

THRICE

FICTION™



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*The Yellow and
Black Handkerchiefs*
by Chad Roseburg

THRICE FICTION™

Issue No.10 • APRIL 2014

RW Spryszak, Editor
David Simmer II, Art Director

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THRICE PUBLISHING NFP, a private corporation registered in the state of Illinois, reaches outside the mainstream to publish the work of selected writers whose efforts, we feel, need to be seen. It's flagship publication, **THRICE FICTION**, has been a platform for presenting this work alongside exceptional artwork since 2011. **THRICE ARTS** provides design and editing services to writers at large.



Thrice 10 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

The best part of this job is tipping readers off to writers who have never been published anywhere before. There's no guarantee they continue, and there's no past they have to live up to. Their work is raw, open, new, and totally honest. They haven't developed a writer's persona. They're just going for it. Right for the balls.

Dave and I are both pretty proud of the new writers we've added to these pages. Meaning – heretofore unpublished. The stories they sent are worth it. The future is up to them. In the meantime, **Thrice** would be happy to see its name on the top of their list of publications; and if any of them turn out to be somebody we all need to know... we hooked them first.

There's a few more in the pages of this issue. And we promise still more. We start as we mean to go on.

In other news, thank God the winter is over. Now it's time for baseball and our Spring issue.

We've also added a few words of wisdom from our friend Gloria in this issue. Not exactly a story, and not really fiction, but it fit so well with the new voices in this issue, we thought it was something that needed to be said. Thanks Gloria.

And thanks to all our loyal readers. 3000 strong these days. Not bad for an indie lit mag.

And wait until you hear our other news!

Later.



Things of the Spirit

Howie Good

1

An angel descended on our town via an elaborate system of ropes and pulleys. “Who would you rescue if you could rescue only one — wife or child?” the angel asked the men he met. He beat more than a few to encourage them to answer. “I’d much prefer to be drinking coffee,” he assured them, the darkness so thick they couldn’t always tell what was grabbing at them with big, meaty fingers.

2

An old young man in a stained T-shirt, a bruise purpling his chin, lurches out the door of the Church of Holy Shit! “Mister,” he calls, “got 60 cents?” I can’t quite decide the right thing to do. The street is crawling with spies and assassins, and all because of a faulty chemical switch in the brain. It’s like a story from the Bible, God betting Abraham which sugar cube a fly would land on.

3

The Buddha is portrayed with his eyes closed for a reason, but perhaps not the reason everyone thinks. Seeing is a neglected enterprise. When I happen to look out the kitchen window, I count four deer, or four spirits disguised as deer, crossing the yard. It isn’t snowing, but it should be, an inch per hour, a long, cold sentence without clauses to cause the reader to pause. There’s a theory that the only things you need are the things you already have. By that measure, I don’t need a quote from Simone Weil tattooed in a spidery script on my neck: “Imagination and fiction make up more than three-quarters of our real life.” Some areas of the body must be extra painful to tattoo.



HOWIE GOOD, a journalism professor at SUNY New Paltz, is the author of the forthcoming poetry collection *The Middle of Nowhere* (Olivia Eden Publishing). His latest chapbooks are *Echo's Bones* and *Danger Falling Debris* (Red Bird Chapbooks). He co-edits White Knuckle Press with Dale Wisely.



Reflection

Emily Grelle

Strands of gray had stolen into his hair as slowly as possums climbing the limbs of a few unremarkable trees. But the man himself is young in the minds of others, and when he would tell them his true age, it would seem as though he was lying. The portrait that comes to mind immediately is that of Dorian Gray, and then the tale of the old man looking young sounds old. And yet, I've been to this man's house and there is no attic. There is a picture of an ugly, emaciated girl, but she hangs delectably in his bedroom. There are many other paintings too. One of them is of three hands spelling out "God" in sign language. When held up to the light, this painting reveals the image of a state official now deceased. The artist, you see, did not have enough canvases on which to paint, and so he unwittingly bestowed divinity upon the officialdom he no doubt had cause to hate. But now the house is being sold. It is empty and clean with fresh paint, and the man posts the pictures of his property on various 'walls' of Internet sites. Presumably, somebody will buy it. There is no reason to renovate—there is only a bit of paint smudged on the fan-blade slicing round and round. Turning to the windows now. There are so many. Each of them faces a new direction, in each cicadas sing and sound like saws threatening to make the trees fall prematurely. In addition, in each one, a pane yields a clear reflection. 🌀

Emily Grelle's bio can be found on pg. 15



Wildebbeest

Susan Tepper

Paula

At the time I first saw the little cottage I never dreamed I would someday live here. The light-pink door— *a woman's door* ran through my mind. This is a place a woman would walk into alone and live. The door, almost flesh in tone. Soft against white clapboards. A small contained cottage on a small plot of land. Out front, a weedy pebbled path. There's an arbor, too, strung with climbers; also pink. Old-fashioned roses. The kind people planted when life was simpler. A cottage like a fairy tale makes real.

I don't remember what I was doing here when I first saw the cottage. I must have been doing something.

One bright day I got into my car and drove off. I thought I was going to the outdoor market to buy apricots. I drove past the market, and the parking area, out to the veteran's cemetery where everything seems frozen, even during summer. Then I got on the parkway going east. I could've driven west. The parkway offers those two choices. This island is long and longer than narrow. If you drive too far east, eventually you will fall off. I drove a while then exited when the name on a sign appealed to me. The sign had a sea name.

Jack

"She left? You mean *left left*?" Mickey leans under the juice bar awning to get out of the sun. He beat my ass in squash. Again. We do it anyway. It's a ritual. He's wringing out his sweatband saying, "Isn't that pretty dramatic?"

"Paula is the dramatic gesture."

"What's that s'posed to mean?"

"It's who she is, is all I'm saying." I watch a blonde with a tennis racket making her way toward the club house.

Mickey gives me one of his low-lidded stares. I'm thinking this juice bar is total crap; I need something that burns going down.

"You have to be back at the hospital?" I say.

"OK. Bings for a quick lunch. But I gotta shower first."

Bings being one of those places my old man used to call joints. Off the exit of the Northern Parkway right before you hit Queens. I back into an end spot. Ours the only cars in the lot. The rest are vans, commercial, SUV's, pick-ups parked sloppy. Younger guys than us hit Bings for pool, the betting, the stacked waitresses said to be Hooter rejects.

Mickey grabs a booth directly under the cold air vent. I am about to say this a bad idea, what with the lousy ventilation, probably standing water, legionella spores.

He stares at me across the booth. "What now?" He says.

I rap-tap-tap my knuckles on the varnished table top.

The place is jammed, noisy. The mid-day crowd. A game of Chicago underway. Some tinsel-haired Goldilocks on speed screeching after each move. It's starting to get on my nerves. "Chicago! Now there's a game with balls!" she yells.

"Shut up!" I yell. She looks surprised, her red mouth forming an O.

Years ago I put a pool table in our basement. Antique with mahogany trim and deep, embossed leather pockets. Paula would never play. Below ground level depressed her. That was the excuse. I played alone. The random clacking of balls like atoms splitting if you could hear that. Thirty years of living with random violence— the ER is a car wreck a minute if you stop to assess. There can be some comfort in that— the counting of things. Sure, it gives a false sense of control but all the same. Medicine is mostly assumptions based on symptoms. The pretentious docs like calling it *art*. You could puke.

"So, Paula..." Mickey is checking out the crowd.

"Don't expect her to come walking in here."

"It's got to be one of her old jaunts she's on," he's saying, "right?"

I shrug. "Where's the waitress?"

"So Paula gets bored and goes back to that old gig." Mickey blowing into the neck of the beer bottle he grabbed on his way in. "Christ this dark shit delivers. Where is she this time? Southeast Asia? Madagascar?" He laughs.

“How the fuck do I know.” I laugh, too, but not really; rubbing the back of my neck slow like you rub the neck of a dog. It feels good— the rubbing.

I signal a waitress killing time near the bar. “She fucking... last week. No note, nothing. Typical Paula.”

The girl comes over in that swig-swig way, short checked apron, square dance kind of white top gathered tight to show cleavage when she bends to take the drink order. “You, another?” she asks Mickey. He’s shaking his head stupidly.

I’m watching him thinking: You cardiac guys, you’re supposed to stay pumped. No falling in love for half an hour. Not in this joint, anyway.

The waitress saunters off. To Mickey I say, “Keep this to yourself. OK?”

He puts out a hand in friendship. “Steady. Steady partner. She’ll get bored with that soon and come running home. You’ll see. Mark my words.” He’s talking way too much. He’s already mapped out the deal.

“Well isn’t that beside the point?”

Paula

If my first baby had lived. But what’s the use in going back? I was young, barely twenty. Didn’t even know it was a baby. Pain like a hot knife and I’d sort of folded in half—the yellow blood goo and staring into the toilet thinking *what is this?* All pain gone in an instant. If only the rest of life could be that way. That baby knew it had no future.

Ten, fifteen years later it all dawned on me. By then things were different. Different husband, different life. Abundance. No coupon clipping and the measuring out of things.

Jack

I’ve got maybe the best house in the world. Not huge. But no way modest by any stretch. The land is crisp, rolling in back like those lakes where you trip down a slope to the water’s edge. Specimen trees in between native oaks and white pine— what Paula called *woods-manicured*.

Custom built using glass wherever possible; wherever a beam could be spared— glass. When I am drunk, tired, confused— it’s easy to get the inside and outdoors muddled. Balconies-what my wife calls terraces- track the perimeter on all three levels like deer runs. A straight drop of glass to the ground. Our son Cody named it The Tree House. We get deer and other wildlife. The black bears

terrified Paula, especially at night. She heard somewhere they will crash through windows to get at a food supply. This is possible.

Paula

The realtor who rented me the cottage said, “This must be your lucky day. Cheap for such a good place.”

I kind of felt the same. I have felt lucky in spurts. I felt lucky both times I got married. Even when my first one turned quickly to sadness, then I felt lucky getting out, both of us relatively unharmed while still so young. If you have to get out, it’s best to leave early.

The cottage, luckily, came furnished. Not exactly what I’d choose but nice comfy stuff, like a fifties movie. A few antiques. I like sitting at the speckled Formica table having my meals or a cup of tea. The vinyl chairs are cracking but the bright yellow makes them cheery. When I shift, they squeak like canaries. According to the realtor, some man who lives in California owns the cottage. He hasn’t been back in twenty years. How can she pin it down so precisely? A man

painted the door pale pink? I am totally surprised by this.

I’m thinking of buying a couple of long silk nightgowns. Winter is coming and silk is good for staying warm.

Jack

Tuesday I brought a woman home. Nell. Nurse from the cath lab. She changes in the locker room without panties. A thirty-something streaked-blond with those deliberate black roots. Bitch I call her, she calls me bastard. The patients love it, makes them laugh, takes their mind off other things.

When I described her to Mickey, he said: Yeah, yeah, the *no panties one*; and that she probably gave me a dose. Well good for Nell. Let it fester. Feel the burn before you reach for the drugs. In the end I couldn’t do it. I thought of telling Mickey then kept this to myself.

Paula could be crazy in bed, insatiable. Then nothing. Touch her, bite, lick, batter her with my dick and she’s gone into a trance. Dead. A stone thing. Twenty-five years married. Who is so wise they can see hate smack in front of their lips when it tastes so good? 🍷



Things to do on the way to the dentist

Samantha Memi

I was hanging from a strap in a carriage on the tube, hoping I’d remembered to squirt deodorant on my armpits, and looking at the other passengers hanging onto straps, and just as I was thinking, Is this any way to treat human beings? The man behind pushed against me and I felt his baby maker appendage stiffen against my ass. I tried to move forward but the woman standing in front gave me a look which said, don’t be so impatient.

I realised I was stuck until we reached the next station and people got off. I squeezed round gradually to see who was poking me. My God, he was gorgeous. I looked into his eyes and my baby maker orifice warmed to the possibilities. He looked embarrassed and turned away. Did he know what I was thinking? He was now prodding me in the hip. If I scratched the top of my leg, I could touch him. Would that be rude? Just as I moved my hand to my hip, the train stopped. People got off and there was more space. He moved away and I missed the warmth of his body against mine. He glanced at me, caught my gaze and looked away.

This is crazy, I thought. Here I am standing in a metal box looking at the man I want inside me and he looks at me like he wants to rip off my clothes and ravish me in a sleazy hotel room, and neither of us do anything. I fell forward and bumped into him.

—Sorry, I said, and in the same instant I thought, What the hell am I doing, I’m a married woman, I’ve got an eight-year-old daughter, I can’t have sleazy, Let’s get together yeah yeah yeah, with some stranger I met on a train.

—Crowded isn’t it, he replied, and I was hooked. All he needed to do was offer me a stick of gum and say, come back to my place, and I was his for the next couple of hours. Bugger the dentist.

—Where’re you going? He asked.
—Hammersmith. And you?
—Heathrow. I’m going back today.
—Where’s that?
—Chicago.
—Oh.



SUSAN TEPPER is the author of five published books. Her current novel-in-stories *The Merrill Diaries* (Pure Slush Books, 2013) is an adventure in love and lust that spans continents. Teppar’s story *Distance* (from *Thrice Fiction* No. 7) is a named-finalist for story/South Million Writers Award 2014. Find her online at SusanTepper.com



I could go to Heathrow. We could have a time-out in the gents. I'd never done it in a public toilet, so that would be new. And then I could go home and... oh God I'd meet my husband and I'd feel so guilty I'd go red as beetroot and fumble my words and he would guess what happened and be unhappy, and I'd hate to make him unhappy. Would he do the same to me? Of course he would, but that didn't make it any easier for me. It wasn't my morals stopping me, but I was not a good liar. The train slowed to a halt. My baby maker was throbbing like ET's magic finger.

—My stop, I flustered.
The doors opened. My heart closed, opened, closed.
I said, —Bye. And got off the train. I glanced back and caught him looking at me. Could anyone be as stupid as me? Why hadn't I said Heathrow? I funnelled along with all the other zombies to the exit, but I couldn't leave, I had to see him again. I turned back, then stopped, what was I doing?

I caught the next train to Heathrow. I hated the tube. All these people just sitting there like Mexican beans being bounced around. What the hell would I do when I got to Heathrow? There were four terminals. Which one was for Chicago? I didn't know what time his flight was. I looked around the carriage for a map or plan. Just the stations, not where the flights went. I couldn't stay for long. I had to take Daisy to dance class. I didn't really have to take her, but it was nice for her. All the other mums took their budding Pavlovas, so I shouldn't expect mine to go on her own. I'd missed a couple of times and she'd said it didn't matter but I could tell from her eyes that she'd been disappointed.


This train was going to terminals 1, 2 and 3. Wouldn't it be just my luck if Chicago was terminal 4. What if all the terminals had flights to Chicago? I didn't even know if he was flying direct. Maybe he'd go to New York first. I thought about getting off the train, and going back. I arrived at Heathrow, looked at departures: everywhere — except Chicago.

I went to a desk.
—Excuse me can you tell me which flight goes to Chicago?
—Depends on the carrier.
—I think it's the next flight out. I'm meeting someone to say goodbye.

—American Airlines, 14.45, terminal three.
I went to terminal three and looked along the queue waiting for American Airlines flight something-or-other: no gorgeous man with a stiffy. Although I doubted that he'd still have a stiffy after 40 minutes. I hoped he wouldn't — for his sake. I wandered around feeling stupid. What would I say if I met him, Oh, hello, fancy meeting you here?

Are you catching a plane?
Um, no no, I'm meeting someone.

•
I went back to Hammersmith. When I got to Daisy's school, she'd already left. I rushed to her dance class. It had started. I waited. At least I could take her home. I stood in the corridor looking at the notice board, and I could feel him pushing against my ass. It made me feel warm and stupid. 🕒



SAMANTHA MEMI is a housewife who cleans, dusts and cooks. Her windows are sparkling bright. There are no cobwebs lurking in corners, and her bathroom is germ free. Her basement is a bit smelly but, as the only person who goes down there is her husband, she doesn't mind. Her tips on household maintenance can be found at <http://samanthamemi.weebly.com/>



Astoria Saudade

André M. Zucker

Katelyn left Mike one day before the refrigerator broke. They never thought much about the refrigerator during their 3-year relationship. When all that need to be cold turned room temperature Mike decided to throw out the refrigerator. Mike wrapped his body around it and attempted to move it. Katelyn never considered its age or how it got into their five story Astoria walk-up. The refrigerator clung to the sticky residue that haloed its base. Mike pressed his entire weight down to move the monolith. A crackling sound erupted as the refrigerator was ripped from its crusted comfort zone. Mike shimmied it towards himself and saw a thick residue spot where the refrigerator once stood. Inside the layer was old food, Q-Tips, dead roaches and dust bunnies; all those things that build up over the years.

Mike called in sick; he could not imagine eight hours of sitting in his cubicle. Katelyn went to her East Side legal services office. Her first night alone she fed squirrels

in Astoria Park while he lay in what used to be their bed. Mike worked at a nonprofit company which he found meaningful but underwhelming. Katelyn was visibly disheveled when she walked in but her colleagues were too polite to comment. Mike continued to push the refrigerator out of the apartment. Neither of them had been willing to clean while they dismantled their life. Mike barely noticed how much junk accumulated until he started to move the refrigerator. Katelyn booked a hotel just before her lunch break and immediately dreaded an evening alone. Mike cleaned up with each of the refrigerator's movements. Katelyn would have liked to come home to an orderly living space.

Not knowing where to go Katelyn crossed the 59th Street Bridge. She wandered Astoria until she arrived a falafel restaurant. They both loved Astoria's gritty boulevards and quaint side streets. They frequented the neighborhood's Greek and Turkish eateries and shopped at the local supermarkets. Katelyn moved into his apartment on 37th

Avenue one year after they met. They often ran home in the rain together. Katelyn approached the counter and looked at the signs above the cash register. The two turned 30. Eventually Mike got angry at Katelyn for talking down to him and Katelyn became furious at Mike’s disorganization. No major life changes or financial problems arrested the relationship’s trajectory. They were an unremarkable Queens couple; young, in love, and together... until they were not. “I’ll have the baklava with Türk kahvesi special.” she exhaled.

Mike struggled the refrigerator into his hallway. When he cleared the doorway, the refrigerator ripped off years of paint and showed some awful aesthetic choices that had been committed. Mike looked at the stairs and then at the refrigerator and for the first sober moment in his life wished he did not live in a walk-up. “Broken fridge?” an old voice asked. Mike turned around to see an elderly neighbor whose name he did not know. “5J, right?” Mike nodded. “5P.” The man looked at the refrigerator. “I’ve been through three refrigerators and two wives in this building.” Mike raised his eyebrows hoping for useful advice. “Tip her over and slide her down on her side,” 5P shrugged. “And if you don’t believe in God... start.”

Katelyn’s coffee went cold while her thoughts flooded. A black ring of stagnation formed in her coffee cup. The waiter approached to ask if she was done with her untouched coffee.

“Another Türk kahvesi?”

“I left Mike yesterday.” she blurted out. “I came to Astoria because it’s New York’s attempt at normalcy!” She looked up and realized she was speaking out loud. “Turning 30 made me restless and Mike lethargic. Watching TV, ordering Thai food and sex lost its flare. I don’t want to go back to Manhattan after breaking up in Queens.”

“More coffee?” the waiter asked in a Turkish accent.

“I walk Ditmars Boulevard and see other couples talking in bars or kissing on stoops. Mike was always waiting for me at home. He never wanted to do anything... he never wanted anything.” Katelyn looked at the waiter. “More Coffee? Türk kahvesi. Türk kahvesi all around. My life is a mess... I’m buying Turkish Coffee for anyone in Queens willing to listen.”

The refrigerator rested on its side balancing on the edge of the stairs about to descend. Mike went a few stairs below it and slowly slid it towards him. The burden got heavier. Life is going to be harder alone. He let more weight fall onto him as he planted his feet firmly. Costs will not be split with Katelyn anymore. He took a step down. Any unexpected expense and paying rent alone will force him out of the neighborhood. He took another step. Each of Mike’s future plans was gradually dismantled by disappointments and the high cost of rent in New York City. More weight compressed onto Mike’s chest. In the past few months, Astoria’s prices started to rise. He took three more steps. He never planned a life without Katelyn. All of the weight of the refrigerator was pushing hard against him. He remembered some of her birthmarks. A hard step down and he was on the fourth floor.

“Mike had a stable job, a full head of hair, and only mild love handles.” The waiter was still making coffee for everyone. “Men who looked like this are either married, gay

or serial killers.” Katelyn said. “He works for a charity and is acceptable at best. I would force Mike to watch obscure foreign films and do trendy exercise routines in attempts to make domesticity more interesting.” Katelyn paused. “Isn’t a life at home what I want? It’s normal... it’s what I am supposed to want.” The restaurant silently hung on her words. “I experimented with religion, philosophy, drugs and kinky sex. When those went belly up I left Mike.” Katelyn looked at the couples in the restaurant and then out the window at gathering clouds. She remembered Mike’s deodorant. The waiter placed cups of coffee on a large tray to pass out.

The refrigerator slipped out of Mike’s hand and avalanched down the stairs. It crashed into the third floor landing making a huge bang. Three men ran up the stairs to find Mike and his smashed burden. “Katelyn left me yesterday.” Silence. “I could have been more for her. If I had cleaned or been more ambitious.” The men looked at each other and formed a silent agreement to help move the weight. “Life is hard.” Each person got to one corner of the refrigerator and nodded at each other. “We were together for three years... do any of you have ex girlfriends, wives, ex-wives, special ladies?” They slowly glided the refrigerator down the stairs. “I have to get this thing out.” No one responded.

“It was kind of cute to be heartsick in my 20’s, but now it’s just annoying.” The waiter was passing out fresh cups of coffee. “I want a man to hold my hand on Steinway Street. The Türk kahvesi smells great.” The waiter placed a coffee and a bill in Katelyn’s hand. “I’m an adult I should have a lover who can go to the supermarket and the a museum with. A domestic Astoria existence.” She looked at the bill and just dropped a credit card on top of it. “I need to fight the monotony and figure out how to be stable.” One falafel patron thrust a fist in the air. “I want to remain interesting without relocating to Brooklyn!” She downed her coffee. “They don’t have Türk kahvesi in Brooklyn... well they do but it’s Brooklyn style.” Another fist in the air. “I don’t know if I’m still an adult without Mike. How much longer do I have to put up with this, with me, with all of it?” She looked out the restaurant window to see a system of grey clouds approaching. “I don’t want to keep falling back into this feeling... I want to be more... Does anyone understand me?” The restaurant broke into applause.

The refrigerator descended to the second story with ease. “It happened last night. It started with a disagreement and then Katelyn is out the door.” One of the men nodded to pick up the refrigerator. “People don’t break up for no reason. Nobody just realizes they’re with the wrong person. Right? Life decays around you until the mistakes can’t be undone.” They moved to the last staircase. “I wasn’t interesting enough. Never tried to do more than I had to. I never wanted to run for the cliffs.” Mike thought about Katelyn on his fingertips and submitted to regret. “I have a frightened passion. It’s time not to be scared... I’m over 30, life won’t wait for me to catch up.”


Katelyn remembered that they had met at a job interview. She had forgotten the accident that started them talking. They spoke like they had always known each other. Neither of them got the position. They interviewed separately and Mike waited for her after his session was

over. She smiled and laughed when she saw him still in the waiting room. He took her for a drink after the interview, then a walk, then dinner and finally they kissed near the Triborough Bridge. They stood over the East River looking from Manhattan into Queens, ignorant that a whole life was on the other side. Holding each other, they watched the sun go down the city lite up. They stayed for hours, heavy clouds formed. They talked minimally, touched, and looked at Astoria’s domestic lights. The clouds burst rain. Katelyn had to laugh. The rain became heavier; a wall of water grew between Mike and Katelyn. He closed his eyes, as the rain grew denser. Katelyn’s hands reached through the water and found Mike’s face. Her hands held him not slipping away. This is how they learned to love each other. Katelyn in the restaurant and Mike in his lobby asked themselves: ‘what ever happened to those beautiful children.’

The refrigerator arrived in the lobby with a thud. “Katelyn’s not coming back.” The men remained silent. “I know she’s gone... What do I do now? Do I go back to mine or do I try to reach out again?” Mike looked up to see heavy grey clouds ready to rain. “Will I repeat this?” Mike remembered Katelyn’s breath. “I should have thought out loud more... I should have told her what I was feeling.”

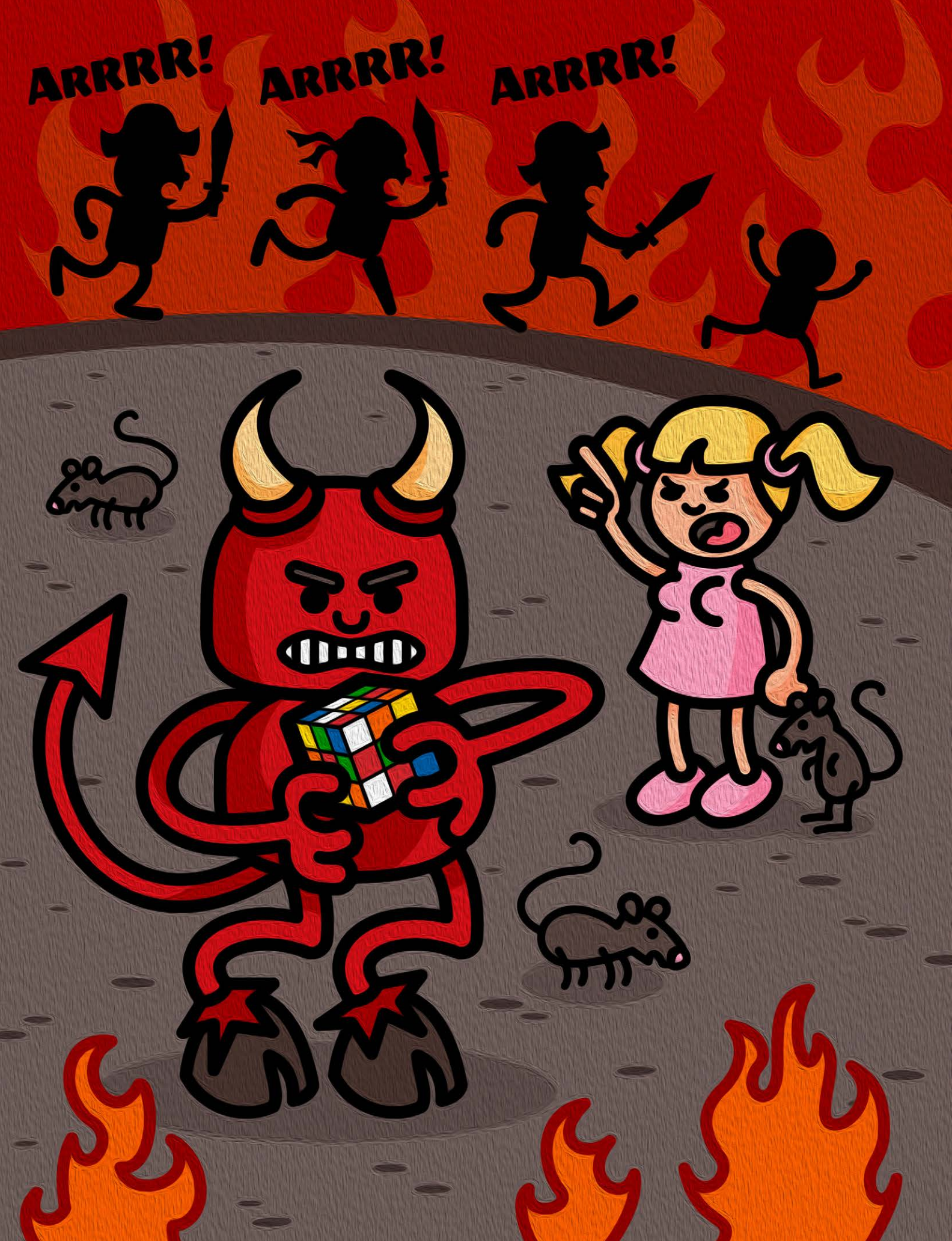
A rainstorm held over the borough. Katelyn looked out the window of the falafel restaurant to see the first heavy drops fall from the sky. Mike and his help carried the

refrigerator through the building’s main entrance. Katelyn signed the credit card receipt and tipped the waiter. The rain got heavier. “Thanks for listening,” Katelyn and Mike both said. The waiter kissed her on both checks. Sheets of rain. The men nodded and quietly wished Mike well with this new season. Katelyn walked into the sheets of rain. Mike let it come down. No umbrellas no protection. Each of them thought of the first rainstorm they had shared. They each had rushes of sparse memories and raw emotions. Neither could see their familiar territory through the buckets of rain. Another failed attempt at normalcy. Perhaps they would die of old age without another brush of contact. The two of them alone on the rain-soaked asphalt while cars had to pull over and sidewalks cleared. They did not yield. Astoria’s residents ran under shelters and awnings to avoid the unpredicted storm. Mike and Katelyn could not see through the walls of water. Katelyn ran her fingers through her dripping blond hair. Mike asked himself where she was in the labyrinth. She had the exact same thoughts. Their dreams of Astoria have washed away in the nothingness. Mike and Katelyn desperately remain in the rain, in Astoria and New York City’s decline. They become storm walkers, each hoping a hand will reach through the rain and let them feel a familiarity again. The steady hand never comes, the rain continues and they each dissolve into their separate lives. 🌀



ANDRÉ M. ZUCKER was born in the Bronx. His works have appeared in *And/or*, *The Associative Press*, *Blaze Vox*, *South Jersey Underground*, *Structo* and many others. He lives and works in New York City.

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The Pirates of Hell or Whatever

Zeke Jarvis

Hell is supposed to be this place where there's justice and stuff. Where bad people suffer through bad things so that the universe gets evened out. You'd think that the worst people would have the worst stuff happen to them, but that's not what happens at all. There's no justice or whatever in Hell. And I know that sounds stupid, but, it's just that Satan's always totally favoring the pirates, which is lame. Plus, I think I've been turned into a teenaged girl. I know, you're hearing me say "I think," and you're like: WTF?, but the thing is that there are no mirrors in Hell, and all the water is just boiling pitch or whatever, so I can't even see myself, really, and everyone's voice sounds the same in Hell because of all the brimstone. But I have these little, like, nubby boobs or something. I guess I kind of had boobs when I died, because I was this fat old guy, but, these are different, and I definitely have a vaj. I've checked it out, believe me. I always thought I'd look like I did when I died when I got here. Well, really, I guess I didn't really think that I'd be here, or that there was anything, but here I am, I guess.

But I was talking about the pirates. They can just run around and do whatever. Like this one pirate that broke into the cafeteria and dumped boiling fat all over my BFF, Louise (her name was Brandon in life, and s/he's in Hell for stealing money from old people in the nursing home s/he worked for), and Satan didn't do anything at all to him. That's total bullshit. And I went to talk to Satan about it, because, like, if there's no justice in Hell, then where is there? So, I go into his office, and I told Satan what happened, and he was just all, "Yeah, I'll look into it", but you totally know that he won't do anything. I asked him why he doesn't do anything to the pirates, but he just looked at me and told me that one of my mice was getting away, like that's my fault or something. Oh, yeah, the mice. For embezzling, my punishment is to have all these mice eating my body for eternity. I guess the

mice symbolize me or the people I cheated or whatever. I try not to think about it all that much. But that was still just a shitty thing for him to say when I was looking for answers.

So I was walking out of Satan's office, and of course I run into one of those stupid pirates, and he's just looking at me the whole time, like he can tell exactly what Satan said to me. And maybe he could. It wouldn't surprise me if Satan lets the pirates read peoples' minds. So I said to the pirate, "What are you looking at?"

He spit on the ground. His spit was gasoline or something, because a huge flame shot out when it hit the ground. The pirate just kept looking at me and smiling. "I'm looking at a little girl."

I couldn't tell if he was being serious or if he was just screwing with me. It might've been that I was even younger than teenaged and I just had boobs as part of some weird punishment in Hell. So, I said, "I hate you pirates. Perv."

That made him laugh really hard, but not because I was being funny. Or not like I was trying to be. So after he laughed, he said to me, "If you're a little girl now, then you might think about whether or not I was always a pirate."

I rolled my eyes, but then I had to close them, because a mouse started biting my left one. I brushed it away, but it fell on my foot and turned into two mice that started biting me. That happens sometimes, in Hell. "Whatever," I said.

"If you can't let go," he said, "then you can't move forward."

I opened my eyes. He had this one gold tooth that was shining. I hadn't noticed it before, or maybe it's some stupid power that the pirates have in Hell. "We're in Hell, dumbass. We're all in Hell."

He laughed at me again, so I flipped him off and walked away. While I was holding my finger up, two mice ran down my arm and started to dig my nail off. I know, total bullshit, right? 🙄



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White

An Observation by Gloria Garfunkel

Imagine we are looking out the window from a dark, empty cafe at the blizzard blowing, the flakes swirling in the lamplight, no one in sight. We both live nearby in this small northern town and will have no trouble walking home. As you finish your first cup of some sort of sweet alcohol and caffeine potent, I'll order a second. Then we order a third. I know that's our limit because we're both on medication.

Now let's get this straight. Who are you and who am I? You are a troubled individual who thinks you can't write, and it's the only thing you want to do and have put it off too long in your life, helping others as a psychotherapist instead of helping yourself. I am your subconscious mind who knows for sure you have it in you and that your insecurities stand in the way. As the snow falls heavily and you are feeling more and more relaxed from the alcohol and energized by the caffeine, you know I am right, that if you just let go it will be there, all of it. Famous bipolars like Virginia Woolf, Sherman Alexie, Beethoven, Byron, Charles Dickens, Isaac Newton, Edgar Allen Poe, Jackson

Pollock, Robert Shumann, Mark Vonnegut, Francis Ford Coppola, Abbie Hoffman, Vivien Leigh, Van Gogh, and on and on never let it stand in their way. People have overcome much more difficult obstacles. Why let it stop you?

You have the help you need now, finally a good doctor who doesn't change treatment plans ten times in one session or poisons you with overdoses. You are isolated, but you do not need others to write. You need yourself. That's what you want to do and there is nothing but your own self-criticism stopping you. Another expensive writing program isn't going to do it for you. You have to do it yourself. Be brave. Take risks. Be your own critic when you revise, not your own demoralizer.

Remember Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*: "Literature is strewn with the wreckage of those who have minded beyond reason the opinions of others."

Let's bundle up and make fresh footsteps in the knee-deep snow and have a fierce snow fight in the flawless night. ☺



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Drain

Emily Grelle

As a man stood in front of his mirror gazing at the image of his freshly shaven self, a tree fell on the power lines outside. All of the lights promptly went out, and the man's image disappeared. He knew he had left his razor lying on the sink, but he had ceased to see it. He feared he might cut his finger or worse. There was the possibility that he might knock his razor off the sink in an attempt to exit the room, and then the blade might land on his bare foot. In addition, of course it would land with its sharpest edge aimed downward at his toe, since things—especially inanimate ones—learn to be aerodynamic on the fly, as if it is second nature. Indeed, the razor might fall or slip into the sink where it would become dislodged from its handle. What a nightmare might then ensue if it were to shimmy down the drain! Who would get it out of there? When washing your hands you would remember something sharp and then look down, but all you would see would be darkness. A great drain of darkness that would become a citywide phenomenon at its end. No doubt, it is better not to move at all, better not to let the blade fall. ☹



EMILY GRELE received an M.A. in Russian studies from Stanford University, and she is currently studying Russian literature in North Carolina. Her work is forthcoming in *Spoon River Poetry Review* and *Zaum*. She enjoys the company of children and animals best of all, but when she is with adults, her drink of choice is a Bloody Mary.



The Wolf's Legend

Jeff Burt

They lied when they said Henry Spotted Wolf died and a strong wind blew. The day was dull and calm. No one spotted anything significant. No earth rumblings. No smoke. No rain. They lied when they said Henry Spotted Wolf died and the moon came red. I knew.

I was walking Sandy Road up the hill and the full moon rose yellow. When I detoured to the trestle and packed the package under the beams of the trestle in the thick, sick black gob of creosote wedged between pillar and post, I used a stick for the levered force to drag the pitch over the bag I had to hide, and walked the railroad tracks and the moon shined in my face until I caught Grasshopper Hollow. And all the time the moon was yellow, and once a thin cloud the size of a needle sliced the moon horizontally as it rose, like it was making segments of it, like cutting thin slices of cheese from a round.

No owl came out of the moon. No midnight crow flew across it. It was just a bright yellow moon and my face up against it climbing to home. I slept on the porch on an old wicker chair. It was comfortable in the way that when you don't have a car but you get to drive one it doesn't matter what kind of car it is. All night it seemed the moon was shining in my face, like earth had no rotation, or that my side of earth would always be in darkness and the moon would always shine on this side.

The train came thirty minutes late, and I can tell you it never whistled. The engineer never whistles when he's late and only whistles when he's early, and I've been near that track a hundred times and I will testify to that.

In the morning I went to Lily Snow's grave. She's been dead since I was fifteen. She was Henry Spotted Wolf's girlfriend twenty years ago when she was found pregnant and abandoned on a night when it snowed. She went to her grandmother's and never went inside. Sat in a chair on the porch. Died during the night.

Two days later the women at the church were stirring large pots and using large ladles the size of turtles. Steam filled the kitchen like smoke, curling up against the ceiling and dropping down the walls, obscuring their faces. Two women pinched dough shut. There was meat inside, and every five minutes they pulled out a tray and put another one in while five more trays were baking. The body had been found.

They lied when they said Henry Spotted Wolf spit back the bullet that killed him. I saw it rattle on the floor and skid past and stick in the grille of the floor vent. I pried it out. I put the brass on the track and it got eaten by the wheels. I looked and never found it.

All these lies. All this myth. 🐺



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Work in Progress

Mike Ekunno

Not that it mattered where I sat but the gallery gave a low down on the congregation. My mid-way entry made the gallery my natural habitat. A do-gooder usher downstairs had thought to benefit me with his quixotic cooing: "Got a seat for you here."

Seat ko, shit ni. Who knows where that'd have had me sandwiched — between two dudes wearing flowing lace agbadas — my rough denim and white sneakers providing the perfect sore thumb.

Instead I got installed at my favourite perch upstairs with all the options. Jennie stood in the aisle facing me. *Did she come with IT?* She turned to face the alter as if in telepathic response. There *IT* was. Jennie wasn't my First Lady for nothing. What she packed behind was arrogant. Delightfully so. Whatever the ushers' uniform for the Sunday, her designer was sure to outfit her bakassi with an obtrusive flair which she carried on 6-inch platforms. And I didn't complain, really. I could trek behind those curves any distance on the face of planet Earth.

Testifiers for the day were taking their turns on the microphone. I sat forward in my seat and closed my eyes: "Lord, I'm here today. Forgive your boy, I beg you. You are a powerful God, the Highest. If you will only help me to travel out, I promise to change. Settle me with better something and let me begin to nak correct sputes from fine fine boutiques. Give me my breakthrough so that I can begin to climb better better stages like them Ali Baba, Julius Agwu. Let me run my own show like Teju BabyFace, AY. God, you're too much. I praise your name, forever in Jesus name, amen."

I opened my eyes and reclined. The view below was resplendent as usual. A rainbow congregation spread to the terraced alter. The alter was majestic and draped in white and purple. The lectern was spare and elegantly done in chrome. It was back grounded by roof-high curtains which parted midway to reveal DIVINE SANCTUARY OF

JERUSALEM MINISTRY INC. The alter job was straight out of some interior designer's brochure. Daddy Bishop and Mummy and the pastoral team sat to the left of the lectern facing the choir. The choir colours that day were lemon green on dark green.

A few of the testifiers had had their turns on the microphone and were serenaded by applause to their seats. Two of them had been on "journey mercies" across the country and one sister had a safe delivery.

Two of a kind. Whether pregnancy or travelling, both are the same journey to the great beyond — potentially. One blink of an eye and somebody can become a mere figure on the nation's maternal mortality statistic or having a ghastly siesta by the roadside with cassava leaves as blanket.

One brother had come to see Daddy for success with US visa application and was asked to sow in dollars which he did. He went for the interview thereafter and got issued with a multiple entry visa. "The Lord is good!"

"All the time!" we responded.

Jackpot, bigtime! You didn't say how much you sowed to give me an idea of how to go about mine. And sowing in dollars — more like asking an anaemic patient to donate blood for his healing.

A sister testified of deliverance from witchcraft attack. Her nights were filled with eerie coos and tweets from evil birds outside and, inside, vermin which behaved like humans ransacked her apartment. They wouldn't be caught by any antidote. Any time the evil bird cooed, her period wouldn't come. But with the anointing oil consecrated by the Man of God, she anointed her apartment and sprinkled on the tree and ever since, she sleeps easy like a baby for the Holy Bible says He will give his beloved, sleep. "Praise the Lord!"

We responded.

You fit complain of witch for night. For my area, where do you see trees belente birds to perch on them? Instead of to de speak phonetics, marriage will automatically end this

kind of witchcraft. With a man — like me — around you, which rat fit miss road show face for the house when bush meat de hungry some people.

The babe looked gorgeous in a hat and spoke with the unmistakable accent that came with contact with Oyibo - the British Ones not the American Ones.

After her, there were two other testimonies that had to do with success with visa interviews. One of them, Baba Dee had been my paddy and I linked him to the guy who was to arrange Oluwole bank statement and marriage certificate for him. The embassy had to be sure he had a regular income in the country with a wife and children to guarantee his willing return. If not for his testimony, I wouldn't have known he succeeded. He didn't tell me. *You see life!*

The one which brought down the roof was of a couple of whom the lady had the SS genotype and a confirmed patient but had gone ahead to wed her AS heartthrob against better counsel if not judgment. She waved the result of the test confirming she had become AA after being prayed for by Daddy and drinking anointed oil. All her symptoms had disappeared and her red blood cell count was at an all time high. People screamed from the pews and others walked out to sow to it. On my row, argument burst as the brother who sat two chairs away said something about fake testifiers who were out for "Notice Me" to please Daddy Bishop and Mummy.

"How d'you mean?" challenged the lady in between us.

"It's not scientifically possible."

"Was walking on water scientifically possible?"

"But that was Jesus Christ."

"What of parting the Red Sea." It was from an elderly man seated on the preceding row turning on his seat backwards.

"Well," smiled Doubting Thomas finding himself outnumbered.

I prevaricated inside having initially shared DT's opinions but being not so sure anymore. Moreover, the opposition looked distinguished. Seeing how I leaned forward right ways with interest in the talk, the buffer lady sought to drag me out: "Imagine what he said," she started. "You mean that lady can come out to fake a healing just to please somebody?"

I gently nodded my agreement.

"You know what it means to suffer sickle cell — the pains, the crises?" She wasn't done.

"Yes," I volunteered, "she even put on weight."

"That's what I'm saying — it shows."

"Very well," I concurred. By then it was just the two of us carrying on. The storm raised by SS to AA had blown over and two other testifiers who I didn't listen to in the aftermath of the storm had brought the session to a close. The choir prepared to deliver its special number to usher in the sermon. As they rose, shades of green suffused the TV screens on the gallery. I had an unhindered view to the altar but depended on the screens for close-ups. The camera panned the choir frontlines and I ticked off: Bunmi, Nike, Tina, Ify, Florence. Blessing was missing. There was no knowing if she was around but didn't robe for the service or she travelled. Fishing out my BB, I pinged her: *No de fuk up, babe. Wia u de?* She didn't reply and the phone returned to

my pocket.

The choir did a special number. Then came the moment I had been waiting for. All my senses were primed for the day's message. *Will it provide good enough materials for tonight?* Daddy stepped onto the altar with his ipad.

"Praise the Lord!"

"Alleluia," thundered the congregation.

"That 'alleluia' is that of a malaria patient. If you know that you don't have malaria, Praise the Lord!"

"Alle – lu – yaaaa!!"

"Shout it let me hear you."

"Alle – lu – yaaaaaaa!!!" I didn't join. *Anybody who didn't hear that first one will need to visit an ENT specialist. There won't be any difference even if I did it with my eyes and nose and ears too.*

"Stand up and tell your neighbour on the right: 'You're in for an earthquake today.'"

Has the National Emergency Mgt Agency been informed?

The church broke into a hearty babble. I turned to my lady neighbour on the right to repeat the line. She was turned rightwards too while the guy to my left was pitching the line to me.

"Say it again: 'You're in for an earthquake today!'"

We continued.

"Now turn to the person on your left and say it: 'You're in for an earthquake today!'"

I turned to the brother to my left. He was rattling off to his left hand neighbour. My right hand sister was on me.

"Walk to seven people and tell them: 'God is going to visit you today with a miracle.'"

How am I sure?

The pews scattered like a stepped-upon line of soldier ants. I went through the motions pumping palms here and there. Before I picked my way through the haphazard traffic to where I'd be in the natural line of contact with First Lady, the temporary jigsaw had fallen into place with order restored.

Bigfuk-up. I made my way back to my seat, unable to feel her hand today.

On the altar, Daddy settled down to the business of the day. The topic was Work in Progress. I reached for my wallet. Rummaging its compartments, I chanced upon a piece of paper and unfurled. It was the counterfoil of my last electricity bill. The back was clear and I scribbled away. The root passage was from Second Timothy Chapter Two from verse 20 to 21. I followed the reading from left neighbour's Bible:

²⁰But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour and some to dishonour. ²¹If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work.

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Taking over the mic from the strip tease act on Sunday night, I had my sequence well worked out. It was MPM Night – Movement for the Postponement of Mondays. High decibels from the club's woofers give way to cackles and guffaws from jokes every MPM Night. I started with an intro that was bound to wet the ground and loosen the

audience, a congregation of a different service — a vigil on Bacchus.

"There was this man who beat the traffic light. You know how it is: you approach as amber is just turning to red and you're in a hurry. But the traffic warden is hiding after the junction and catches you. 'Park! Park!!' he motions to this driver while standing just inches away from the bumper. His colleague goes to the passenger side to enter as if the car belongs to two of them".

Chuckles.

"Oga pulls over and the leeches gather him: 'Red stop you and you pass. You nor de see? What if you jam another person?'"

"Our man tries to explain that it had not fully turned to red."

"Okay, you teach us our job. Where are your papers, fire extinguisher, triangle, spare tyre? Again, your side mirror is cracked,' and so on and so forth. Oga understands the message and asks for settlement."

"No. You go with us.'"

"Where to?"

"You'll know when we get there. You de speak grammar for us, eh?"

"No now, it's not like that,' goes our man. 'We can settle this here.'"

"So the negotiation starts. From five thousand Naira. Finally, finally they settle for five hundred Naira. Oga fishes out a One thousand Naira note and asks for change."

"Ahhh! Where we go see change, now, Oga?"

"Abeg try. That's all I've got.'"

"Change is taking time so one of the wardens returns to the beat so as not to miss the other bush meats speeding past. His colleague goes off with the note to look for change. Presently, the second returns not with the change but an idea. 'Oga,' he starts, 'as I no fit get change, just go back and beat the light again so everything go balance.'"

The room thunders. A couple table topple their contents and the waiters hit the aisles, mop and pans in hand. I wait for the guffaws to die down then I go antiphonal: "Praise the lord!"

"Alleluia!" The mockery elicits more laughter.

"Praise the lord!"

"Allelu-ia!!"

It dies down. I continue. "You thought before now the traffic light had more brains than its human counterpart. Now you know better. You're going to be hearing more about the road. You know when it used to be 'Slow Men at Work'. How many of us remember that?"

Some hands pop.

"Ehe! These are the Methuselahs. Anybody here who knows when Ministry of Works was PWD don become Old School. So if any person beside you raised their hand, shake them for me. They try well well. It's not easy to be senior citizen."

More smirks. "You, nko? You, nko?" It is a lady sharing

the table with an elderly looking man.

"Ah, me? It was my grandfather I heard saying it..... But seriously, it is just lack of simple punctuation marks that caused 'Slow Men at Work'. A comma after 'slow' gives the right meaning."

"Teacher! GS 101!" I savour the heckling.

"Other havocs have been caused by the lack of observance of small chinchiri things. The other day, it was a sub-editor who failed to tap the space bar as he cast a headline. The headline was to be 'Pen is Mightier Than the Sword.' But he forgot to tap the space bar after Pen". I pause to allow them picture the snafu.

The chuckles come in leaks until the moment of epiphany. Then the flood gates brake. The ladies are off the hooks. I wait. "Praise the lord!"

"Alleluia!"

"This kin' joke too de sweet for ladies. Ladies say 'Yeah!'"

"Yeah!"

"I love all you ladies here – only with permission–ooh. A-beg me no wan' mek person block me for road after this. This morning at church, the sermon was on Work in Progress. My pastor spoke of Saul on the way to one place"

"Damascus!"

"Yes. Give yourself a knock for getting it right."

Chuckles.

"Yes," I continue. "On the way to Damascus, he became Paul. That's work in progress. There was Peter who denied his master but became mighty thereafter. That was work in progress. As the man of God was preaching, I was following him with other examples of works in progress. Every lady is a work in progress – right?"

"No!" "Yes!" "Yes!" "No!"

"I should prove it?"

"Yeees!"

"Okay. You all know there's a time of the month for ladies when the chest gets like this," I gestured with my two hands apart. "Then after, they return to normal. That's work in progress. God help any guy who is looking for a Partonian or Orjiakoic chest. If you meet one like that at the wrong time of the month nko? That's work in progress."

The glee was measured.

"And talking about the changes in a woman — physiological changes, yes!- clap for me for that one."

Few scattered claps.

"..... Physiological changes – I went to school, you know! What causes another form of physiological changes"

"We don hear, now!" "You just learn that one?" the last heckler elicited some laughter at my expense. I paused and continued.

"What causes those"

"Physiological changes!" chorused the audience.

"Yes – oo! You guys need to pay lesson fees – oo! They are caused when a woman begins to cat walk around her husband. You know" I demonstrated a coquette's strides.



Laughter.
“So when she keeps doing that, na trouble de sleep, inyanga wan wake am. The man will be looking at her from the corner of his eyes and be saying: ‘Heeeee!’ Then before you know it, the walk changes.....”. I waddled out of the stage to mimic the pregnant woman’s swag.
Raucous roar.

My next manifestation at the sanctuary was after two weeks clear. Two weeks as in clear two Sundays in between when I didn’t attend church. The earlier absence had hangover to blame while soccer pleaded *mea culpa* for the later miss.

It was to be another miss this Sunday because I over slept but I rebuked Satan and made it half way into the sermon. Half a loaf was always going to be better than no bread. My arrival time was good enough for the gallery again. I repaired upstairs, hopeful. I was ushered to a seat at the near end, close to the staircase entrance. I sat and bent down by habit, my eyes closed in prayers. When I opened my eyes and sat up, I scanned the aisles on the gallery. She wasn’t there. *Fuk-up!* On the screens, the day’s message title was emblazoned:

O GOD, WHEN THOU
WENTEST FORTH Ps.
68⁷⁻⁸.

Daddy, going on with the homily filled the frame. He wore his trademark hands-free microphone and strutted the alter, ipad in hand: “Can somebody read from the Living Bible or the New International Version?”

One of the pastors from the Pastors’ Bay stood and a media hand relayed the cordless mic to him. He read:

O God, when you led your people from Egypt, when you marched through the wilderness, the earth trembled and the heavens poured rain before you, the God of Sinai, before God, the God of Israel.

The pastor yielded up the mic and sat down again.
“Thank you for that,” Daddy complimented. “This is just so that somebody will not be confused by the quaint wording of the King James’ Version. Today, you cannot write ‘wentest forth’ except you want to score F in English. But I do like its richness. When it speaks of when God wentest forth, it is referring to the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night with which the Almighty led the children of Israel out of Egypt. The awesomeness of the Almighty made the earth to quake and the sky to bow down. That is what happens when God intervenes in your situation

The cameras swapped and Camera 2 beamed the pews on the ground floor.

“...When you are going through a wilderness experience, let God lead the way; let Him wentest forth, amen!”

“Amen!”
“Let Him be your pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire

by night, amen!”
“Amen!”

Just then, the sweep of the camera lens brought in the center left column and who was smack on the aisle – Jennie, my First Lady! There in full force!! The camera faced her front but aint no doubt, her fit-to-die-for curves were intact behind. *Her Rear Majesty!* From then on, I could not be bothered with who wentest forth or whatever. If I couldn’t espy my quarry, service wasn’t worth it. I got restless thereafter thinking of how I can re-unite with First Lady. Then I did a double take and picked up my Bible and exited: “I’m coming,” was for my bemused neighbour. Past the usher’s quizzical looks by the doorway again: “I’m coming,” I trotted downstairs and onto the ground floor main entrance.

“No more seat,” the head usher protested. “Go upstairs.”
“I know,” I barely said, breezing past him toward the centre left aisle. Jennie was upfront.

Surely an odd seat could have been skipped somewhere or someone could have exited.

I encountered her downstream colleague at the tail of the aisle: “Guy, abeg, see if you can get me an empty seat somewhere,” I coaxed pointing to the extreme left column.

“Yes, he enthused, moving up the aisle. I trailed him. Midway, he turned to the right row and pointed to the empty seat at the far end.

Here?
“O thanks!” I picked through the five pairs of legs and sat down with one person between me and the other aisle. Stretching to look ahead, I could see Jennie’s torso. Her waist downwards were partly shielded by a plantation row of heads and head gears, I bid my time for when she was bound to amble past my row. Upfront, Daddy went on and on. He was

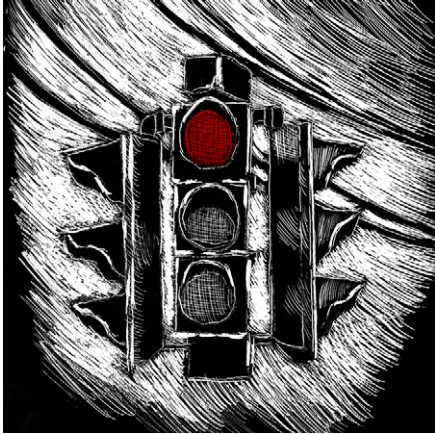
itemizing How to Make God Lead You. On the screens, the bulleted sub heads rattled off:

- **Live Holy**
- **Be Submissive**
- **Invite Him to Lead You.**

The children of Israel - which of these did they?
The Man of God presently climbed down the alter leaving his ipad on the lectern. The cameras and microphones trailed him into the pews. The miracle segment was underway. He went down the aisle two columns away from mine. The first victim of the day was a woman.

“You,” he pointed at her near the front row. She stood up on cue.
“Your husband is not here with you — right?”
Obviously. There’s no man seated beside her.
“Yes,” the tentative lady said.
“I see two of you living separately in two different cities.”

“Yes, he was transferred to Port Harcourt.”
“The Lord says you make haste to join your husband for that is the beginning of your separation if you don’t. Clap hands for Jesus!” With that he was done and the lady made



her way out to sow a seed into the stationed receptacle by the alter.

Picking on his next victim, Daddy told her she had just discovered she was pregnant and was contemplating abortion for they had six children already. “Is your husband here?”

Why wouldn’t you know?
The man stood beside the woman on cue. Turning to him, he continued: “My brother, even you have not been told. You’re just hearing it, right?”
“Yes, Daddy.”

“Don’t be offended with her. She ‘s looking at it from the point of view of Man – seven children with the state of our economy.”

The rest of the church watched enraptured. Turning again to the woman, Daddy continued: “My sister, the baby you carry is exactly 26 days, 8 hours and 17 minutes old.”

The church clapped and hailed.
“God says forget about abortion. Your baby is a boy – go and mark it down – and he is a star. He is going to be a great guy, praise the Lord!”

“Alleluia!” we intoned and Daddy got moving again.
With eyes looking up at the gallery, he stopped and used his right palm to shore up his right ear lobe: “I hear a name like Ambrose Ambrose Akpo... veta. Yes, Ambrose Akpoveta!”

Something first sounded familiar about what he said. It wasn’t until it was repeated over the PAS that it dawned on me I was the subject of what was coming out of the PAS. I stood, tentative and at a loss.

“What’s your name, brother?” He directed at me as a microphone was making its way to me.

“Ambrose Akpoveta.”
Then the mic came.
“Ambrose Akpoveta,” I said again.

“As if you’re not sure, brother. Now, let’s confirm if you’re the one. The Lord says you are wearing blue boxers with white lines on both sides, is that right?”

“You are right, sir.”
“On your back pocket you have your wallet with exactly two 1000 Naira notes, one 500, two 100 and three 20 Naira notes – Two Thousand, Seven Hundred and Sixty Naira, only. Can we confirm that?”

I didn’t know exactly how much I had left in the wallet but I remember the two wazobias and the three 20 Naira change from the okada motorcycle that dropped me at Church. I removed my wallet from the back and opened its sitting room compartment. Out came the notes: two wazobias, the 500, two 100 and the Murtalas. The camera splashed the contents on the screen and the congregation

applauded.
“Should I go on?”
“Yeeeeess!!” The thirsty congregation didn’t wait for my answer.

“This morning,” he continued as I flinched feeling like a patient stripped for medical students, “This morning you woke up exactly 9.23 and you were of two minds – whether to come to church or not – right?”

“Yes, Daddy.”
The church clapped.
“When you came, you sat upstairs at the gallery but later came to where you’re now sitting.”

“That’s right, Daddy.”
“The Lord says concerning your change of position that the he-goat went in search of a wife but came back pregnant himself. Does that make any sense to you?”

“Yes, Daddy.” Bouts of mirth coursed through the congregation.

“Ok. Now that we’re sure it’s you the Lord has in mind, come to the alter and wait for me; the Lord has a message for you.”

I made my way out and to the alter standing with my back to the congregation while he continued. I couldn’t keep up with him through the large screen on the alter. My head was swirling wentest forthgallery to downstairshe-goat wife..... pregnant wentest forth pillar of cloud cloud of fire fire of cloud

There’s no knowing how long I stood there before I heard: “Are you a preacher, I see you with microphone.” Coming through the PAS, I regarded it as a continuation of the other sounds until I saw my image on the screen with Daddy up close.


He repeated the question and a mic had been poked to my face.

I answered, “No, sir.”
“What do you do with the microphone?”
“I work as a stand-up comedian and MC.”

“From now on, the Lord says you start working for Him.” With that he blew in my direction and I was lifted by an unseen force to crash into the steps of the alter. Hands stretched to hold me and guide me to the floor. I was knocked out. When I came to, it was Jennifer standing behind me.

Where are they — the male ushers!
Daddy brought his king-size Goya bottle and anointed me and I fell backwards. My sensitivity didn’t stop the brushing of her arms on my way down. I got up and Daddy said, “Congratulations. You are free. Clap for Master Jesus!”

The congregation clapped as I made my way, head bowed past the ushers avoiding Jennifer to my seat. 🙏



MIKE EKUNNO is an award-winning writer and freelance book editor. He was senior speechwriter to Nigeria’s last Information and Communications Minister. He presented on TV, worked in radio as Special Assistant to the Chief Executive of Radio Nigeria, and has been a columnist for *The Guardian on Sunday*. His short stories, poems and essays have appeared in *The African Roar Anthology 2013*, *Warscapes*, *bioStories*, *BRICKrhetoric*, *Dark Matter Journal*, *Cigale Literary Magazine*, *Middle Gray*, *Miracle e-zine*, *Sentinel Literary Quarterly*, *Ascent Aspirations*, *The Muse*, *Bullet Pen* and *Storymoja*.



From: Thomas, Hector
Sent: Wednesday, December 14, 2005 9:10 AM
To: Harrigan, Julia
Subject: My Brother

Dear Julia:

My older brother died unexpectedly last week. He lived in Albuquerque. I hadn't even realized he was ill. The first I learned he was sick was an e-mail from my mother on Friday saying he was in the hospital with kidney failure, on dialysis. Then she called Saturday evening to tell me he died. Multi-organ failure. My mother and his wife both mentioned a "deep infection," but Sally chose not to have an autopsy, so we'll never know what it really was. Cancer? Like our father? I don't know; the information could have been helpful to me or their kids, who after all share the same genes. Ben was cremated.

Sally was Catholic, and Ben was after his fashion, though he hadn't converted. It was the first time I'd gone to a mass. There was a huge emphasis on life-after-death, described variously as "in Jesus" and "in love." I wasn't sure if this was just to comfort Sally and my mother and the kids, or if they always hold out that promise as a centerpiece of the service. There was a huge writhing Jesus on a cross on the wall in front, looking down on us.

Next day I got on the plane back to Baltimore. Funny thing is, I had to fly to Detroit first and then get a flight back to Chicago, to get one to Baltimore. My flight into Chicago, from Detroit, skidded down the runway and when finally it stopped, all the passengers applauded. The next flight, which actually originated from the Baltimore airport, skidded off the runway and into a neighborhood, killing half a dozen people on a city transit bus. You could see the swirling lights of the emergency trucks off in the distance the rest of the night. The airport was closed and all flights canceled. Spent the night in the airport and finally got on the 6:05 AM flight to Baltimore, which left around 7:30, after they rounded up a crew.

From: Harrigan, Julia
Sent: Wednesday, December 14, 2005 10:15 AM
To: Thomas, Hector
Subject: RE: My Brother


Dear Hector: I'm sorry about your loss. How old was your brother? Your flight sounds dreadful, but at least you weren't on that flight that killed all those people. How awful! The news kept replaying the story over and over and over again the way they always do these pointless tragedies. There may be a poem or short story in your airline adventure, at least. How are you feeling? Julia

From: Thomas, Hector
Sent: Wednesday, December 14, 2005 10:33 AM
To: Harrigan, Julia
Subject: RE: My Brother

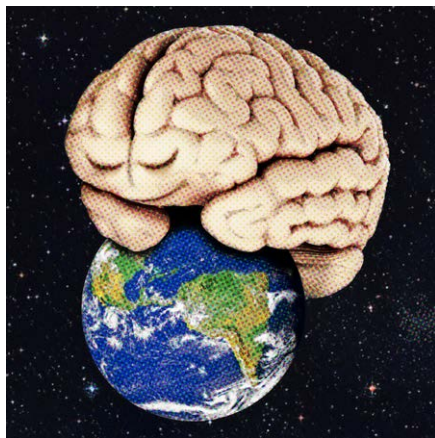
Julia – Ben was 57. There may be a poem in my sister-in-law's decision not to have an autopsy performed, too. Hector

From: Harrigan, Julia
Sent: Wednesday, December 14, 2005 10:39 AM
To: Thomas, Hector
Subject: RE: My Brother

H — Yes, all that not knowing. J. 6



CHARLES RAMMELKAMP lives in Baltimore. His latest book, *Fusen Bakudan* ("Balloon Bombs" in Japanese), was published in 2012 by Time Being Books. It's a collection of monologues involving missionaries in a leper colony in Vietnam during the war. Charles edits an online literary journal called *The Potomac* -<http://thepotomacjournal.com/>. His collection of short fiction, *Castleman in the Academy* (March St. Press) deals with a reluctant professor at a community college. Find him online at [facebook.com/charles.rammelkamp](https://www.facebook.com/charles.rammelkamp)



Weight

Tom Gledhill

Catharsis. I want a release of pressure and build-up and anger and frustration and everything an orgasm should bring but doesn't. I want that. I want it now, and I want it shot straight into the centre of me. I want it there, right there where these ash-clouds of shit patrol the gates to my home. I know for a fact the only intruders will be attributes of my own sphere of cognition; but the cunts still march up and down. Up and down and up and down, and reticently, up and down and up and down, and purposefully, up and down and up and down. There's no such thing as 'The Minds Eye', and if there were, I doubt fundamentally that this would precipitate any real new or revelatory understanding. It seeks patterns everywhere, finds correlations where there are none, makes decisions before you know you've made them yourself and releases regulating chemicals without even a shade of volition entering the chain. My mind is like Spinoza's god: unable to create or control or interact in any purposeful or remotely free way. My mind is like Spinoza's god; in that everything occurs according to certain rules, my mode of intellect isn't even aware of. My mind is like Spinoza's god in that it's just there. It exists. It exists, and it is, and it will be. I can't control anything. I'm not even the author of this passage. ↻



TOM GLEDHILL is a Philosophy undergraduate studying at University College London. His time is split evenly between writing fiction, reading Philip K. Dick, attempting publication and fulfilling his duties as a cinephile. He will forever regard *Golden Feelings* to be the pinnacle of creative human achievement.



Question 922.06

Chris Fradkin

"It makes sense," she said, while peeling off her raincoat and her bra. "That when we fall in love ass-backwards, falling through the looking glass—that when we're falling out of love, we'd see much clearer. Right?" She hung her stockings on the bedpost. "I mean, the laws of physics says that we'd be gaining our direction, when moving in a line away from chaos. My priest told me the same. He said it's healthy for the soul. To free oneself from selfish obligation. And my bookie at the track said, place your bets on number nine. But when he comes in last, switch to another color." Her eyes were focused on a distant vista. "But if all of them are right; I mean if leaving him was good; why does it feel as if my soul's eviscerated?" She slipped her hands around my waist. I felt them cold and shaking. She squeezed me, while her lips repeated, "Why?" ↻



CHRIS FRADKIN is a beet farmer who is tending crops in Central California. His prose and poetry have appeared in *Monkeybicycle*, *Thrice Fiction* and *Thrush Poetry Journal*. His songs have been performed by *Fergie*, *The Plimsouls*, and *The Flamin' Groovies*. His photography has appeared in *Bartleby Snopes*, and his Emmy-award-winning sound editorial has graced *The X-Files*.



Spitting Out

Jill Owen

She was sitting opposite him. Yellow top with some sort of bird on it — he couldn't quite make it out without his glasses on, and he didn't want to get them out. Probably kingfishers. Or hummingbirds.

The train rattled on through Turnpike Lane, Manor House. He should say something to her, he announced silently to the disapproving audience inside his head. But what could he say that would grab her attention, make her feel that there was some connection worth exploring?

In a moment of inspiration, he glanced down and pulled out the bag of cherries from his briefcase. He'd bought them from the market for the office receptionist, who he'd upset the day before. Not intentionally, but he'd started off with some jokey comment about her dress which turned out to sound worse than he'd meant it be, and in trying to correct himself, he'd just dug himself into a deeper pit.

He saw the girl glancing at him. *Fancy a cherry?* He said suddenly, surprising himself, and felt a hot blush creeping up the back of his neck. *They look lovely*, she was saying back to him, laughing, and he was trying to identify her vague accent, perhaps Northern Irish. He had a sudden, vivid flashback to a childhood holiday in Donegal, running wild with his cousins, barefoot on the windswept beach.

She was taking one now from him and opening her mouth he glimpsed her perfect white teeth as she bit into

the flesh. Then suddenly, and rather shockingly, she spat out the stone so that it flew with alarming speed across the carriage and ricocheted from the window just behind him with a loud *ping*.

She was laughing at him now, mouth wide open so that he could see her tongue stained blood red with cherry juice. *Would you like to go for a drink with me?* Had he really said that? Or was it her that had said it to him? As the train juddered to a halt at the next station he sprang from his seat and leapt out of the door, scattering cherries that rolled and bounced after him. He saw her watching him expressionlessly through the glass as the train pulled away. And the hummingbirds on her yellow top seemed to be flying. 🐦



JILL OWEN has recently relocated from London to Warwick, where she lives with her family in the shadow of the castle, and works as an accountant. She has always dreamt of writing, but has only lately started to put pen to paper. She is currently working on her third piece of short fiction.



Between the Pines

Shayna Murphy

We drink up the last of our Saturday morning in the evening time, cigarettes split and spent in an ashtray piling up all around our feet, and I was only there to say I'd been there, but fuck, wouldn't it be nice if I could remember where I put my Charlie Card one of these times?

Outside the air is moist and sticking to our faces and forearms like it's cotton candy and we're a couple of sticks wrapped up inside. It was so menacing out here right from the start — the clouds all pregnant with poor intentions — and it rained on my whole walk over here without shedding a single drop.

So, it was my fault we missed the bus, and now we're just hanging around, stuck somewhere between going home too early and having a real good time. I flick my cigarette again, baring the nub to the bone. You laugh and say you won't be giving me another one, telling me it's my own goddamn fault until it's the next time. And deep down, I'm feeling angry, because no matter how hard I try, your get-togethers always seem to draw a much better crowd than mine do.

"Not that place, it's a fucking dive," you snarled when I reached for the door of the first place I saw. "We're going down this way — no, it's on that side."

I clutch my wristlet up to my chest as you lead me over a few side streets, but it drops loose as we head deeper into the darkness, and all just to wind up at a bar that doesn't look much better than the other one did from the outside.

We slip in past the bouncer, me shoving my passport down my pants pocket and you hawk-eyed, in search of a couple seats. High-definition screens that have been mounted a few feet apart from one another on the walls are all narrowed in on the same game. I sigh, because I can't do anything with this scene, but since it's nearly through, a line has formed near the counter so the tabs can be picked apart and properly put to rest.

We circle once around the place and elbow our way

through the crowd to get some beers and an order of French fries, then do another roundabout until we notice an empty booth in the back.

"We found a good parking space," I observe, stretching my legs out across the seat.

"This place will get better once the game ends," you reply.

When the hometown team closes out the showdown with a game-winning score, you ask me whether I want to do a shot with you to celebrate. I shake my head, reminding you that I'm not even a sports fan, but you insist you can't be doing one alone.

"Why not just wait for the others to come?" I ask and shrug. "Besides, I've never liked doing shots and I think you know as much."

You poke me in the arm where the flesh is softer than I'd like it to be and tell me I've got to live a little sometimes, right? But, sensing my reluctance is real and not just an excuse to make you pay for it, you offer to share a chaser. I chuckle and tell you to get a bib too, but you don't laugh, only signal the waitress to take our new order.

We're waiting on this girl Janie and her crew, who have been out at Great Scott for the last hour or two. A few months out of the state college system and due to start up nights at Suffolk in the fall — she's a smart girl, you tell me while picking at some fries, and well-off too, from old Brahmin stock or something. But of course, it's not like any of that really matters to you.

I want to ask what she's doing then, milling around a third-tier institution with a pedigree like that, in a city that dies out after undergrad. But instead, I press my lips together and wait for the shots to come. I can't drink all of mine in one gulp, but pull it down in two sips and clench my eyelids shut as the hotness creeps over my chest and fills it up, making my heart feel swollen and whole. I gasp.

"You're pathetic," you tell me. "Really, really pathetic."

"Are you getting the next one?" I reply, snatching up the

chaser. You clear your throat.

“I should lay off the smoking,” you say. “I was actually gasping the other night. It was miserable. My heart was pounding and I was afraid I was about to have a heart attack or something. And so I stopped and started eating her pussy out instead, but I got the distinct impression she wasn’t happy about it.”

“I mean, did she cum?”

“Of course, and everything was fine after, but I just felt like she could tell and I couldn’t enjoy myself after that. I don’t know. I’m going to stop after tonight. It already feels like my cock is about to explode as it is — like, every time I see her I just want to cum all over her tits and spend the whole time eating her out.”

“Sounds tasty,” I say.

“Oh, she tastes fucking amazing.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t even get that. It’s like, saying it has a taste or anything is just this bullshit foreplay thing that people lay down to make giving head seem less awkward and terrible.”

“You’ve just been eating out at the wrong places, my man,” you reply.

“I guess,” I say with a shrug.

And so I consider the chaser now — most of the head is gone, but some foam has dried up along the top and it clings to the inside of the pint glass. They never poured beer the right way at the Whip, so it either came out too frothy or the keg was close to kicked, and they’d only fill you up by half in that case — no credit or nothing. The lines were never clean either, so the brew would be cloudy, and you’d feel like an asshole for not just playing it safe with a Bud or Michelob Ultra like the rest of them.

Back when I was on days, I’d walk over there after work, usually after grabbing a ham and cheese grinder with no lettuce or tomato on it from the Hess station next door. I’d bump into Ladd, out on the picnic bench smoking a butt and texting his wife to come get him after his shift was up. Then I’d eat and leap over a patch of Queen Anne’s lace that had sprouted up, forming a barrier in the asphalt between the sidewalk and the station, and keep passing — first the old showroom, where the windows were broken in some places, and then the big road where the cars weaved between the lines, pine trees bordering them along the other side.

“You know, there’s no place else for me,” I say quietly.

“This isn’t even a real city,” you say with a scoff, your nose to your phone and your hand cupped around a pint glass. But then I insist it’s the real deal and you reply that I’m really just a little country girl sometimes.

And then I see him flitting in and out of the crowd, his hair tousled and the strands of his chest hair peeking out between the spaces in his collared shirt as if struggling for some air. I scratch an itch on my leg and wonder whether or not to pull myself up to my feet. I can tell by what this dude is drinking and the way he’s perched up against the bar that he isn’t from around here. He’s the type who’s probably just in for the weekend with friends to see and family to make peace with.

“Are you here for me?” I laugh, faltering, once I find my way to an empty barstool in his orbit. “No, seriously, uh, let me just start over here - I know I sound like a real asshole here, but I’ve been drinking whiskey.”

So, he says his name is Dave and I tell him mine is Frances. We talk long enough for me to figure out that he’s slumming it tonight, but he goes for me because I look like the kind of girl who settles for a nice run of bullshit and won’t hesitate. When we head outside we cut it quick to close quarters and hand-rolled cigarettes that I need to light more than once before he swoops in gallantly and we share our first kiss over the inconstant flames and ash that hits back at our faces when we flick our cigarettes into the wind.

“I like this,” I say, my fingers fondling the patches on his frayed denim jacket. I ask if I can wear it, and he takes it off and drapes it over my shoulders.

You have cute cheeks, he leans in to tell me - and in that city tongue I’m a little too proud to admit I can’t get enough of. I tilt my head to the side and say yeah, I’m cheeky from time to time, but I am so afraid, and haven’t you ever been a little scared of yourself sometimes? Then he pushes a few curls back behind my ear and presses his lips against mine. After a moment, I pull away and brush aside some dandruff on his shoulder, then sigh. It’s too warm out here for us to be anywhere else but inside.

Back in the bar, we plop down in the booth and I smile and introduce you to Dave as my buddy Francis. He slides in beside me, stroking my thighs underneath the table while I eat up the last of your French fries. I ask if he wants any, but he only shakes his head. I say I want to dance. He won’t budge because he can’t move to anything he doesn’t know the words to, but you tell me you will.

“Well, he’s kind of fat,” you offer out on the dance floor as you wiggle your shoulders to the beat and I have to bite down on my bottom lip to keep from laughing. “But he wants you at least and he’s better than the last one.”

“It’s not happening tonight, anyway,” I reply.

“Did he get your number?”

“I don’t give my number out to guys,” I say and drop Dave’s jacket on a chair nearby. “They either find me or they don’t.”

You chuckle and reach out to scruff my hair and my bravado. “Well, better luck next time, champ.”

Twisting apart, you and I throw our arms and legs out in moves that don’t sync up with the rhythm that plays overhead. You belt out some lyrics I don’t exactly remember as I toss my head from side to side and miss, by a few locks of hair and some divine intervention, the folks beside us, who are swiveling their hips in perfect time.

“So how’d you do?” I ask in the middle of another twist. “Did she get back to you?”

“Nah, but she’s getting too frustrating anyway.”

I call you a liar, and it’s something that is known, but you only smile so the grooves in your face stand out clear. You take hold of my hand to slow it down as the riff tapers off and bounces in echoes down the hall. You say you don’t bite your nails anymore, but they’ve been shorter than mine for as long as I can even remember and the cuticles poke out from your broken red skin like little daggers.

Occasionally, I want to reach out and bridge the space between us, but you’re rough to the touch and your face is getting old way faster than mine is, my friend. You come off so big all the time, rarely letting things show when they should, but if someone really cut you down to size sometime, I wonder if I could count your heartbreaks by

the thickness of their lines, or if you would even let me. But instead, all you do is spin me.

Under your lead, I’m turn, turn, turning until my insides start to ache and I’m reminded that I’m not the kid I used to be. I kick you in the shins and tell you to knock it off already, then call dibs on the tab because, in the end, I’m cash poor and I could use the couple of bucks you’ll shove in my hand later for the long cab ride home.

We head to the table, where Dave looks me over with big green eyes burdened by too many expectations. Wiping the backwash from my chin I tell him I’ve got a ride to catch but that I hope to see him around sometime.

Back outside, we find ourselves on the stoop of a dark house not far from the bar, sharing a cigarette together and talking smack about the kids plodding by, dressed all alike in shredded jeans with the cuffs rolled up over their high-tops. It’s an eternal style that will never go out of date.

“Until they age out of it,” I say under my breath. Then I notice that the concrete steps we’re squatting on are damp underneath and moisten my pants, which reminds me of something. I tell you to keep the watch.

“This is like seeing the end of the world!” I shout a few minutes later and lift myself up from behind this old Dodge Neon that’s parked in the adjacent driveway. Balancing on the balls of my feet and careful not to lose my poise, I leap over the little stream that runs down from the driver side door and into the vacant street. Back on the stoop, I bunch my knees together and remember to zip up my fly.

“I’m never drinking again,” I announce.

“Neither am I,” you reply and take the last drag.

“Maybe we should start a temperance league?”

“I think that’s the best idea you’ve ever had.” The speckled end of the cigarette goes careening out of your fingers and hits the ground. The end is still lit, and I have to fight the urge to jump up and stomp it out with my heels, but that would only give me away.

“Okay, you ready?” you ask.

“Sure, I guess.”

I look down at my feet, which are caked on both sides by the dirt of city sidewalks. I’ve been scraping my sandals against the pavement for too long and it shows. One of these times they’ll just come undone, and I will have no choice but to drag my feet along the ground and clutch the severed tongue between my toes and hope no one around me has the presence of mind to notice.

I rub my eyes. “I’m probably going fall asleep in these contacts,” I admit. “To be honest, I very rarely take them out.”

You smile and slip your fingers between the spaces in mine, your palms feeling coarse and clammy against my

skin, then you lead me down toward the corner where the traffic has swelled up, even though it’s not closing time. With your free hand you work to hail the first cab for me.

“Now you better take those out,” you warn loudly after a few minutes of waiting around finally scores a free one. The cab pulls up to meet the sidewalk. “Listen to me,” you say as I sway and so you take me by the shoulders to keep me from veering closer to the ground. “You’re really gonna fuck up your eyesight if you don’t.”

“That’s what they tell me,” I reply and push your hands away.

Bending over toward the passenger side window, I peer in at the cabbie, looking restless in his stasis. I ask if he’ll go out in my direction and he nods.

“Looks like this one is all me,” I say, turning back to you.

You cluck your tongue against the roof of your mouth, then lean forward to peck me on the forehead. “Go and get some rest, kid. I’ll talk to you later.”

Visions of sheets and a warm, dry bed are like a caul gulping me up as I slip into the back seat and wait to be delivered. I wedge my hand into my pants pocket and don’t bother to wave goodbye to you, instead just feeling around for a penny that I’ve been rolling between my fingertips for the last few days.

I yank it out and admire the look of it - the copper is almost black in some places and the coin only shines when it’s tilted, but it was made the same year my sister was born and that makes me really like it. Examining it reminds me of that time when I was five and I took a handful of Meme’s spare change that she kept in a water jug and played grocery store with it because I wanted my transactions to feel authentic. When I was done, I stuck a penny in my mouth to see what it would taste like. And later, after I swallowed it, I waited to see what it would be like on the other side, but didn’t notice anything worth remembering.

I rub the penny against the seat and trace along the cushion’s edge with the rim of the coin. There’s a gouge in the leather upholstery where the padding pours out, looking jaundiced. I plant the coin beneath the flap and press down on it with one hand, wondering if some good can work its way up from between these slits or if I’m just kidding myself like all of the other times. 🕒



SHAYNA MURPHY is a Boston-based writer and editor. She attended the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. This is her first fiction publication.



Stasis

Elizabeth Kroll

Old. It's the first thing you think when you hack through the door of the abandoned fortress. It's a shame too; it was a beautiful door, but the intricate carvings go unnoticed as you step over the splintered wreckage into the derelict hall.

Dust coats the floor. Beneath your feet are remnants of older tracks, distinguishable only by differences in layers of dust. In your wake, you leave glimpses into the past, as the elaborate, swirling designs of the carpet become exposed in your footprints. In fact, dust coats every surface. The rich, brown, walnut panels of the walls have been rendered an ashy grey, transforming your world into a black and white film. One accidental brush of the wall casts you into the same setting. All that is visible of the portraits hanging from the walls are the eyes that seem to follow you as you track your way through the dust.

The air, though cold, is thick and musty, and it's obvious by the smell that animals have been the only inhabitants for quite some time. Rotting carcasses that lay forgotten in corners, skeletons showing through half eaten flesh, give off an all too familiar stench of death. You purse your lips and concentrate on taking slow even breaths, trying to keep yourself from gagging.

The wind that blows through the abandoned corridors gives you the impression of whispered conversations behind each of the closed doors. You strain to listen, but the contributors are being much too quiet. The shriek of a raven pierces the air, causing you to leap back and swear in surprise, sending the dust around you into a flurry of action, creating a miniature dust storm around your feet. When the dust finally settles your clothes are coated in a fine layer. You don't bother to wipe it away. It would only transfer the dust from your clothes to your hands anyways.

At the end of the hall, there is a large, spiral staircase and although the tracks you had been following before don't go up, there are tracks coming down. These tracks appear to be much smaller; however, it is possible the buildup of dust has merely shrunk their appearance.

One step at a time, you climb upwards. At one point, you feel as if the walls have started closing in on you, and

it takes you a second to realize it's because they have. The stairs are leading you into a tall tower. You begin to believe you are playing out your own fairy tale, and though you laugh at the thought, the idea does not fade.

At the top of the stairs, there is a doorway, not quite as ornate as the front door lying splintered in the foyer, but elegant enough. Unlike the front door, this one easily opens inward, with nothing but a quick breeze as if the room is exhaling after a deep breath.

Through the door you can see a bedroom, driving home the fact that you've stepped into a fairy tale, because who else lives in a tower, but a princess. You half expect to see something stirring beneath the sheets, but there is nothing but the breeze from a half-opened window rustling the curtains. Still, you wait a few moments before stepping inside.

An oak writing desk stands against the wall, the chair pulled away as if someone left it in a hurry. An old quill still sits in an inkwell that – judging by stains on the glass – has been empty for quite some time. A few sheets of paper stick their brittle, yellowed corners out of the drawer, practically begging to be written on.

Near the bed, you brush an old lace curtain, adding another layer of dust to the floor. Though you are sure the sheets used to be a pristine white, time and elements have turned them tawny and crisp. One of the brittle papers from the desk has been folded up and tucked neatly beneath the curtains, and you are careful as you reach towards it and pick it up.

The note inside is scrawled hastily across the yellowed page.

You didn't expect me to wait forever, did you? 🕒



ELIZABETH KROLL is a high school senior in Sacramento, CA, and her work has been published in *Sacramento News and Review*, and *Blue Moon Literary and Art Review*. She is currently an editorial intern at *Under The Gum Tree*, a literary magazine that specializes in creative non-fiction, but her ultimate goal is to become a novelist and an editor.

THRICE FICTION MAGAZINE EDITORIAL STAFF

RW SPRYSZAK

Editor, THRICE Fiction...

participated in the alternative zine scene in the 80's & 90's and wound up editing *The Fiction Review*. Some of his work from that era (*Slipstream*, *Lost and Found Times*, *Asylum*, *Version90* and others) is included in John M Bennett's Avant Writing Collection at the Ohio State University Libraries. Currently editor at *Thrice Fiction Magazine*. He can be found online at rwspryszak.com



LINDA GOLDING

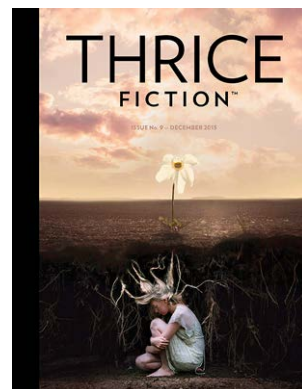
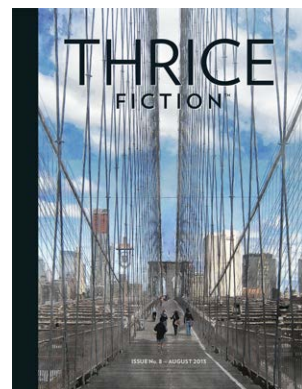
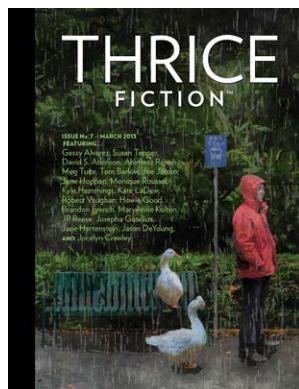
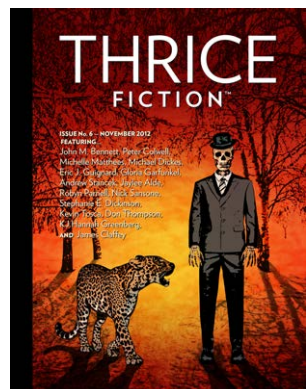
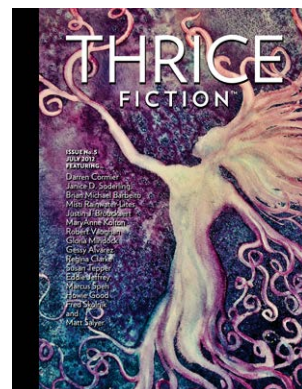
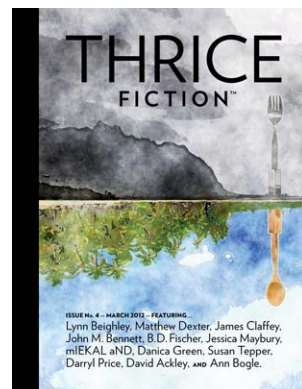
Editorial Assistant/Intern, THRICE Fiction...

is a second year student of Creative Writing at Edge Hill University (UK) who hails from Merseyside, Liverpool. A budding novelist and poet, Linda also has a keen interest in the day-to-day function of literary magazines, and will assist in the selection process of works appearing in *Thrice Fiction*.



There's more where this came from

Our first nine issues are available for **FREE** download at ThriceFiction.com



ARTISTS & STORYTELLERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE



CHRIS WALTON

Front Cover...

was born in the backwoods of Southern New Jersey and has been drawing monsters, robots and sexy dames for as long as he can remember. Sometimes for money. He now resides in Seattle with his wife who lovingly puts up with him, a dog who adores him and two cats who are still hedging their bets.



KATELIN KINNEY

Pages: 2-3, 8-9, 30, Back Cover...

graduated from Herron School of Art and Design in Indianapolis, IN with two BFA's in fine art painting and fine art photography. She uses these two methods together to create digital paintings where photos begin to morph into surreal worlds of fantasy and conceptual dramatizations. Visit her online at katelinkinney.com



CHAD ROSEBURG

Pages: Inside Front Cover, 17-20, 26-27...

is of possible Jewish descent. Superstition, Klezmer music and Chinese candy wrapper designs inform many of his artistic works. He is interested in the places at which art, music, technology and language intersect.



KYRA WILSON

Pages 4, 14-16...

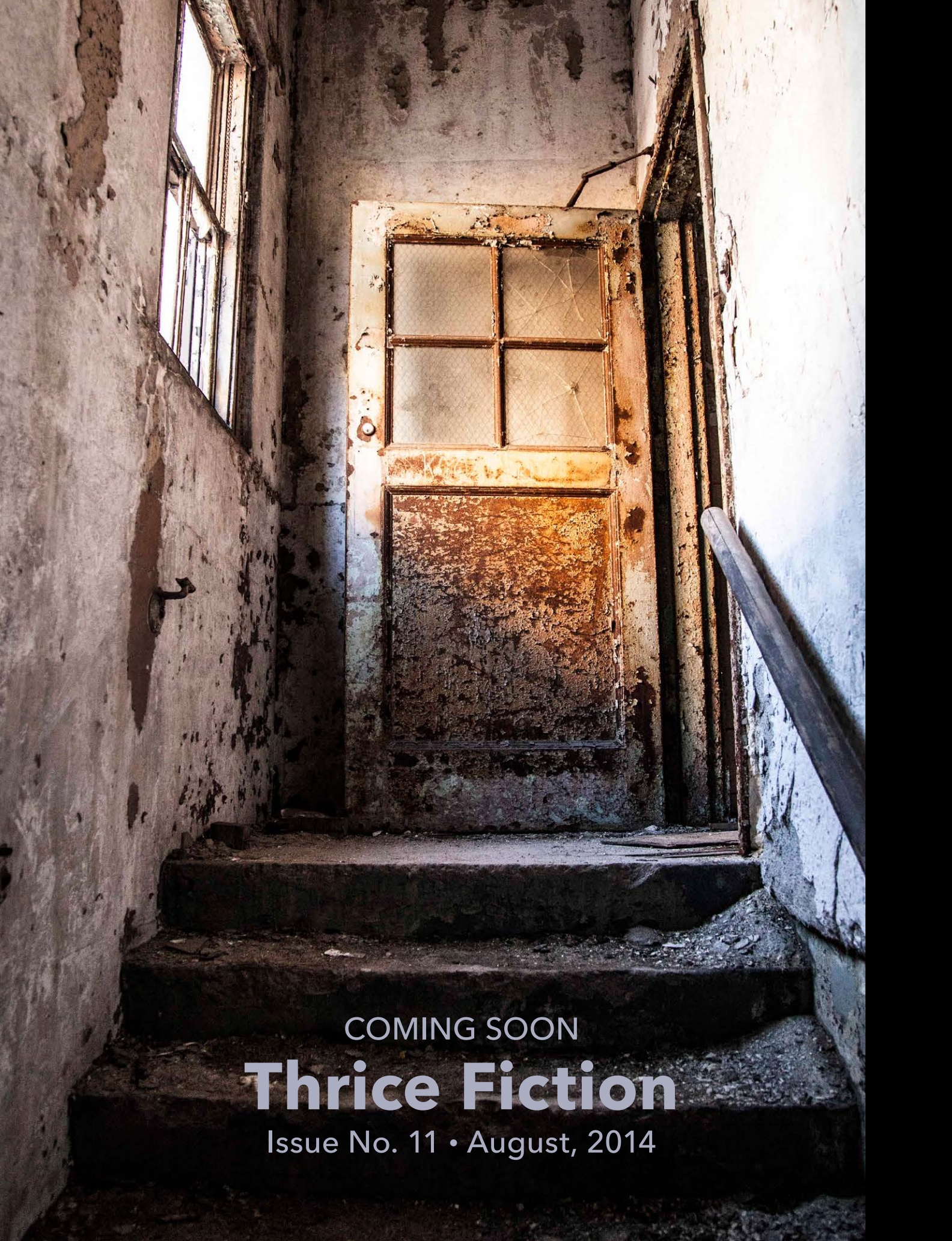
is an artist residing in Vermont with her family, and has been painting for over 20 years. Kyra tried going the expected career route in business, but ended up working in an office with flickering fluorescent lights, zero windows, way too many spreadsheets, and people with suspenders. She escaped, and embraced color and movement as her passion. Creating in Oils, Acrylic, and Watercolor, she works in a predominantly fantasy style, but visits the contemporary and even abstract realms on occasion! Kyra's work can be found at KWilsonStudio.com



DAVID SIMMER II

Lead Artist & Art Director, THRICE Fiction...

is a graphic designer and world traveler residing in the Pacific Northwest of these United States. Any artistic talent he may have is undoubtedly due to his father making him draw his own pictures to color rather than buying him coloring books during his formative years. He is co-founder and art director of Thrice Fiction Magazine and blogs daily at Blogography.com



COMING SOON

Thrice Fiction

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