fiction currently residing in Glendale, California. He enjoys reading too much science fiction, hanging out with his cat, Athena, and blogging about music. He has been previously published in Poetry Pacific, Chantwood Magazine, The Haunted Traveler, and most recently in The Penwood Review.

Insatiable

Too little or too much;
neither is enough.
Scorched by Sun's wrath,
soaked by Nature's fury.
No happy medium found
land, or sea, or sky.

I roam, a lion on the prowl
for a scrap, anything to satiate
my roaring stomach.
Eating rotting carrion,
knowing it brings me closer
to death.

Crawling through the dryness,
searching for an oasis;
a bath in a mirage filled
with blood and tears.
Frenzied attempts to wash
away sins, stains on skin like tattoos.

Treading water in 10 foot swells,
gasping for breath between waves.
No respite from the foamy beatings,
with cold-blooded carnivores
circling beneath my dangling limbs.

Hydroplaning on mountain roads,
thick drops blurring the twists and turns,
blinding the cliffs ahead,
impending doom
I recklessly aim for.

Strings

I am a puppet master;
pulling strings,
guiding actions.

But the strings I manipulate
are not so wooden
and lifeless as puppets.

They are those
of the heart;
soft, warm, fleshy,
gently pulsing in my fingers.

Living snakes full of blue blood,
a thin membrane away
from a chemical reaction;
transformation from calm to rage.

Tenderly holding them,
I direct these heartstrings
through the right steps.

Waltzing with grace,
jumping with ease,
a spectacular show!

But only a show
till I break these strings
and the puppet falls dying

pumping out crimson,
lying in a dark pool,
no strings to hold it up

as I wander away
hunting for the next
set of strings to manipulate.

Slow Boil

Do you ever wonder
if the devil can see in your soul?
'Cause I swear he's been squatting
right on top of my heart,
letting his darkness drip down
and coat my insides;
seeping in the cuts,
lining my gut.
Mutating me on a molecular level,
a slow kind of spread
so the change is gradual
and unnoticed until
the point of no return;
like a frog slowly dying
when the comfortable water
is brought to a boil.

~ *Ryan Dodge*

Diana Devlin

3 Poems

Diana Devlin is a Scottish Italian poet living near Loch Lomond in Scotland. After working as a translator/interpreter, lexicographer then teacher for many years, she now writes poetry full time. Her work has been published in The Blue Nib and Reuben Woolley's ezine I am Not a Silent Poet. Her work is also featured in the print anthology Back Again, published by Leven Litts Writers' Group in 2017. She shares her life with a husband, two daughters, a Jack Russell and two psychotic cats.

Company of one

It's the end of the line
the pencil is blunt
the paper torn from trying
I'm at the edge of the cliff
looking down
nothing above
nothing ahead
this time it won't
blow over
my head is full of rumbling wind
heavy rocks with jagged edges
only sand between
can't hear myself think
soon I won't hear
anything
it will be quiet again
I'll find me
once again
it only ever was
meant to be
just me

gatherers

the others gathered shiny stuff
polished glass chips
exotic looking coins
a soft edged earring warm from wear
gleaming iridescence of feathers
shed in a sudden flutter
I collected words like pebbles
hoping they would lead me home
silky scraps of stranger sound
tripping over each other like waves
divergent discordance
not stuff to build a life on

VOICEOVER

I've got my eye on you,
I smell your fear.
I sense your hesitation
whenever I am near.
When dark thoughts unleash their bite,
I usher them inside.
They cluster in the corners
and leave no place to hide.
Yet though I bring great pain,
you seek me out, my friend:
I am your Judith, Holofernes
and I am loyal
to the end.

~ *Diana Devlin*

Aneek Chatterjee

2 Poems

*Aneek Chatterjee is an Indian college teacher, writer and poet. He lives in Kolkata.
Poetry is his passion*

EFFIGY

You came, rain
I was burning my effigy
I was burning my effigy
blocking the I from me
silence, pain
burning my effigy
removing the I from me

Persisted, in vain
I was busy
burning my effigy
burning my effigy
dusk rainbow evening
blackening all halo from me
don't take it as
untold story

Take rain
from burning effigy

Cave

Quickly I entered the den
My favourite den,
When you yawned.

Here, outside, the air is dark
Here the river is black
Here trees are nothing but ugly demons.

The golden mouth only contains fresh air.
Father died a month ago, unnoticed
He had an incurable stomach.

And I wanted a cave
To hide my eyes, brain and heart
Mother could only watch in agony

You yawned, probably in fatigue.
The golden cave was unveiled in the long run
Quickly I entered the illuminated world.

~ *Aneek Chatterjee*



Image by Debbie Berk

Andrew Hubbard

1 Poem

Andrew Hubbard was born and raised in a coastal Maine fishing village. He earned degrees in English and Creative Writing from Dartmouth College and Columbia University, respectively.

For most of his career he has worked as Director of Training for major financial institutions, creating and delivering Sales, Management, and Technical training for user groups of up to 4,000.

He has had four prose books published, and his fifth and sixth books, collections of poetry, were published in 2014 and 2016 by Interactive Press.

He is a casual student of cooking and wine, a former martial arts instructor and competitive weight lifter, a collector of edged weapons, and a licensed handgun instructor. He lives in rural Indiana with his family, two Siberian Huskies, and a demon cat.

Walking the Labyrinth

(New Harmony, Indiana)

The labyrinth is polished granite
At grass height, incised with the path,
The dead ends, and cunning detours.

An energetic cricket
Leaps over the boundaries
And sits in the center, prideful,
Honing his antennae with satisfaction.

That's fine for the cricket
But you can't do that.
You know that without rules
The game disappears.
And the game is your redemption.

*The labyrinth is essence
And it instructs
Not by teaching, but by being.*

You move into the labyrinth
And begin to comprehend:
The way is not straight
Nor is it simple.

Everyone makes wrong turns.
Character is defined
By what you do next.

Patience is not always rewarded
But without patience
There is no hope of reward.

Complete the prayer walk
And learn that in the end
The journey is the destination.

Joe Dolsen

2 Poems

*Joe Dolsen lives and writes in the suburbs of Chicago. He has worked as a mason's assistant, in a cabinet factory, and in a psychiatric unit. Find out more at:
joedolsen.blogspot.com*

The Bird

Hitting the bird was unavoidable
It flew too close to the car
A natural born Icarus with wings and feathers
Cursed with the illusion of immortality

Through the rearview
I saw the hobbled bird hopping from side to side
Upright on one leg then falling sideways
Confused and stunned

I drove by the next day hoping to see nothing
desperately wanting to see nothing
and I saw the bird carcass
wedged against the curb
claws clutching
at nothing

And I wondered
if the bird's last breath
had been a
chirp

Exhausted

The news seeps in
and daylight buckles
under darkness's ooze
Uncertainty mounts fear
and breeds paranoia

We withdraw into
our neighborhoods
into our homes
where we carve out
important spaces
with soft light

~ *Joe Dolsen*

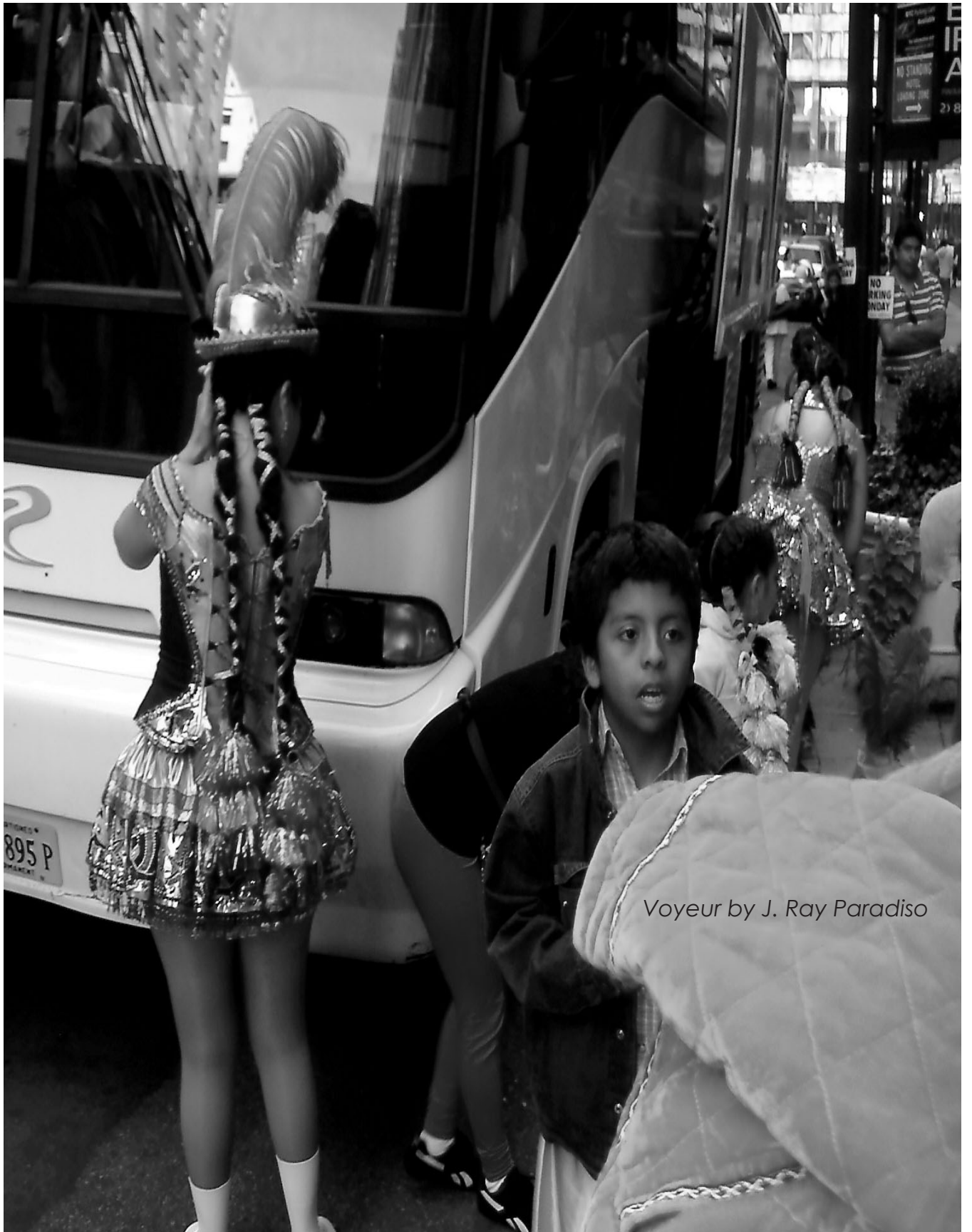
Photography



Homeless by J. Ray Paradiso

J. Ray Paradiso is a recovering academic in the process of refreshing myself as a street photographer and an experimental writer.

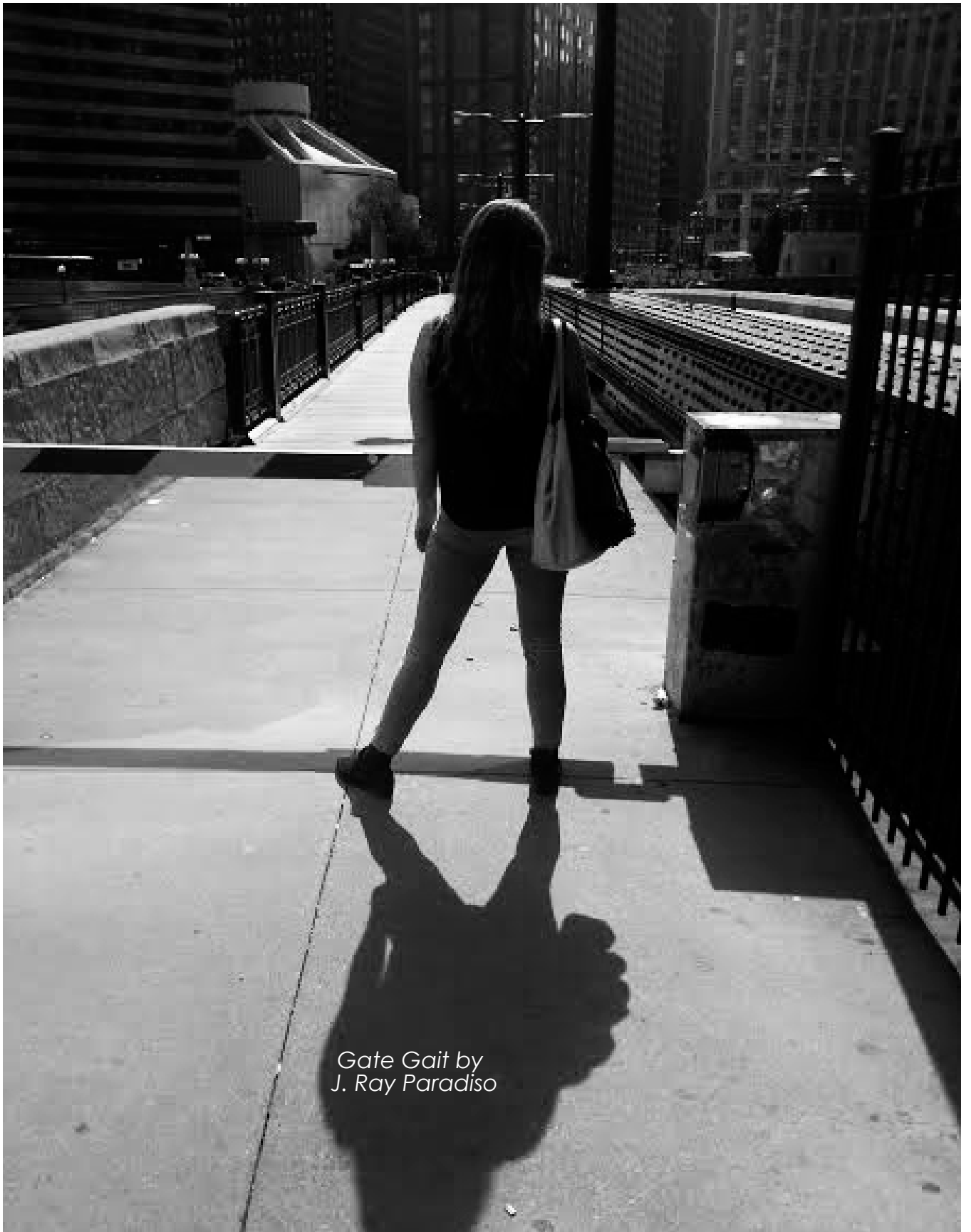
*Author
INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY
Cold Case: Commander Adam. S. Appel
<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/593445>*



Voyeur by J. Ray Paradiso

Life Cycle by
J. Ray Paradiso





*Gate Gait by
J. Ray Paradiso*



Bus Buds by J. Ray Paradiso



Two O'Clock by J. Ray Paradiso



4 Poems

Anastasia Jill (Anna Keeler) is a queer poet and fiction writer living in the greater Orlando area. She is an editor for Smaeralit as well as The Chaotic Review. Her work has been published or is upcoming with Poets.org, Deep South Magazine, Cleaver Magazine, Dual Coast Magazine, Queer Stories, FIVE:2:ONE, Drunk Monkeys, and more.

Incredible

Pouring myself into taillights
I reach empty pores to street signs
/ Stop
/ Stop
/ Go.

Yield to the pedestrian
Sustained in sprint.

She's running towards the car on
Water lagged legs and tripping over hair
Dyed by the run marks of rats.
She is begging for her stomach
To fold under the fender.

She craves metal in her liver
And asphalt freckling her toes
Because backroads are conducive
To vehicular suicide--

Strip.
It's incredible
What tires do
To a
/ red light.

Sensitive

/ a half life in a hospital

Signed off by the girl who can't leave his room
To defecate because of the red arrow
stitched to her eye cavity.

/ she can't see

Her only crime is
Being the spawn of
Two LSD strips in the backseat

Of a Jeep in a bowling alley.
Someone waited their half lives
For her to be born.

/ twirling in a holding cell

That holds itself together
With holly blue paint
And amber wall stains

/ she harvests those cells

And builds herself guts,

/ We call it moxie.

Raise the bars, in case her nap
Gets too high strung.

Autospasy

She crawled out of a spider's third eye
With a lucid grip on instruction,

No one cares enough for there to be
Something wrong. Each day
Se is bound to the lense of a newsflash.

They write on her with spider terms,
Because she spatters penultimates

On the wall in uneven orders of three.

She grew from Charlotte complex to Alice complex
Until she was a multiplex of fetishes and reverence
For the bony orbit she came from.

That eye was her unceremonious support;
She could no longer stand upright or make noise.

Creeping into the axles of capsules
Full of pop rocks and the sakes of ducks,

It was pain. She was pain in a book lung.
Her legs were black sticks, and she wanted
To sink into lake grass.

She was fastened to the tangible--
By force, by force--
Until the second choices were dissected

From her thorax,
Third leg sickling into an oxford comma
Punting the disorder: why third?

That eye was a fold of honey calcite,
Indigo iolite and other redundancies,

Draggin' the universe's sound to a paternity test
Like plastic chain links.

How? She lived a life in threes,
Catholic guilt, until four was the sin

That her tarsus suspires even in a
Juxtaposition of multiple.

She's sorry. She doesn't know
Why she's still there.

She cuts off all eight legs
Unfortunate;
Regeneration comes in the third molt.

Web

Arrow, sun, arrow tail,
Don't give them a dime
Because the table is set
By meat breathers.

Criminal coordination
Leaves your forehead caught in target.
How terrible that broad daylight
Has a bounty bias.

~ Anna Keeler

C. Alexander

2 Poems

C. Alexander is a small-town Southern born poet who now lives in New England. He has his MFA from Lindenwood University, and dabbles in print and spoken-word poetry. He has a spoken word EP called "Cosmic Aging" that you can find from all online music sources. He has been published in The Eunoia Review, Anti-Heroin Chic, and The Inflectionist Review.

The 4-Dimensional Texture of Time Feels A lot Like Sand

Butterflies and seagulls!

They're never in the same place in my imagination.

But they are now,

with my toes in the sand at Folly Beach.

they go together like opposite clichés.

If they are both (in a relative sense) far enough away from me,

they look the same size on the ocean skyline,

like my sense of time when looking back on

old home movies.

Sometimes the wind makes them fly backwards,

and they beat and flutter for status quo, or worse.

Sometimes they embrace it.

Fly headlong into the future,

like they never have panic attacks about the constancy of time and space.

And maybe happenstance blows them over some cat-eyed sunset.

Sometimes they collide.

And the past eats the future--

leaves him wingless and dying on a tesseract shoreline
wondering when the fuck the third dimension became so damn obtuse.
I pour beer on top of him--
I hope it numbs him before I bury him in the sand.

Failed Attempts to Hula-Hoop

The darkness doesn't extend to sips of a shotgunned beer.
No, it can't touch me here.
Distance doesn't create anything sustainable, just
goodgoddamn electricity extending through fingertips
holyhallelujah goodnight kisses.

I would've sat up with you all night.
Maybe I did, in some other quantum universe
outside of space and time or time and space, where we are meeting
and dancing
and screaming
broken harmonies into crowds and kissing
infinitely.

And that's beautiful in its own way, don't get me wrong,
but my faulty tape recorder brain is already losing the edges of it all.

Don't get it twisted. I'm not saying I love you or anything,
but I have these blurry movies behind my eyes,
and I just want to watch them over, and over again.

Before the contact stops, and the memory fades,
before the daydream of seeing you again goes away,
before you and I cheapen the whole damn thing.

~ C. Alexander

Poetry / The Stray Branch; Fall/Winter 2018 #22 Vol 19



3 Poems / Photos

Wayne Russell is a creative writer, amateur photographer, his work has been published in several different countries such as Greece, Africa, The Philippines, The UK, and India.

Alone in a Room

I Don't really know how much longer,
I can of exist in this room, with no one
else here.

The ghost come around sometimes,
then they flicker and fade away.

Leaving me alone again, with echoes
from a long gone past, the laughter of
my children, the tears that I have shed,
over my two failed marriages.

Outside my window, there's a red brick
wall, a purgatory, saving me from myself,
from the real world; alcoholism can't reach
me here, in this recovery ward, alone in
a room.



Island of One

Drifting through the clouds of bedlam sway,
thought my mind had been banished far away
from this island of one.
I dreamt emotions were knocked off the dilapidated
pedestal.

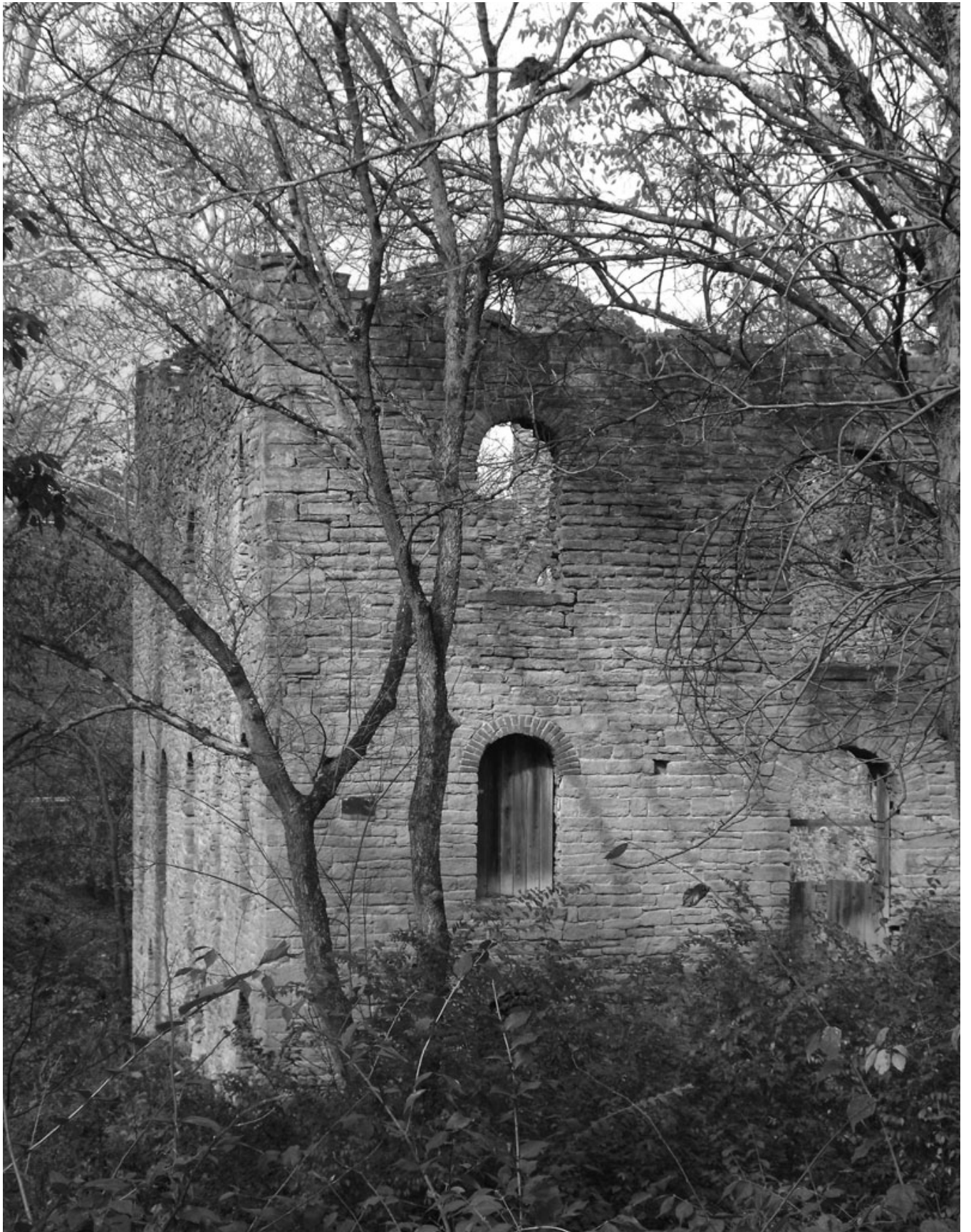
The colors of this kingdom were fusing upon a grey
jagged shoreline, nothing made sense.

Love had found a lonesome crack in barren sky, this
millstone cast around the neck of a frozen ghost, gone
forth, into her catalysis heavens.

A voice that reverberates within my heart of reckless
abandon.



Photo by Wayne Russell



Dark Star

Dedicated to "Theda Bara" Theodosia Burr Goodman, July 29, 1885 – April 7, 1955)

Rest now my love, for you have earned it.

Sleep beneath snow laced pines, and listen
to the rhythm of nature's cadence.

They created you and thus made you in their
image, a puppet, a vamp goth mistress of
emotionless night.

They knew not the realness of you, yet you became
their product, another starlet to feed the machine.

Snowy blanket, sealed over with concrete slab,
your coffin; a cocoon in which to keep the multitudes
at bay.

Melodious songs, sung by a myriad of creatures,
underground angels, perplexed yet bemused;
riddles wrapped and warped in the ebb tide.

You wish not to kiss phosphorous stars, drifting
with helpless, thematic pulse of humanity, no; for
it is of those days, you have completed.

~ *Wayne Russell*

Photography



Metal Breakfast by Rebecca Oet

Rebecca Oet is a high school student from Solon, Ohio, USA. She enjoys photography, reading fiction and comic books, writing short stories and poetry, and watching anime. Rebecca is a national silver medalist in the 2015 Scholastic Art & Writing Awards and has won multiple gold and silver keys for her photography in the Regional Scholastic Writing Competition & Exhibition. She has published her photography in numerous magazines, including *Ranger Rick*, *Teen Ink*, *Stone Canoe*, *Silk Road*, cover of *Glass Mountain*, *Qwerty Magazine*, *Healing Muse*, *Noctua Review*, *JAAM*, *Forge*, *Sandy River Review*, *Whirlwind*, *Blacktop Passages*, *Riding Light*, *Constellations*, *Off the Coast*, *Bitterzoet*, *The 2017 Lake Erie Ink Home / Away from Home Anthology*, *2015 River of Words Art and Poetry Anthology*, *Best of Photography 2015* book and cover of *Susan Faulkner Fine Arts Exhibition and Auction Brochure*.





Ghosts by Rebecca Oet



Ghostly Fruit by Rebecca Oet



Circles by Rebecca Oet



6 Poems

J.J. Campbell (1976 - ?) is currently trapped in suburbia. He's been widely published over the years, most recently at Mad Swirl, In Between Hangovers, Midnight Lane Boutique, Winedrunk Sidewalk and Horror Sleaze Trash. You can find J.J. most days on his mildly entertaining blog, evil delights. (<http://evildelights.blogspot.com>)

you see that empty field

i still think of all
the ones that got
away

one of these days
i'm going to have
to drink them away

and think about what
the fuck is my future
going to look like

the voice in my head
laughs and tells me
to look out the back
window

you see that empty
field

yeah

you should also see
every friend you have

i chuckled

i know that old fucker
is right

my future is dark
and probably bitter

just like how i like
my women

enough years behind you

i promised myself
another woman was
never going to make
me cry again

and then you waltzed
into my life with those
come fuck me eyes
and all the dreams
of this unbelievable
future we were going
to mold together

and just as quickly
as the weather
changes

you waltzed right
back out of my life

off into the future
with someone better

that was the night i
realized they didn't
make enough alcohol
to fill the void

i suppose the best
part of being a
hopeless romantic
is there's never any
reason to get your
hopes up

you put enough years
behind you

you know how the
damn story is going
to end

a boot across your neck

the christmas blues are like
a boot across your neck

the constant pressure
eliminates the screaming

it's all the memories of
dysfunction, of broken
glasses and arguments
in the middle of the night

why does a christmas tree
end up with threats of violence

i still remember the night my
mother dragged us to her brother's
house in her underclothes

she wouldn't leave my father
until she thought my sister
and i could fend for ourselves

i laughed

told her i told dad when i was
eight years old if i could i would
kill his ass right now

by ten i had the plan and by
eleven i had drunk his bar dry

christmas never got any better
once he was gone

it didn't get any better when he
died either

it's more an exercise in creativity
and frustration now

kind of like when i figured out
just who santa really was

for all the progress

i can still smell the burning
flesh

i often wonder what would've
happened if i actually managed
to kill myself that night

and for all the progress

here i am alone
drunk, listless

when you run out of vices to
fill the void

that's when loved ones
should start to worry

most of them are dead now

lucky bastards

they got to avoid most of the
struggle

i would turn to the lord
but he's already told me
no once

i know when i'm not welcomed

there's still a dark corner of
my heart that hangs on to the
hope of a lovely woman like
it actually matters

each night i drown that fucker
with bitterness

i do admire a stubborn son
of a bitch though

carve out a reality

i never wanted
to be famous

hell, i never
intended living
past the age
of 27

i only wanted
to live in the
middle of
nowhere and
carve out a
reality that
would accept
me

by the time
i got that done
i figured death
would be next

instead, god keeps
me right on that
fucking cliff and
never allows me
to jump

one of these days
that fucker is going
to turn his head

finally knocking on your door

it's the voice
of an angel
as the gun
is being
loaded

it's your
favorite
song as
you prepare
your goodbyes

it's the lonely
housewife from
across the street
finally knocking
on your door

just as you finish
up one last note

but of course

there's always
another poem
to write

it's the old soul
coming to relieve
you of your duties

~ J.J. Campbell

Photography



Street #1 by Michael Morell

Michael Morell is a poet and photographer whose work has appeared in Shot Glass Journal, The Aurean, Philadelphia Stories, The Stray Branch, and elsewhere. In 2017, he received first place in the Ardmore Library Charlotte Miller Simon Poetry Contest, and earned a Master's degree in Applied Meditation Studies.



Street #2 by Michael Morell



Street #3 by Michael Morell



Street #4 by Michael Morell



Street Musician by Michael Morell

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