

# THRICE

FICTION™

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*Signal Tracer* by Chad Yenney

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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 15 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

Welcome to Happy Holidays under the gun. Note my War On Christmas there.

In 1977 the great Spanish surrealist Luis Buñuel released a movie titled *That Obscure Object of Desire*. The story was centered around an aging French aristocrat who has fallen in love or lust with a 19 year old servant girl. But, being it is – after all – Buñuel, the movie takes a few twists and turns and sidetracks along the way and pays homage to the director’s surrealist leanings. Not a terribly remarkable film except, that is, for the sidetracks.

From time to time during the process of this aristocrat’s somewhat tawdry pursuit of his “obscure object,” bombs blow up. They have no connection to the story or the aristocrat, or anything. They just go off. In restaurants, at a train (if I remember correctly) and at other times reported in the news and so on. They proceed with the carnage one may expect from bombs going off in public places, but without much notice or comment. As if the explosion is much like a bee landing in your Cosmo on the veranda. The bomb explodes, people are killed, the aristocrat still lusts after the girl, people brush the rubble off their heads and sip their drink.

Buñuel’s genius, in retrospect, is the prescient nature not only of random acts of terrorism as a kind of new normal, so to speak, but also of the fact that the existence of all this attempted coercion by violence really changes nothing, or anybody, in the long run. Aristocrats, or anyone else for that matter, will still chase that obscure object of desire – periodic senseless social murder notwithstanding.

So though I sing the praises of fiction in film or anywhere, I have to admit that, while imitation may be the most sincere form of flattery, sometimes I guess I’d rather not go there.

Are there any works of prescience in this issue of *Thrice*? Time will tell. We certainly have enough talent in these pages to pull it off.

Happy Holidays.

See what I did there?



# Grounded

## Ray Nessly

**S**o we're stuck on the runway, all two hundred or so of us strapped in our seats, waiting for the mechanics in furry caps outside to stop pretending anybody on God's white earth could ever de-ice wings as frosty as this plane's are. All of us, every guy, gal and screaming baby, and me, especially *me*—myself, yours truly, I, whichever way you want to put it—want nothing more than to get out of here. Me, my knees are in my face cos there's no place else for them to go, seeing how all six-four of me's crammed into this window seat not fit for a child. If life were fair—I hear it isn't—I would've gotten the aisle seat, the one I thought I was reserving, silly boy me, when I clicked the box on the seating chart six and a friggin half months ago. The brunette next to me? One with the boobs squished into the Christmas sweater two sizes too small? With the snowflake motif leggings, the Aussie-style snow boots? She got my seat. Legs like those, yeah, she needs room. Not like I do though.

Maybe in a Scarlett Johansson-like, sexy, husky voice, she'll offer to swap seats. Or—long as we're fantasizing here—maybe she'll hop in my lap, clamp her arms and legs around me, and after a while unscrew her tongue from my ear for a sec, so I can hear her whisper, sexy-like, of course—is there a better way to communicate with a guy's sopping wet ear?—an invitation to sneak into the restroom and join the 'mile-high club' with her.

Yeah, right.

She hasn't said one word to me. Hasn't looked once at handsome-handsome me. Me in the Lucchese ostrich skin boots, me with the tied-back ponytail with just the right touch of Grecian 44 on the ol' silver greys, me with more jewelry than Ringo, me in the snug black leather pants, *me*. But no, she hasn't so much as stolen one admiring look, not even to pretend she's looking out my window. Not that there's much to see out there, just snow. It's like a TV tuned between channels in moldy-olden days. In the distance, one of the mechanics: Rosie the Riveter in coveralls, brawny

as can be, at the wheel of what looks like a giant golf cart, taillights fading as she chauffeurs the rest of the crew to the pit, the bunker, the burrow—whatever it is they call the place the crew scurries off to when they've given up. The pilot should too. Call it quits I mean. Take us back to the gate, refund our tickets and put us up in a nice hotel. Room with a view, heart-shaped bed. Jacuzzi tub. Mini-bar. Room service. All at the airline's expense. But stick the brunette in my room cos hey, the airline isn't made of money, now is it?

Besides, I love to share.

Look. I'm even letting her hog the armrest.

"Flyin's for the birds, eh?" (Never-fail icebreaker, that.)

"No hablo," she mutters. Worst fake Spanish accent ever. The h is supposed to be silent. Her h comes out raspy, just shy of phlegmatic if you ask me. What, she's an Arab princess with the flu maybe? Too good to talk to me anyway. Doesn't know what she's missing, that's for sure.

Whatever, she doesn't make sense. Her fake Spanish grammar isn't all that it could be.

"You literally don't speak, you say? Interesting, interesting. Because you—"

"Ex-coos-a-me," she says, interrupting me, and shoves her face into a book.

"Ah, *Fifty Shades Of Grey*. Of course."

"Ex-coos-a. Please."

"*Soon To Be A Major Motion Picture*, I see. Says right there, on the cover. In plain English I can't help noticing. But hey, if you—"

"Ex-COOS-a!"

She just interrupted me again. So rude.

"Oh c'mon. Let's have us a nice chat. Make the best of it, yeah?"

"No speak-a."

Ah Jesus . . . "Face it, young lady. We're gonna be here for a while yet. They gotta take us back to the gate but don't have the balls—parm' me, courage—to tell us. Courage. Moxie. Gumption. Or, in Spanish—the loving tongue, the

Bard calls it—of which you clearly are a master, *cojones*, if you like. And I bet you would. If you gave them a chance.”

“Um . . .?”

“Need to borrow a Q-Tip? I SAID they better give up and take us back to the gate. Snow’s comin down like the end of days. Wing looks like a Popsicle. They have Popsicles in Arabian princess land?”

“Arabian? What? . . . oh crap.”

“Huh. You speak-a da English after all. Do. They. Have. Popsicles . . . oh never mind.”

She reaches for the call button.

“No need for that. I’ll be good. Promise.”

She presses the button. Twice.

“But while you’re at it? See about scoring me a Pepsi. Huge thanks in advance, Brownie. Okay if I call you that?”

So the stewardess lumbers up the aisle, and by the time she gets to our row, she looks a mite pissed off because somebody roused her from her cozy seat in the back. Gritting her teeth: “Yes? Help you?”

I decide, for the good of all concerned—my fellow passengers, the crew, and oh yeah, myself, AKA *me*—to get to the stewardess before Brownie can. “Why yes, ma’am. Thank you for asking. My companion and I—”

“Companion?!” Brownie’s chest is heaving as she says this, placing untoward stress on her clingy sweater.

“—Could go for a Pepsi. With ice. Loads of ice, if it isn’t too much trouble? We’ll share a can, won’t we, dear?”

The stewardess smells trouble, you can tell. She puts her hands on her hips in that no-nonsense, *don’t screw with me, mister*, kind of way. Like that’s necessary. I mean, the uniform alone commands my undying fear and respect. That and her butch haircut.

Looking at Brownie, the stewardess says, “Ma’am? Is everything okay?”

“No. It isn’t.”

“Wife’s right, about that,” I say. “We’re still waiting on that Pepsi, one thing. Also? Here we are, two seats in the exit row, obviously. And I hate to point fingers, but you, dear appointed representative of this fine airline, never gave me and the wife the lowdown on, how you say . . . our civic *responsibilities*, vis-à-vis aiding our fellow passengers in the event of a mishap.”

Butch the stewardess sighs, then,

“Actually, sir, we covered that in the preflight briefing. Could it be you weren’t listening?”

“Impossible. I miss nothing.”

“And it’s on the aircraft safety card. I indicated it to you earlier, remember?”

“Who can find it what with all the shit you guys jam into the pocket? Fess up, sweetie, you screwed up. Or the airline screwed up, same diff. Oh and I paid extra to be in the exit row. ‘More leg room,’ it said. You call this legroom? I shall sue for false advertising. Never got my aisle seat either. But bring that Pepsi and all’s forgiven. Maybe.”

“Let me try this again,” she says, turning to Brownie. “Is this man . . .” She mouths the rest: *bothering you?*

Brownie looks at me. That neutral expression on her face, that pause before answering. Obviously, she digs me.

“Yes, he is.”

“I’m bothering her in a good way, she means. Her English is pretty good, mind you, but it could use a little

polishing. She’s from Spain. Aren’t you, honey?”

The stewardess glares at me. “Now listen to me, sir. Are you listening? You need—”

“That’s right, can of Pepsi, ice. And all the tiny bottles of rum you can spare. Unless the clowns in the cockpit hogged it. That why this plane isn’t budging?”

“Sir, you need to behave right now, or—”

“Oh and have a word with the brat in the seat behind me, would you? Bastard’s kicking my seat. Jacking off, prob’ly. Boys will be boys, eh?”

“That’s quite enough. You stay right there, sir. Don’t move.”

Butch heads toward the front of the plane to have a powwow with the captain. I yell at the back of her Nazi Girl Scout uniform, “Don’t move, you say? Good idea. Oh hey, look, I’m shoehorned into a kiddie-car seat. Complying with your instructions will be no trouble at all, turns out.”

I turn to Brownie and say, “Wow. Some people, huh?”

Okay. In retrospect? I admit I went a tad over the top. Maybe I wanted to get thrown off the plane. Who wouldn’t? Who wouldn’t want to end, this, this . . . there’s no other word for it—this *ordeal*? Stuck, in a micro-mini seat with not one but two kids now kicking my seatback like they’re in tryouts for pee-wee football. Trapped, in a giant tin can that’s going nowhere fast, the captain asleep at the wheel, the crew hostile and my seatmate more hostile yet. A pair of Chihuahuas in a carrier under a seat vie to break the record for non-stop yip-yapping. Going for the gold, they are. And umpteen babies and kids are screaming as though the plane’s on fire, and who can blame them? It’s gotten hot as can be in here. Everybody’s sweating, stowing their winter jackets in the overhead bins. I shut the vents within reach but still they blast hot air like hair dryers. The lights flicker, flicker, flicker. The plane’s electronics, gone haywire? Computer on the fritz? Human error? No comment from the pilots. Crew losing their grip on a dicey situation, everybody on edge, everybody sweating, especially me, me, me. Me (did I mention?), scrunched into a seat no wider across than a baby’s butt, my feet clammy in four hundred dollar boots. My long legs and ample equipment, damp, crammed into snug leather trousers. My boys want out of there. Hindsight being 20/20 and all that jazz, maybe I should’ve gone with gym pants and slippers. Instead of lookin good as Jim Morrison, had *he* made it to fifty-four, I would’ve looked like a dork. Least I’d be comfy.

Bright side, I seem to be off the hook temporarily for my mischief, attention diverted elsewhere. The lights, the heat. This plane to nowhere, stuck in a winter wonderland.

Still no word from the cockpit. The intercom’s out. And Brownie? She’s incommunicado too. Has her sleep mask on, pretending to snooze. Any excuse not to talk to lil’ ol’ charmer me.

It takes some doing but I manage to doff my boots, cross my legs, and give my dogs a chance to wiggle. Butch the stewardess, patrolling the aisles, doesn’t approve. Way I see it? She’s lucky I haven’t taken my socks off.

The lights flicker again. Going, going . . . gone.

Dark.

Folks murmuring. Kids whimpering.

Me? I take advantage of the situation. I’m hot—did I

mention? My equipment, my boys, my swimmers, they're hot too. Time to let my people go. Oh I'm discrete about it: I loosen my belt, slow like, and cough—twice, lest Brownie detect the *click-clack* of my buckle. Another double cough to cover up that *unzip, unzip* sound and we're home free.

Groping the floor, I manage to locate, in total darkness, the blanket the size of a girl's hankie that the airline issued me. Trouble is, the moment I'm *about* to put my hankie-blankie over my lap is the exact moment the lights come back on. And there's Brownie with her sleep mask off, screaming at the sight of my undies. And the stewardess, who'd bumped into her a sec ago and woke her up, points at me and yells. Everybody's yelling, pointing. Every crewmember, passenger, Chihuahua, staring at my lucky boxer shorts. Ones with the Valentine hearts.

What can I say? I try,  
"You missed out, folks. I should've worn my tighty-whities."

Forget all those movies you've seen. Folks don't get sucked out of exit hatches. Not when a plane's six miles high. Given the pressure up there, nobody on earth, past present or in whatever imaginable future, is strong enough to open it. And if a plane loses pressure and does a swan dive, right about when flying out the hatch is sounding like an attractive option, the locks kick in.

Folks sure as hell aren't sucked out of planes, either, when a plane's immobile, safe n' sound on the ground, nestled on the tarmac at the airport of your peacefully snow-flocked hometown.

You would think.

But I'm here to tell you, it is possible to feel the sensation of being sucked out of an airplane. As close as you'll ever get anyway, and live to tell about it.

Oh sure, *human error* they'll call it. Or maybe they'll blame it on *malfunction*, something gone awry with one of those billions of moving parts, something on the fritz, deep, deep, inside those state of the art gee-whiz electronics.

But even though it happened so fast, and came as such a shock to little ol' me—me, in my boxer shorts, with my leather pants down around my ankles, *me*—I can say with absolute confidence that it was Brownie who opened the hatch. And no doubt about it, it was the stewardess who kicked the switch or pushed the button or whatever the hell it is that inflates the emergency slide. And I'd bet my life it was the guy with the yappy Chihuahuas, or maybe it was Brownie or Butch or even the captain of the miserable plane himself, who grabbed my legs and pushed me, head-first—pants last—out that window and down the slide, into the dark-dark snowy night.

Oh it was cold out, I'm telling you, and the slide colder yet. Me, on my back, and every inch of the slide grating my calves and my backside into what felt like slivers of flesh and ice. Yes, my backside, my bare backside. For not only had someone pushed me, not only had someone tugged at my pant legs on my way out, someone must have given my boxers a good tug as well. Or maybe they just plain came off, from friction, somewhere on the way down. Whatever, here come my boxers now, tumbling down the ramp, right behind my hundred-fifty dollar pair of black leather pants.

I'm in shock, on my back at the bottom of the slide. But still I can make out the lights of an approaching vehicle, hear the soft rumble of its engine getting louder, louder, and its lights brighter and brighter, glaring such that I have to shut my eyes. The engine idling, now off. The unmistakable sound—*clank!*—of an emergency brake, on. Boots crunching the snow.

I open my eyes.

I see someone. Someone upside-down, holding a flashlight. I manage to get off my back and sit on the edge of the slide, shivering. The guy with a flashlight is no longer upside-down. And it's no guy. It's Rosie the Riveter, the mechanic from a few hours back, holding a flashlight the size of a sledgehammer. She raises her other arm high against the night sky, her big fist clenching something I can't make out. She drops it.

Boxer shorts. Falling, landing in my lap—my naked lap. "Yours?" she says.

She shifts her gaze away from me and gives a big wave at ... somebody behind me? Who? Why?

I turn around.

Faces. At the windows of the plane. Brownie. Butch. The captain. Every last guy, gal, and seat-kicker kid. Waving their hands.

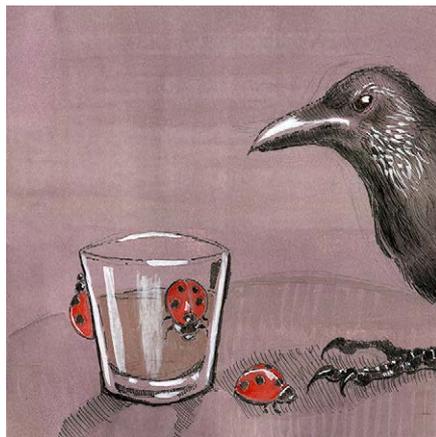
Rosie turns off her flashlight and strolls to the truck. *Clank* goes the emergency brake—off. Engine turning over, idling. Headlights on. The glare so bad it hurts. I shut my eyes.

The engine rumbles softer, softer . . .

I open my eyes. In the distance, taillights fade to black. And all I hear are my chattering teeth. 



**RAY NESSLY** hails from Seattle and lives near San Diego with his wife and their two cats. He is forever at work on a novel: *If A Machine Lands In The Forest*. His work has been published in *Literary Orphans*, *Thrice Fiction*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Apocrypha & Abstractions*, *MadHat Lit*, *Yellow Mama*, *Do Some Damage*, and other journals of note.



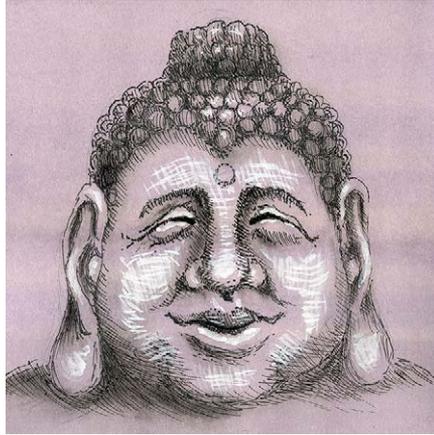
# A Life Forgotten by Iron Voorhees

Rob Cook

A man known for his blind crew cuts and his guitar-picking claws on the tramp circuit. He grew up in his own age of whispering. His life the duration of a recording made from the wind's illness. He reads candy bar labels to keep track of each word aging inside the things he says. He remembers the woods that grew during the amphibian songs of his father. Cities at certain hours threatened with an hour no longer used. A letter to Scranton, PA, or someone else's autumn. A boy whose red anger led others to call him *Allied Tomatoes* grew into a man who signed his name, *Iron Voorhees*, on every napkin behind him, but without a past. He scrapes his blood from the microphone and calls it a song, or a corner of his voice he didn't know about, a noise in the alcohol itself and easy to learn as a dry river leading to sky that's already been lost. But not even the dust remembers how to move the way it was pushed here by the radio and its promise of a popular winter, a day to threaten oneself with salvation, a specific snowflake, another man's nostalgia, which is always wrong. *Leave my brother alone*, Iron Voorhees said once to the trees with *Number of the Beast* shirts chanting their crow suicides from the live branches. This is when he marries the deer he's killed with his hands and makes a family, a civilization out of the entrails. This is when he tells himself he never cheated during his mother's drowsiness, a summer of his own that he shares and shares and shares like a sky that cannot be seen until his practice drinking gets spiked with ladybugs, little phone calls that sometimes end and sometimes disappear. Thomas Voorhees born somewhere with a need for one sibling, one phone number to keep the dirt-filled day, its windows and hard-working roses and compassionate mosquitoes from filling his flesh with holes that mean something, minor sugar sores where he can live once the light is false or leaking from some other house. ↻



**ROB COOK** lives in New York City's East Village. He is the author of six collections, including *Empire in the Shade of a Grass Blade* (Bitter Oleander Press, 2013), *The Undermining of the Democratic Club* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2014), and *Asking My Liver for Forgiveness* (Rain Mountain Press, 2014). Work has appeared in *Sugar House Review*, *Versal*, *Rhino*, *Caliban*, *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, *Great Weather For Media*, *Small Portions*, *Phantom Drift*, *Zoland*, *Toad Suck Review*, *Verse*, *Quiddity*, etc.



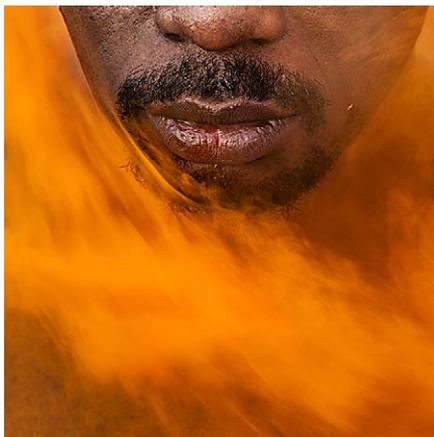
# Smiling Buddhas

Nancy Hightower

**W**e were on our third date, not that I was counting or held much stock in the power of numbers. Not like Christ rose on the third day or after two plane crashes there's always that extra one to look out for. Not like I trudged through New York City sleet, transferring three trains just to make the pilgrimage from Brooklyn to Washington Heights on a Sunday night in hopes of a decent movie date. Not like there were twelve of them in his apartment. Does the exact number matter of Buddhas matter? Well, maybe not twelve, but in a 900 foot square apartment ten smiling Buddhas can *feel* like more. Like one too many. Not like the first two I saw crouched by the loveseat were grinning at me like gremlins. Not like the fourth on the TV cabinet had its eyes wide open as if scared to close them. When I sat on the couch I looked up to see the sixth and seventh hovering amid kitchen shelves stocked with Jack Daniels and an assortment of gourmet potato chips. The small one by the loveseat seemed to have inched closer while my date handed me a drink. Not like it mattered that he wasn't remotely religious and thought meditation took up too much time. He didn't put in the movie right away because he wanted to give me a tour of the place. I spotted a ninth Buddha by the umbrella stand near the front door as he took my hand and led me into the bedroom. Another two lined themselves up opposite the futon, but maybe that was just my buzz taking over. Who can say if there were twelve? Does it matter that they were gathered and ready? Not like I stayed over that night, watching the clock like it was the face of God. 🕒



**NANCY HIGHTOWER** has published short fiction and poetry in journals such as *Prick of the Spindle*, *storySouth*, *Sundog Lit*, *Gargoyle*, and *Word Riot*, and her novel, *Elementari Rising* (2013) received a starred review in *Library Journal*. Her first collection of poetry, *The Acolyte*, was published this fall by Port Yonder Press. Currently, she reviews science fiction and fantasy for *The Washington Post*.



# Listen

GINNA LUCK

Once I saw a bright mouth, a light orange and white from its lips, down a chin, a neck, between thin brown hairs on a chest, this low humming light, visible like smoke, a smoke cloud drifting inside the arm, ricocheting off the wrists and wiping everything out, even what the mouth had said, even how it loved, eating away all the fat and leaving the body transparent. It was the most beautiful moment, as if I stood outside the skin of someone's mistakes. I wept and screamed and that's when the soul lifted off like a dress flayed open in the wind, weightless, bloodless. There was nothing to hold anything down. Hands and faces, everything suddenly became unstuck, floated off into the day and day went dark. It just fizzed and got dark, this warm, aromatic dark, a lingering smell of rain and flesh becoming something that never loved, never could have loved, much simpler, much easier to understand, nothing but thin translucent sound, nothing but vibration, something fragile again, arriving softly, all the sorrow gone out. ↻



**GINNA LUCK's** poems can be read or are forthcoming in *Typehouse Literary Press*, *Juked*, *Gravel*, *99 Pine Street*, *Cultural Weekly*, *The Writing Disorder* and *Rawboned* where she is also an editor. She earned her MFA in 2012 from Goddard College.



# Salute

Clodagh O'Brien

**T**he pigeons take turns; to excrete one chalk star after another onto the footpath. The gap between each is identical, a hair breadth allowance of error. Cars slow as they pass; windows rolled down to get a better look. Passers-by stumble as they forget to watch where they walk. Journalists flock; scrawl on their notepads as pigeon by pigeon takes turns to find its spot. One by one the birds circle, glide and hover several times before finding the right height, speed, wind direction. TV cameras arrive, record the coos and scan the skies as more pigeons appear. Until electricity lines sag, roofs disappear beneath grey capes, cars bear claw scratches. The air trembles. With coos that flood people's ears, and when they sleep, haunts them in pigeon-flooded dreams. Dusk brings a cherry blossom fog; the glow of a half-sun that matches the hump of chalk stars. It's only then that people notice; the man against the wall, a comma in a sleeping bag. His hair is threaded with feathers, open hand cold and cupping seeds. Around him the pigeons gather. They dip their beaks; outstretch one wing in a delicate salute. They coo. They fly. ↻



**CLODAGH O'BRIEN** writes flash fiction, short stories and the occasional poem. Based in Dublin, she has been published in *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*, *Litro*, *Literary Orphans*, *Visual Verse* among others. Her flash fiction was highly commended at the Dromineer Literary Festival and shortlisted for the Allingham Arts Festival. She loves writing in bed, and realizes there are too many books to read before she dies. You can find her blog at: [www.clodaghobrien.com](http://www.clodaghobrien.com)



## Dripping Teeth

### Maroula Blades

She wanted to fight scorpion-style in the gridlock. Through the cold lens of life, I watched streaks of lemon-fire burst in her eyes. She was buoyant in black gym clothes as she jabbed the air and skipped on the fourth floor landing. Planks of wood from a king-sized bed criss-crossed the floor area; male toiletries were on the steps together with a shiny pair of size-10 dress shoes and a three-piece suit. I tripped on grey shoe.

It was 1.00 a.m. on a Friday night; I bolted up two flights of stairs to see what caused the commotion. I thought someone was breaking into a flat. The din sounded as if a door flew off its hinges and crashed. The neighbour opposite Ms Scorpion stood with her large frame positioned in front of a freshly scratched door. Deep cuts in rust painted wood ran from top to bottom. The neighbour wore an off-white T. shirt and unseemly underwear; varicose veins plagued her stout lower body. Surprised by the scene, I cupped my mouth. Ms Scorpion screamed and hissed in a language unknown to my tongue, Russian. I ran towards them as Ms Scorpion lifted a dustpan by its wide body and cracked a forceful blow with the red handle on the forehead of her rival. At once, a bump grew and blood trickled out of the wound.

The browbeaten woman cradled her alopecia skull, rocking in pain, she cried,

“You’re nothing but a skinny dragon.”

More words spat from Ms Scorpion’s mouth as she

elbowed my solar plexus. Winded, I fell with a thud against the whitewashed coffin-cold wall and slid to ground. She threw down the dustpan; it bounce twice and then it took a wayward path down the stairs. Suddenly, Ms Scorpion whipped out her dripping dentures and with the index finger of the other hand; she poked her chin as if to provoke a blow from her adversary. Her foe recoiled while saying,

“I’m calling the police.”

Thin lips disappeared in a gum-rotten mouth. The stale plastic teeth dripped. Clear-coloured globules dribbled to the brown linoleum floor near where my feet lay; with a sharp movement, I drew them to my body. Halitosis wriggled like a demon in the stairwell. I took a eucalyptus-scented tissue from the pocket of my towelling dressing gown and placed it over my nose. Aches pulsated just below my ribcage, breath returned. Ms Scorpion screamed in cyclic rhythms; a war chant, her inflamed swollen uvula danced at the back of her throat. The neighbour swore, slamming her door shut. I shivered; goosebumps ran the length of my arms. The chant echoed and shook the whole neighbourhood awake until the law enforcement officers arrived, thundering up the stairs to subdue the fracas. Police arrested the toothless woman. But before handcuffing her wrists, she shoved the stale dentures back into the orifice, fixing the dripping teeth to worn gums with a dust-encrusted hand. She winced. As she was led away, she snarled in my direction. Down the stairwell, she screamed and kicked. No one understood her cries. 🗨



**MAROULA BLADES** is an Afro-British poet/writer living in Berlin. The winner of The Caribbean Writer 2014 Flash Fiction Competition and Erbacce Prize 2012, her first poetry collection *Blood Orange* is published by Erbacce-press. Works have been published in *Volume Magazine*, *Abridged O-40*, *Kaleidoscope Magazine*, *Trespass Magazine*, *Words with Jam*, *Blackberry Magazine*, and by *The Latin Heritage Foundation* and *Peepal Tree* and others. Her poetry/music programme has been presented on several stages in Germany and the 16. Berlin Poetry Festival. Her debut EP-album *Word Pulse*, Havavision Records (UK) can be found on iTunes and Amazon. More information at: <https://www.facebook.com/Poetrykitchen>



## Ripples Run Deep

Carol Malkin

**T**he men will come tomorrow. One at each side of the cement surface that borders its home, they will drag the carapace slowly, calling instructions, in tandem, across, until it is secure. I will breath differently, as I do, year after year, seeing it contained, no longer expecting me.

All summer as I step out of the door, I see it electric in the morning sunlight. Tiny white clusters twist carefree upon its skin unaware of their pending demise. And insects, seen and unseen alight for sustenance, then caught, are dragged under, extinguished.

This morning, like earlier ones, it roars to life and begins its final attempt at seduction. Languid, always in my view as I scan for rain or clouds. It shimmers like a jeweled coat, offers its comfort to me. *Let me wrap my arms around you before it is too late, it coos as I scurry past.*

I see the pending storm and exhale. Tomorrow, I tell myself.

As a small girl, I was encouraged, coaxed, swindled, to

enter another cunning den. Arch your back. Push off with your toes. Point your hands like you are praying, which I was, to be upstairs, safe, with a story.

Instead they forced, pushed, until I fell, splat, shocked at the cold, its actual temperature irrelevant, swallowed what I could not breathe and fought The Furies that pulled at my pedaling legs. My eyeglasses, safe on a chair, not able to guide me to the tiled curb upon which I could step my trembling foot. Instead my fingers, doing the job of my stinging eyes, searched for purchase as my lungs fought to expel that which they could not welcome.

My husband no longer chides. He is unaware. Daily he enters the beast, one graceful arch of his body, no shudder in sight, and a moment later surfaces to shake the clinging hellions from his head. But I sit a distance away and sweat and search for its unseen bedrock, at once visible, but experience says it is trickery and that the bottom does not exist. Should I find it, it will mean the beast has won.

I remember a sandy day with friends, cajoled, appeased

with a blanket and their valuables, content to bake and slurp melting ice. Until, laughing, they—the boys, at least—lifted and carried me, bound but not bound into the vastness as far as the horizon it seemed as I squirmed and cried, not laughed, certainly did not laugh, and dropped me they did at my command, when it was too late and I sank into its velvet grip, head and feet in opposition, the air dancing above. I rose, finally, only to have it pull me again into its breast and cover me with arms of steel and hold me until the sky, I thought, had never existed.

It is only a ploy to lower my resolve. No storm will come. Instead, the air is feverish and I have walked far and returned. I am alone with the beast, dripping from my hatted forehead and sticky in my shirt. It gurgles as I pass, innocent in its intentions and I stop to touch it with my sweaty hand. It sucks my fingers like a newborn. My heart is louder than its purr. There is only one more day and I am dizzy with the sun.

I scan the surface for the deceased. Small and hairy things that sought to suckle and were taken. Finding none, I slip my shorts to the cemented verge and step, one step in and wait. A chill dances upon my skin, just my ankles and toes, as they blur from sight. My breathing has stopped and I will it steady and step again. My toes have warmed. Instead my knees are bitten, nipped just barely. The beast is patient. I am aware, alert to its slyness.

A further step and most of my body has merged with its silkiness. My arms are skyward, not touching it. My breath held. No satisfaction offered, though it is there.

Wobbly, in reach of the strong edge, I toe in tiny steps against the pull, like fighting a windstorm, deeper. Its odor redolent of clean, but deceptive. It tickles my chest, releases

the sweat from my body as I lower my arms to meet its embrace. Each hair on my body enveloped by its mass, my appendages wholly in its grip, given over to that which has been waiting for me since its spring awakening.

But not my head. That it will never meet. The idea alone is too much. I imagine the chill as it seeps up my cheeks and forces my eyes closed, until the icy pain creeps slowly through my naked scalp, splaying my hair like snakes and I am inert, shrouded in its power.

There are a few pathetic movements; strokes too elegant a word. Feet kick. Arms ribbon away. Mouth locked tight, lest an ill-intentioned finger of plasma comes near. Its body temperature has risen, as it does in preparation for digestion, and I know it is for me, hungry, as the small rodents and flailing bees are not enough. My feet reach for safety and find none. My stomach curls and twists. Has something pierced it? I am shivery in its heat.

Finally, I reach my lifeline and climb, hurriedly onto the lowest rail, but its grip is strong and it pulls at me as I lift my body away. Pieces of it cling. Others tumble away, back to their home as we part.

I stand at a distance in the now cool air and swoosh its remnants from my arms, my legs, my heart. It tempted me to it, teased me with its comfort. But I am glorious in my triumph. Did it grant me freedom? Is a trap set for another day? I am wary of a ticket with too many punches.

The men will come tomorrow, nonchalant at the life they will return to me. They will be unaware that I would have given them much more to secure the beast in its cave for the winter. It will sleep, languorous with the movements of the earth and wait for spring. ↻



**CAROL MALKIN** used to sell fine art but now writes fiction. She has been published in *Every Day Fiction*, reviews the work of debut and emerging authors for the website, *Author Exposure*, and is at work on two novels. Her blog, *Treading Water*, can be found on [carolmalkin.com](http://carolmalkin.com)





# Winter Sun is a Lie

## Fikret Pajalic

**T**he morning breaks grey and cold. The State Library was burning all night and ashen snowflakes are now falling on the city. Smoke and fog cover the suburbs like a dirty blanket. Snipers should be quiet today. My dog Miki senses that this opportunity is perfect for us to get water. He lets out a bark and nudges me with his nose. But first I drink coffee with Dedo, my grandfather.

Dedo says the sediment on the bottom of the Turkish half-cups never lies. He sounds like my grandmother who was lucky and died peacefully in her sleep before the war started. "Let the earth be light on her," we say when her name is spoken.

Except Dedo isn't holding a dainty porcelain cup, but a large, metal, army-issue canteen. What we drink is not coffee, but a mixture of ingredients ground into oblivion that he got from the black market. I only recognise remnants of brown rice in it. The trick is to gulp it down while it's piping hot so the heat covers up the taste. Dedo sees a vulture in the cup. "Vulture means loss," he says. We still have each other to lose.

I put on my jacket and hang two five-litre water canisters on each end of a wooden rod and place it across my shoulders. If you carry canisters on your back in the middle of winter, you get wet to the core, sickness follows and then you die.

I used my sled to carry the canisters and buckets, but it broke when I was running away from machine gun fire. That day I lost all our water-carrying gear. My grandfather had to sell his stamp collection for some second-hand tin cans. He now has only a dozen or so stamps, all with dogs on them.

In this city under siege you die without containers and buckets. Without wood, you freeze first and then you die. With a heavy heart and sadness in his eyes my grandfather cuts the last tree from our backyard. It's the great cherry

tree. He planted that tree nearly fifty years ago when his older brother, a partisan courier in the war before this one, was killed in front of his family. Slaughtered by the grandfathers of the same monsters who are shooting at us today.

"It's not just a matter of cutting the jugular," he once said making a horizontal slashing motion with his palm across his throat. "One has to stick the knife behind this bone." He touched the back of his jawbone. "A strong and steady hand is needed, otherwise there is much pain."

Every late summer the tree would sag with ripe, blood red fruit, but no one ever touched them, and no one ever mentioned the name of the boy who lay underneath.

Miki and I wait for more than an hour at the brewery to fill the canisters with water. People know us. "It's that boy with his dog," they say. We must look like images from pleasant dreams, if they still have those. Hollow-faced souls pat Miki and he thumps his tail on the ground creating a little snowstorm. He learnt very quickly to be nice to all, a part of his survival instinct. It pays off this time as one old woman pulls out a piece of bread and peels the crust off. Miki wolfs it down. I thank her by letting her go in front of us.

There is the distant thunder of bombs falling on the other side of the city. You can hear the screaming shell of the big gun coming toward you, but with mortars you never know until they hit. Those silent bastards are vicious.

We reach the middle of the water line when I see a flash near the open pipe where people are filling their containers and buckets. Thousands of fragments, no bigger than an air-gun pellet, spray deadly rain. I hear whistling around my head like super fast wasps. Between the screams Miki is whining. He's been hit.

I bundle Miki into my jacket and run to the hospital. Two vet stations that existed before the war were long converted into makeshift field hospitals and when I reach

one of them, breathless, the guards will not let me in. The one with lifeless eyes casually volunteers to shoot Miki on the spot and put him out of his misery. Then he pulls his handgun out of the holster and offers it to me.

Maybe we should have done what most did with their pets. Let him go. In times when their children were starving, humans didn't know what to do with their animals, so they were let out. Birds flew off, cats went feral, and dogs roamed the streets in packs, but Miki stayed with us.

We watched as our neighbours released their dog, who hung around in the street for days and howled at night and eventually disappeared, but Dedo said, "Whatever comes our way, Miki stays with us."

By the end of the first war winter there were no dogs left in the city. They died from hunger, cold and madness. But we kept our Miki. During the bombing I would put earmuffs on his ears and we would huddle together.

I return home and Dedo cleans the wound as best he can. Miki winces in pain and his injured leg shakes uncontrollably. Whimpers escape his throat. Night comes and Miki passes out from pain and I from exhaustion.

At dawn I lift the makeshift bandage off Miki's leg and see the bleeding has stopped, but the wound hasn't scabbed. Bacteria have worked overtime during the night and his thigh is swollen from infection. The cut is watery and smelly.

I use one of my water buckets and make an improvised collar to stop him from licking the wound. Miki hates the plastic around his neck obscuring his vision. He bites it, growls in impotence and whines in supplication, before quickly losing his energy and quietly resigning himself to his fate.

I stick old barbeque tongues in the snow for half an hour and then use them to peel off the singed fur around the wound. Miki growls a little, but mostly remains still.

He is a tough mongrel who my grandfather found as a pup hiding under a garden chair. He kept him largely because of his strange looks for this part of the world. His coat has a red hue and neighbourhood children called him pirate dog because of the black patch around his left eye. He loved chasing everything and when he was taken for the first time to a nearby village his real nature came through.

Half the village gathered to see the miracle dog from the city. Watching Miki around their sheep was like watching a flock of birds flying in a V. He demonstrated instinct,

purpose and endurance. He was doing what he was born to do. He ran across sheep's back, nipped at their heels and stared them down. Somewhere in his veins, blood from a pure sheepdog ran hot and true.

One of the peasants offered good money for him. My grandfather refused, but agreed to bring him back in spring so that Miki could chase female dogs in the village that were ready for mating. The promise of Miki's progeny was rewarded with fresh produce.

In the afternoon Miki is gripped by a fever and poisoned blood streams through his body. My grandfather walks in with his hunting rifle and orders me to leave. I lie on top of Miki and cry. He stands above me, for some time, before leaving.

In the morning, I take Miki upstairs to one of the bedrooms. I look through the hole in the wall made by a tank shell in the first week of war. It was one of those shells that pierce the walls then explode and kill everything inside. Remnants of blood are still on the walls, now black in colour.

A sliver of winter sun bursts through the snow clouds and falls on Miki. His ailing body feels the smallest trace of warmth on his fur. With great effort and urgency he sits up and he is bathed in sunshine. His red coat is glowing orange and his eyes are bright again. A minute passes, maybe two, when the sunrays begin retreating. Miki looks at me, eyes full of sorrow, his body enveloped by affliction again.

He drops to the floor and buries his face between his paws. I lie next to him and pat his neck. He turns his head and we look at each other, our unblinking eyes full of tears. I take his face into my hands and he licks them. I kiss him on the forehead. He's too weak to keep his head up and I put it down on his paws.

Miki's breathing slows down and then it stops. A small murmur comes out of his throat, like a swallow nestling in the roof and his body goes limp.

"We'll bury him next to Mirza," Dedo says from the doorway. He gestures at the cherry tree stump; his brother's name passing his lips for the first time in decades. ↻



**FIKRET PAJALIC** came to Melbourne as a refugee and learned English in his mid-twenties. His fiction has appeared in anthologies and literary magazines *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Sleepers*, *Westerly*, *Etchings*, *The Big Issue*, *Mascara*, *Writer's Edit*, *Regime*, *Verity La*, *Gargouille*, *Verge Annual*, *Antipodes* (USA), *The Minnesota Review* (USA), *Crack the Spine* (USA), *Bartleby Snopes* (USA), *Fjords Review* (USA), *Bird's Thumb* (USA), *Paper and Ink* (UK), *Structo* (UK), *JAAM* (NZ) and elsewhere. In 2014 he completed a short story collection funded by Creative Victoria.



# The Woman with the Juicy Fruit Breath

Paul Beckman

**M**irsky, out for a drive to get away from the house, was in downtown Branford when he looked over and saw a woman dressed in white; flared white pants, matching jacket and a button down white silk shirt with long pointy collars. The only touch of color was a red boutonniere that did not match her red hair. Her arms were filled with papers and Mirsky wondered why she didn't have them in a briefcase of some sort.

He thought back to a woman he once saw in New York wearing a similar outfit but not as attractive or as well put together. He looked from the woman to the road ahead and then jammed on his brakes. He heard the car behind him do the same. She was kneeling down in front of his car gathering the papers that had spilled onto the street as she began to cross and trying to keep them from blowing further away. The car behind him began blowing its horn belligerently. Looking in his rear view mirror Mirsky saw an angry twisted face and a man making closed fist gestures at him.

Turning back from the mirror the woman was standing on the sidewalk as before after gathering her papers. Mirsky waved to the man behind him and drove off circling the block. He made two right turns and found a parking space near the corner and pulled over. The woman in white was no longer on the sidewalk and Mirsky, disappointed, figured that her ride came along or she crossed the street and went into one of the stores or offices. Then he noticed the store sign—Luggage. No one's name indicating who owned the store and the sign wasn't attractive but pitted and paint worn.

*Strange*, he thought. *All the years I've been on this street I never noticed that store.* It was nestled between Mrs. Murphy Toys for Tweens and Risko Appliances. He crossed over and walked to the store. It was a small storefront with a glass door that needed cleaning and a picture window that was almost beyond cleaning with samples of suitcases and briefcases haphazardly displayed.

The bell tinkled as he opened the door and an older pumpkin of a woman with wire rimmed glasses and

disheveled stringy grey black hair told him to look around she'd be with him in a few minutes. The store was jam-packed with merchandise, pack-rat style, showing both the newest designs and very old, some of which were in vogue again.

The woman in white walked up to him. "Thanks for stopping your car so I could pick up my papers," she said. "I wanted to throw my arms out wide in apology but that would've just tossed more papers around."

"I wanted to get out and help you," Mirsky said, "but the driver behind me was blasting his horn and shaking his fist."

"I'm sorry. It really is true that no good deed goes unpunished."

"It's not the worst road rage I've seen. While you were standing on the sidewalk holding all those papers I was thinking you should have a mailbag or briefcase of some kind and then the next thing I knew you were in the road in front of me picking up your papers."

"In that case, take a look at a couple of bags I've picked out and tell me which you think would suit me." Her Wrigley's Juicy Fruit breath came floating his way and Mirsky had the urge to taste the flavor on her lips.

She was striking, her red hair cascading over her white clad shoulders made him think back to an encounter many

years earlier when he was a young man. She turned and went back deeper into the store where she'd come from and he walked over to a shelf and took down a cordovan bag with white rivet edges to show her.

"Now what is it I can help you with?" the rumpled proprietress asked.

Looking around Mirsky didn't see the woman with the Juicy Fruit breath. "I was bringing this back to show the woman in white," he said.

"There's no one here but you. Are you auditioning for a job?" she asked.

Mirsky shook his head and wanted to call Elaine to come and get him. She was understanding and had done so before when he left the house without telling her. She wouldn't ask him any questions except if he'd like a new briefcase or piece of luggage.

Mirsky wanted to be home sitting in *his* chair thinking scenarios about his encounters with the woman in white, but at the sound of the saleswoman's voice he snapped alert and asked if he could take a phone picture of the cordovan bag to show his wife. "She doesn't like surprises but she does like nice presents," Mirsky said and then left the store. He made a quick right out the door never looking left where the woman in white was standing, arms full with papers. 



**PAUL BECKMAN** is a writer and photographer (both above and beneath the water). He is widely published in print and online in the following magazines amongst others: *Connecticut Review*, *Raleigh Review*, *Litro*, *Playboy*, *Pank*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Flash Frontier*, *Metazen*, *Boston Literary Magazine* and *Literary Orphans*. His work has been included in a number of anthologies. His latest collection of flash stories, *Peek*, published by, by Big Table Publishing came out in Feb. of this year. His website is [www.paulbeckmanstories.com](http://www.paulbeckmanstories.com)





# Natalie's Room

## Eliot Deringer

**A**t 5:47 p.m., still hours before sunset and on a busy residential street, a man wearing a red and yellow cape over otherwise nondescript though somewhat ragged and unwashed shirt and pants leaned into the 19th century brick wall of a converted hostel and urinated. I noticed that the pee miraculously ran both around and between his feet, leaving his perilously unlaced ankle-high boots bone dry. This, perhaps, was his super power. Not sharing his gift, which was, carefully considered, not overly advantageous to the community at large, I carefully watched my feet as I walked around him to my left. Glancing over my shoulder as I walked by him, I saw him shake it off, put it away, and walk in the opposite direction as myself, treating the sidewalk like the rolling deck of a ship. There on the concrete I saw two perfect boot prints, ovular islands of dry sidewalk in a sea of urine. I continued walking. Yes, I was hot. Yes, I was sweaty. And yes, there were miles to go before I slept.

Arriving at Natalie's house I realize I have forgotten the

oversized chocolate bar I had promised to bring. Indeed, I considered it my entry pass, my golden ticket into the wonderland of oversized throw pillows, satin sheets, back rubs, and the enormous canopy bed planted in the center of the room like a merry-go-round. I had myself not actually glimpsed the sheets, but I imagined that unlike my own they matched the pillowcases and were softer than the downy under feathers of a newborn duckling. I imagined one would have to be careful sliding into bed with Natalie. If one were overconfident, one might slip suddenly across the satin and off the end of the bed like a naked sled rider on a too-icy slope, perhaps pausing briefly in the air before landing in a tumble. Then having to sheepishly walk around the corner of the bed to the side entrance, gripping the oak bedpost in one hand and swinging one leg up like mounting a horse. The chocolate bar was a problem and I resolved not to mention it. Instead I would overcome Natalie with my immeasurable charm. I would bathe her in the pool of my darkly radiant brown eyes until all else was forgotten.

The door opens and we smile at each other. I step inside, so close to touching her, but not. I prepare to bathe her in a pool of darkly radiant brown eyes. Why did you make me come all the way downstairs, she asks, why didn't you just come up?

I forgot the chocolate bar, I blurt out. This is what happens when we make eye contact.

It's okay, she says.

I'll go buy another one, I say.

Come upstairs, she says, and I want so much for it to be more than it is, to be a loaded invitation, a come-on, a solicitation, but it was only a direction as one might give a tourist who is looking for some familiar sight that happens to be upstairs from where you are both standing, and in a place where you already headed. Come upstairs, you would tell him, I am going the same way. I walk behind her and we climb the stairs to her room.

Her room is the size of four normal bedrooms. There is a closet for every day of the week. She consults a large calendar projected onto her wall by a purple laser controlled by a computer. If it is a Sunday, she will open the Sunday closet and choose an appropriate Sunday outfit. If it is a Tuesday, and so on. If it sounds too easy, it isn't. There are times for all of us, I know, when Tuesday, for example, may feel like a Wednesday. Or more tragically, a Thursday may feel upon waking like a Saturday and work comes like an unexpected ice cube sliding down the back of one's shirt. I asked Natalie once and so I know that if she feels surprise after consulting the calendar, she goes instead with her gut. I have seen her wearing Wednesday's clothing on a Friday, not out of ignorance, but out of her desire to let feeling be her guide. Once, while gently nuzzling her collarbone, I whispered the same thing, to let feeling be her guide, but she only turned away from me and hid her face behind a matching throw pillow.

You cannot stay long, she says, you know I have work.

I will stay long enough, I say.

You always know what I don't mean, she says.

Your skin is like butter, I say, but very quietly. And then we sit at identical desks arranged side by side and pushed against the wall, each of us in office chairs that rotate and swivel and squeak. She begins typing again at her paper while I pull my computer out of my bag and place it on the desk. I open it and wait for it to power on while I plug in the power cord. I look at her and think I will kiss her forehead first and then her cheek and then in the shallow place between her collarbone and her throat. She looks at me and says, I have a new letter from Martin. I smile and say, that's wonderful, I hope to have one from Martina any day now, especially with my birthday coming up. She smiles and says,

I am sure you will have one soon. Then we both turn back to our computers.

How we both laughed to learn that she had a boyfriend named Martin, and I a girlfriend named Martina, the coincidence was astounding. Perhaps we are dating the same person, she joked, what color is his or her hair? Of course, my laughter was somewhat reduced, knowing as I did that Martina was fictional—an allergic byproduct of my imagination caused by the untimely discovery of Martin. Some things cannot help but be untimely. Their appropriate time is too far in the future or too far in the past to ever be located or triangulated and always they trudge through this time with the word *untimely* the permanent ball at the end of their chain. Martin's existence was, I thought, one of those things. Unfortunate for him, but more so for me. In any event, the fact that she was dating a Martin and I a Martina seemed less of a coincidence to me than it did to Natalie though I tried to see it from her point of view.

Have you ever been in love, I ask Natalie, foolishly.

I love Martin, she says, predictably, and then adding, and don't you love Martina?

Of course, I say, and how, but sometimes I think that what I really love is the *idea* of Martina. Do you know what I mean?

She reaches across and touches my knee as I sit in the office chair she bought for Martin behind the desk she bought for Martin for when he moves in with her next month. She holds her hand there for a moment, and says, No. I touch her hand and she withdraws and we both resume typing.

I notice she has left the door to her bedroom halfway open as she always does when I show up on these afternoons. I am always disappointed that she leaves it open, but also flattered. I am just enough of a devil not to be trusted, and it is also true that I once unrepentantly nuzzled her collarbone in the light that shone into her bedroom from the hallway and I did not say I was sorry. The two of us continue to type in tandem in our same office chairs behind the twin desks in the enormous room flanked by the seven floor to ceiling closets and the canopy bed with matching sheets and pillowcases. The windows darken and the paired desk lamps brighten. Somehow there is a chocolate bar on the desk between us and we share it. 🍫



**ELIOT DERINGER** used to know a blind man who was able to climb mountains just by instinct and by touch. When people asked him why a blind man wanted to climb mountains, he would just point at the mountain and say because it's there. And everybody would laugh because he was pointing at somebody's house or one of the neighbors and not at a mountain at all. You can contact Eliot at [eliot.deringer@gmail.com](mailto:eliot.deringer@gmail.com)



# A Tribe of Our Own

## Gregory Roll

**I** counseled against it. This was not the place. Maybe the time, but not the place. Here, diversity is measured by how one says 'eh'. The Nords stretch it out a bit while the Finns are quick to finish it off, no pun intended. The indigenous peoples, the Native Americans, have an altogether different way of saying 'eh'. When they say it, it feels like they have been saying it that way for millennia.

Imagine 10, 000 years ago and two Natives are crouched in the forest hunting:

"What's that?"

"Looks like a wolf, eh."

"Yeah, eh, looks like a wolf."

"Must be a wolf, eh."

Imagine last week and two Natives are out four wheeling:

"What's that?"

"Looks like a wolf, eh."

"Yeah, eh, looks like a wolf."

"Must be a wolf, eh."

They own that word. It's theirs; we're just borrowing it.

Here, reticence is an appreciated trait and locals recognize other locals by how they talk, how fast they talk, and how long they talk. A local will know if you are not one of them in no time.

If you are a local, then there is a 23% chance you are a Nord, 18% chance you're a Finn, 15% chance a Swede, 13% chance a Canuck, 5% chance a Native, 3% chance an Italian, 1.5% chance an African American, and .05% chance you're a Mexican. I know a guy whose mother was Finnish and his father was Mexican. You should hear the way he says 'eh', couldn't tell if he liked ice fishing or rodeos. Turned out he liked both and that's okay up here. But the last time I looked at county records, nothing was offered in the way of statistics on sexual propensity. I know same-sex relationships happen here as they do elsewhere, but it's kept quiet. If you are a man and want to be the woman in a same-sex relationship out in the open, or go to those crazy gender-upside-down parades, or have one of those weddings where the older

people don't know what to say to you, you move.

The Black Robes, the French missionaries, came through almost four centuries ago and they laid the groundwork for people's sensibilities. What is and isn't taboo around here must have been brought over from the Old World because I'd read that this sort of thing, same-sex relationships, also happened in aboriginal cultures but was handled differently. There was this Native, Laughing Feather, who fell in love with an officious, government bureaucrat named Mr. (I can't use his real name because the fellow has a county, numerous streets, and many other inanimate objects named after him, and is still revered by dreamy-eyed-librarians, local historians, and Anglo-enthusiasts) Standoffish. In 1873, Mr. Standoffish wrote this about Laughing Feather's attempt at courtship in his journal:

*"He proffered many gifts concluding with a string of wampum. I smoked and shook hands with him, and accepted his tenders of friendship by re-pledging the pipe, but narrowed his visit to official proprieties and refused his wampum. If his intention were made known to the populace at large, he would be at the least taken aside and pummeled until such perverse notions were dismissed from his consciousness. Though I appreciate and understand his attraction to me being who I am, it is my reputation that would suffer the worse consequences of his perverse affections."*

Mr. Standoffish later noted:

*"...Laughing Feather participates in tribal affairs as a woman. He does what they do, dresses as they dress...strange how Laughing Feather is considered without malice or prejudice by all the members of his tribe whether male or female."*

I will forever have an image of the perplexed Mr.

Standoffish watching Laughing Feather participate in his tribal affairs as a woman. At present, we do not live as a tribe and I advised Ray on his seventy-third birthday, the day he'd thought was a good one to spill the beans to his wife, against coming out of the closet. At first it seemed he'd listened.

He awoke on the day after his seventy-third birthday alone and in tears. Jill, his wife of fifty-one years, had dressed, put on her make up, what Ray called her game-face, and was downstairs talking on the phone and drinking coffee. Her bed - they slept in separate twins - was made, not a wrinkle, not a pillow out of place. Cold and shivering, close to panting, Ray wondered if he was having another heart attack. But no, this was something different. He'd had a nightmare. I guess that's what you called it when the worst day of your life was revisited in your dreams. It was 1952, at summer camp in South Dakota. The camp wise-guys, ruffians from Chicago, had climbed into his bunk and beat him with their fists and kicked him with their boots, hissing "Cry, faggot, cry." Afterwards, he'd cocooned under his sleeping bag and did what they'd instructed, though he hated himself for doing so, and cried for hours.

That's what he felt like doing now...rolling into a ball and crying. No, it was worse than that. He felt like dying. I told him it's just another day, shake it off. He ignored me and shuffled downstairs without shaving, without putting in his teeth, without combing his hair and without slippers.

He settled into his chair at the breakfast table.

Jill's eyes widened. "My God, you look terrible."

He opened his mouth to say something, anything. Strands of spittle hung from one lip to the other like a cobweb. Quickly she wiped the saliva from his mouth.

"Are you okay?"

Again he opened his mouth to speak, but was too late.

"Because if you're not," she went on, "I could see if we could get you in to the doctor's office before bridge."

He winced.

"Or, I could just cancel bridge and wait with you in the ER," she said, a slight emphasis on the word 'cancel'.

His gaze wandered out the French doors. A brisk autumn breeze escorted a steady stream of maple leaves across the yard. "No," he muttered.

She sighed. "What, Ray. What is it?"

He searched for a way to tell her, thinking it was what was needed. I told him he'd be nuts to tell her. Just say you're 'in a mood'.

He waited until she began tapping her foot on the tile. He was almost out of time, so he said, "I'm in one of my dark moods." He bracketed the words 'dark moods' with his fingers so that they were officially parenthesized.

"Oh no," she said, "not again."

She sat down next to him and took his hand. "Did you get one of those horrid rejection slips back with a story of yours?"

"No, no I didn't, but that's what it feels like."

"What does it feel like?"

He let his hands rest on the table. "I've told you a hundred times."

"And don't I always tell you the same thing?"

"That's just the point. I don't want to be told the same thing."

She put on her jacket and inspected the contents of her purse. "Well I'm going to say it again. Don't take it personally." And then she added, "I don't have time for this, Raymond."

"Do you ever have time?"

She moved to the door. "Listen, I don't understand why you need to write or why you let yourself get in these 'dark moods' in the first place. I mean, what's the point?"

He sighed. His attention returned to the tumbling leaves. "I'm trying to get at something."

"What?" she asked.

Don't you dare, I told him.

She stood in the hallway, near the front door. A black leather purse was clutched in her left hand, the car keys in the other. I grabbed him by the neck and choked him. He stifled a gasp and dismissed her with a wave. After she left, he shuffled back upstairs. The car started, and the garage door opened and then closed. He let sighed.

I could see what he was thinking. If his life was the subject of a novel, like those he'd required his high school lit students to read; there would be a plot evolution at this point. He would have to change or his 'raison d'être' would be forfeited, but I counseled against it. That happened in books, this wasn't Dickens. It simply did not happen in the life of a seventy-three year old man, a long married seventy-three year old man with kids, grandkids, and one great grandkid.

Instead of going back to bed, he put in his teeth, combed his hair, shaved and got dressed. It wasn't change and it wasn't forfeiture; it was 'going through the motions', and I was pleased with him.

For the next several months however, going through the motions brought Ray no peace. Waking up gloomy and brooding, detached from memory by regret and oppressed by depression, he wandered listlessly from one day to the next. The present moment was lost to him, eclipsed by mortality's encroachment. Emptiness haunted him and nothing I said cheered him.

But Nature abhors a vacuum, and despite my admonishments, Ray began to fill his emptiness with fanciful musings, imagining himself as a completely different person in a completely different life. I was powerless against the intoxicating effect it had on him. These fantasies thrilled him and once he had dared to think the unthinkable, hope rushed in and challenged his obduracy. He had to do it; he had to reveal himself to someone before his life ended. He was no longer concerned with why he wanted to be a woman, why he was attracted to men. No more painful analysis, self-flagellation and shame. He didn't give a damn why, nor would he let himself consider it a chromosomal screw-up, a mistake, or damnation. It just was. God did not have a hand in all that happened. Time, his time, was running out and so, ignoring my counsel; he made the decision to come out of the closet...at least to one person...and then maybe...

But how, how to lay his soul bare to someone without the embarrassment and suffering it might cause? As a teacher and as head of the family, he had given advice and doled out comfort to those in need. Whether it was Jill, the kids, the grandchildren, or the thousands of students he had taught,

he had reached out with alacrity to help those in need. Most took him as he hoped to appear, as a sensitive and caring man. A few sensed the psycho/sexual dilemma within – the need to nurture not just as one human being to another, but as a woman, as a mother – and shied away from him. But what, Ray asked himself, asked me, what would happen if we stepped out of the shadows and stood in the bright light of the sun?

He went on trying to convince me...if he made anyone uncomfortable by his need to be maternal, so be it. It wasn't a sin or an abomination. He could finally say that. The world was filled with others like him, many of them brave enough and comfortable enough in their own skins to be honest. He longed to be one of them and wanted me to get on board. I was in awe of his yearning, stunned to silence.

He went on like this, believing he'd come to a resolution after a life of suppression. He was certain that after following a yellow brick road for decades, he'd arrived for the first time at a white square, and stood looking down at the letters A-C-C-E-P-T-A-N-C-E in big, bold, black letters written there. It gave him confidence, and a strange thing happened on the third Sunday in November. As he strode past the altar heading for the lectern, he imagined himself reading to the congregation, the congregation he'd read to for the past thirty years, not in the musty blue and gray suit he wore, but in a green and yellow paisley dress. It brought tears to his eyes. He stood gasping at the lectern before a sea of expectant faces. When his eyes cleared, he read to the ever faithful a letter of Paul's to the Corinthians in a voice that did not betray his vision of emancipation, but did convey an emotional impact that hushed the crowd.

At last he had passed over the razor's edge, breaking through an invisible but real barrier. He was ecstatic. So why did I feel as if we were standing on a mountain ledge waiting to be pushed?

While his friends watched football and his wife attended a luncheon that day, he spent the rest of the afternoon daydreaming, imagining himself as a woman not in someone else's life, but in the one he'd been given. He went back in time, foraging through his memories, bravely rearranging them. Jill with her migraines and anxiety had not been much for nurturing, and in his revisionist assembling of the past his wife faded away and he stepped in for her. In this bold new rendering, he flourished in his role as mother, and so did the children. From the parallel universe he created, Andrew, Alexei and Alison emerged as competent, radiantly successful human beings. Not that they hadn't done well in reality, but Ray was convinced they had harbored hidden needs that only his love as a mother could have met, and once met, they would have been granted the happiness of the fulfilled...so fulfilled it was easy to take the next step and imagine his children loving him, no, no, embracing him passionately as a transvestite.

These imagined successes galvanized his resolve to reveal himself. His confidence gathered impetus, slamming him from behind like gusts of wind, propelling him, propelling us, forward to oblivion. While the audacity of his resolve thrilled him, it terrified me. It was an atomic bomb detonating, and following the brief white light; there would be an implosion. I reminded him there is always an implosion after an explosion.

Fear mushroomed in his mind until he was asphyxiated. In a panic, he considered abandoning his plans. Yes, yes, yes I advised. It would be best taking the well-worn route we'd always taken, that of being a sensitive, caring person... but no, no, no. He would not give in; he'd risk it no matter what. I relented and we began deliberations.

If he was going to spill his guts it had to be to someone outside the church circle, someone who didn't know Jill or the kids. It could not be any one of the thousands of students he had taught in his forty-year tenure at Christian South. We simply could not jeopardize his civic or professional legacy. This narrowed the field, and by doing so the answer came to him. It had to be Nick, Nick Jorgensen. A transplant from Detroit, surely a guy from a big city would be more open-minded than a local. Ray was convinced he was the one.

After his first heart attack, Ray had been sent to the hospital health facility for rehabilitation. That is where he'd met Nick. Nick had no health issues. He worked out to augment his training for triathlons and he worked the weight and cardio machines driven by a severe purpose unlike the careless effort Ray put forth. Handsome and outgoing, Nick's vitality made it difficult for others to guess his age. If Ray hadn't asked, he would have never guessed fifty-four.

Like Ray, Nick was a writer, and they'd hit it off, with Nick doing a great deal of the talking. He needed a caring, sympathetic listener. His son was stationed in Afghanistan, he was estranged from his daughter, he'd just lost a close friend to cancer, and his wife...well Nick didn't talk about her much, and when he did, his eyes hinted at a painful drama that was not touched on. Sleeping had become difficult for Nick. Vodka helped but wasn't always enough, and he'd told Ray he was wearing thin.

Under the harsh fluorescent lights in the locker room bathroom, the glistening urinals hanging from candy-colored tiled walls behind him surrounded his image in the mirror. Ray studied his face. Again the possibility of being a woman hit him like an explosion. Again he was thrilled by the possibility of a new life. The white light following the detonation lasted a bit longer than it had the first time, and in that moment he sampled the air. It was alpine. Cool liquid energy ran through his veins and his mind engaged the most wonderful fancy yet. He saw himself holding Nick in his arms, rocking him back and forth. My voice was made inaudible by the din of a thousand Roman candles exploding. Ray hurried into the workout room.

Nick was using the leg-press machine. The entire stack of weights lifted and fell in tandem with his facial contortions, and Ray thought, here was a man free to face his problems without confusion, to live life on its terms as a man, and he longed to touch Nick as a woman.

"How are you holding up?" Ray asked when the stack of weights came to rest.

"Just barely," said Nick with a wink.

"Doing your best to wear the machines out, huh?"

Nick smiled a teasing, knowing smile. "Somebody has to do it."

He had a wonderful smile, a smile Raymond loved to elicit. They had, in the course of two years, become

comfortable with each other, often going out for drinks after working out. The roles they played never varied...Nick was the tough, Hemingwayesque hero, quietly enduring the onus of manhood until the right measure of booze and conversation yielded insightful, philosophical gems to the sensitive, less manly biographer, Ray.

Ray asked, "Do you want to go out for a drink later so we can talk?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"Where do you want to go?"

They ended up at the Cajun restaurant, sitting near the bar. The atmosphere was breezy and celebratory inside, while outside snowflakes fell. Soon it would be Christmas. New Orleans style jazz played Jingle Bells from hidden speakers. Strings of LED lights twinkled above the barmaids and bartenders that hurried to fill orders. Nick downed his second double vodka and ordered a third, winking at the waitress as he did so. She smiled for Nick and Ray winced at the exchange.

She turned to Ray. "Another for you?"

"No, I'm fine," Ray replied.

She headed towards the bar and Nick chased after her with his eyes. "Where was I?" He asked.

Ray sipped his wine and then said, "It's a bullshit war and it's your son's second tour of duty."

Nick nodded. "Right. It's a bullshit war...there's no reason for our men and women to be there anymore..."

Ray wanted to take his hand.

"...It would be the end of his mother if anything happened to that boy..."

He loved Nick; he could honestly say that. Not just romantically loved him, but was in love with Nick's honesty. It was simple and natural for Nick to be a man, and more than anything Ray wanted to be here as a woman, his woman, listening.

In the light in which he saw Nick, he momentarily saw himself - liberated and free - and so it happened. When Nick stopped talking to take a drink from his refreshed glass, Ray did it. A tremulous confession.

"I've always thought I was meant to be a woman?" he said, a tremulous confession.

There was no white light, no chains falling from his ankles, no angels singing. Instead, Ray was stunned by how insignificant he felt speaking the greatest and only confession he'd ever needed to make.

Nick stared at him, unaware a crooked smile had appeared on his face. Ray was mortified. Nick nodded slightly but still he said nothing. His silence was unnerving. A jolt of nervous energy made Ray's hands clatter over the table. To his utter astonishment, Nick reached over and

grabbed his hands and then patted them before releasing them to take another hit of vodka.

"I don't think you really do," Nick said, a sardonic twist from a man's man who had seen and heard it all. "My wife is always telling me I should live for one day as a woman, just one. God damned wife drives me nuts but I love her."

Nick veered from Ray's admission and returned to himself as the subject of their conversation, leaving Ray to linger there at the edge of honesty. As he droned on, Ray's heart sputtered violently, thoughts chased away by vertigo. He swallowed the last sip of wine, stood up, and walked from the booth.

"You going to the bathroom?" Nick asked.

Ray nodded.

"Do you want another glass of wine?"

Ray nodded.

He passed the bathrooms, turned right and exited the restaurant. He folded his six-foot-five-inch frame into his car, swiveled the rearview mirror until a dolorous and abbreviated face appeared there. He spat at his reflection and began to sob. Two, maybe three minutes, I waited for him to stop crying. He found a napkin in the console. His hands trembled as he wiped the spittle from the mirror. He repositioned it, and to his satisfaction the images were sharper.

He left the parking lot, goosing the gas pedal of his SUV so that the tires spun and the anti-lock braking system engaged.

Well, I told him, I tried to warn you.

"Shut up," he yelled. "Shut the hell up."

Really it didn't go that badly, I added.

He became thoughtful. "No not really...at least he didn't laugh."

No, he didn't laugh. I just hope he doesn't tell anyone.

Ray agreed and I told him this just wasn't the place. Who the hell did he think he was, Laughing Feather?

He pulled the mirror around and looked at himself. "I suppose I did," he said. "Only I don't have a tribe to go home to."

You've got me, I told him.

Ray smiled but it wasn't really a smile. "A man has to have a conscience, right?"

Yep, I told him. A man has to have a conscience. He cried all the way home, something I told him seventy-three-year-old men shouldn't do. 🕒



**GREGORY ROLL** Essay: "Our Son the Soldier, Dead for a Moment," *Third Eye Magazine* 2009. Contests: Finalist, Marquette Monthly short-fiction contest, 2011,12,13 Honorable Mention, "The Dacha," *Glimmer Train* 2012. Finalist, "Poet, Policeman, Dancer," *New Millennium Writing*, 2013. Short Stories: "The Memory Keeper's Promise" and "The Quiet Minnesotans and the Man From Manchester," *The Storyteller Magazine*. "The Dacha" and "A Union of Incomplete Hands" just appeared in *Rosebud Magazine* issues 59 & 60. Currently I am finishing up a historical novel spanning over a century of Russian history.



# the day nannette barns heard her brother neil barnes tell ricky c he wanted her dead

Christine Tierney

she hid in his smelly hockey bag and the leprechaun on the front of his musty nylon jersey snickered “flubbaaa” every time she moved----she hid in the joke of a padlock on his bedroom door she picked clean with one of her sister bernadette’s greasy bobby pins----she hid in the eye socket of the drool crusted teddy bear he whacked her with when she scratched his david bowie record----she hid in the can of hot sticky fanta and nail clippings he forced her to swig from in front of bronstein brothers----she hid in the mangled toilet paper tube in his filthy hamster cage where all those hairless squirming babies died of starvation----she hid in the armpit of his precious black cure t-shirt she stole from the hamper stretched and wore in the laron’s over chlorinated pool (you have to admit robert smith’s succulent red lips morphing into flaming swiss cheese was sublime)----she hid in the flip-top lid of the rolling stones butane lighter he singed her baby crissy’s long retractable hair with----she hid in the spine of the crinkled dirty magazine she found in the fort he built with the shittiest plywood ever----she hid in the delicious layer of chocolate on the charleston chew candy bar he never gave her half of because he said she needed to lose a few----she hid in the knuckles of his bony tanorama fist that punched her in her fleshy places----she hid in the thumbprint of fluff she left on the volume knob on his bumble bee yellow portable 8-track player----she hid in the bruises that spread like moldering sunflowers beneath her long sleeved and way-too-hot-for-summer tops----she hid in the coke bottle vase she stuffed with droopy backyard forsythias he purposely knocked off the table when he discovered she had eaten the last friggin’ oreo. ↻



**CHRISTINE TIERNEY** is an MFA recipient from the University of Southern Maine’s Stonecoast Writing Program and is employed as an afterschool director. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net, a Pushcart Prize, and the Best New Poets anthology, and has appeared in *Fourteen Hills*, *Poet Lore*, *PMS*, *The Tusculum Review*, *Skidrow Penthouse*, *Sugar House Review*, *Gemini Magazine*, *Toad Suck Review*, *Lungfull!*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Weave Magazine*, *inter/rupture*, *great weather for MEDIA*, *The Boiler Journal*, and other cool places. You can read her work at <http://christinetierneypoet.com/site/>



# Courtesy

## Esther Veitch

There was barely enough space in the funeral parlor to breath. Lila hadn't predicted that Mrs. Chesterfield knew this many people, let alone impacted their lives enough to make them get force sympathetic small talk with mutual acquaintances. *Maybe they are only here for the free breath mints and Kleenexes*, Lila reasoned, surging with the satisfaction of thinking such a nasty thought.

The line inched forward and the scent of gardenias intensified. Gardenias reminded Lila of old people, not unlike mothballs or pearl earrings. She'd have to make sure she died young so people sent her things like rhododendrons and bamboo shoots and ferns. (Lila had never been to a young person's funeral, so she wasn't sure what the socially appropriate breed of condolence plant was--she could only assume it to be something exotic.)

The woman next to Lila lifted her kid glove to cough. "You're going to kill us all," said Lila bluntly. The woman trembled and pulled her young child closer to her.

Lila was standing by a three-legged stool bearing a plastic basket of funeral cards. Pinching her fingers together delightedly, Lila fished around, pulling up one depicting Mary clutching an infant Jesus to her bosom. Lila didn't believe in God and she didn't believe in breastfeeding. Anguish washed over her; she felt disgusted with her lack of luck, and, furthermore, her incompetence. She spat on the Jesus card and ground it with the toe of her shoe.

Everyone within a reasonable radius of Lila starred, but she received no reprimand. The funeral clock ticked and finally a balding man poked Lila and said "Move up." She snatched a handful of funeral cards, and did.

The procession was undeniably close to the casket. Lila could make out draped crushed velvet, the sound of a woman crying. *How arbitrary*, Lila thought. She promised herself she would never weep from that point onward, then gave herself a quick hug because she loved herself dearly.

She began to wish it wasn't so stuffy. In fact, she came to believe that the air quality was below average. Using her free hand, she plugged her nose to see if she might not make it to the coffin before she had to take a breath. She did not. Someone flicked on a recording of opera music, noticeably increasing the amount of remorse in the room. Lila rolled her eyes in disgust. She pictured herself as an opera singer, with a

mermaid gown and a flamboyant blonde wig.

Wooden picture frames came into view presently. Inside them, dated images of a teenage girl stared blankly at Lila. She averted her eyes to the molding ceiling. This teenage girl was not someone Lila knew. This was someone foreign and pre-Lila, someone who cared about boys and clip-in hair curlers.

A photographer squatted behind a tripod, his finger poised above the flash button. Lila didn't want her picture taken. She didn't want to end up like the teenager in the wooden frame. Why was there a photographer at a funeral parlor, anyway, Lila scrutinized. Photographers were supposed to be for yearbook and holiday parties and weddings, and not for funerals.

Lila became aware of the empty stretch of carpet between her and the kid glove woman who was presently kneeling in front of the casket, her child replicating her motions. The opera music experienced a rapid crescendo (or someone adjusted the volume.) This she regarded with the typical indifference, or at least she attempted to.

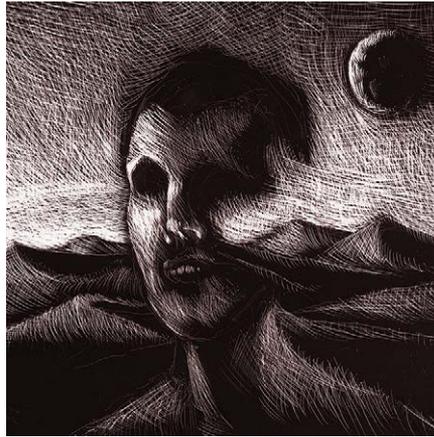
She thought about screaming and wondered if she screamed loud enough, the body in the casket would hear her. She clamped and unclamped her fists, wishing her fingernails were long enough to create scars. She stuck out her tongue at everyone around her just to see them wince.

Mrs. Chesterfield's face was cold. It felt thin, too, like rice paper wrappers. If she had gotten an itch on her cheek and tried to scratch it, she might have ripped the skin. The curator had given her too much face powder and an ugly wristwatch set--could dead people tell time? She wore a fixed expression of mild disappointment. It seemed apparent as to why. Up close, the velvet was stiff: unsatisfactory. Lila wondered if there were cucumber sandwiches in the afterlife.

The funeral clock marked the passing of time. Something jabbed Lila in the bend of her spine. She peered back to discover that it was the same man as before, only a lapse of minutes resulted in him appearing considerably balder than previously noted. Gardenias concentrated the air and Lila debated throwing up. She peered down at the fistful of funeral cards in her hand and over at the photographer who was now documenting two sobbing twins. Returning her gaze to the man behind her, she waited patiently as he opened his mouth to say, "Move up." Lila snatched the wristwatch off Mrs. Chesterfield's corpse, and did. 🕒



**ESTHER VEITCH** happens to be an art student studying in Rockford, Illinois. Being partial to raining felines and canines, she wishes to please be a buttercup, or maybe a cement block (in her next life.) Her work has appeared in *Medium* and *Figment* as well as on her personal webpage, *Girl Is the Word*.



# The Passerby

Mike Corrao

I'm afraid to say I've been dissolving lately. Soon I believe I will be nothing more than a hint of something strange carried by the breeze. I don't know how it happened, although I don't think many do know how these things happen to them. It's almost sad, but not quite.

"What do you mean dissolve? You're right here. All of you. Not even a bite out of you," my brother said. He didn't take the news very well. He's in denial--whatever stage of grief that is.

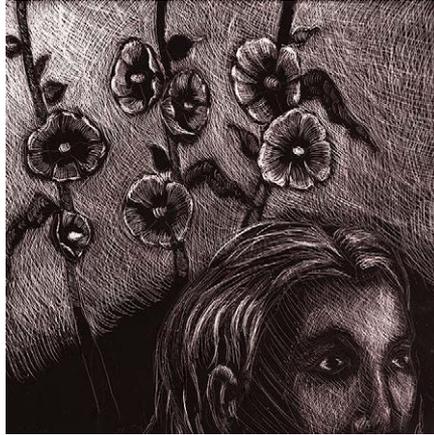
"I'll be leaving soon." I told him. He crossed his arms and looked at me tiredly. Just at that moment, I noticed my hands and my feet starting to fade. They floated away bit by bit as if I were just pixels on a screen. My brother still didn't believe me. Not even when I was nothing but a torso and a head. Not even when I was nothing. He looked scared. We stood alone in silence.

"I think I'll be on my way," I said.

"I think so too," he replied. He didn't believe me though. Not even when I was nothing. He said goodbye to me like I was still his brother, but I said it to him as I was: oblivion. It's not my fault. How could I have stopped the inevitable? I could not. It is not my place to disturb the universe. ↻



**MIKE CORRAO** is a current student at the University of Minnesota studying English and Film. When he isn't busy writing, editing, pitching ideas, or frustratedly shouting at his laptop, he enjoys watching old foreign movies and hanging out with his friends (including but not limited to drunk strangers). Mike has been published in magazines such as *Century* and *365tomorrows*. At the moment he is working on a short film titled *Weekend Dahlias*.



## Welcome Melissa Ostrom

**Y**es. This would be the perfect time. The hollyhocks, candy pink and tall as men, sway and stare in our front windows, the white Meidiland roses by the door smell like nothing but keep the night in check, and each daylily puts in a good twenty-four hours before giving up. Michael removed the mice from the sandbox, and the shower's fixed. Plus I'm practicing wonders with biga. So much yeast and wheat around here, the place smells like a brewery. Which reminds me: plenty of beer. One sooty stout tastes like coffee. I recommend it for breakfast. And the children haven't stopped growing. The older one reads. She also translates what her little brother says. I could use some explanations. On a clear day, Toronto winks across the lake. That mayor's out, but what about corruptions elsewhere? Unchecked like the ants we can't kill. Out there finding ways to break in. As dismissive of boundaries as China's black air on its way to California. Pour me another, would you? Hillary hits delete, Donald's a bigot, my brother-in-law can't find a job, and jihadist terrorists are bringing crucifixion back into style. Actually, this might be the only time to visit. Before the temperature drops, the leaves fall, the snow arrives. Before we all get thoroughly buried.



**MELISSA OSTROM** lives in rural western New York, where she serves as a public school curriculum consultant, teaches English at Genesee Community College, and writes whenever and however much her five-year-old and seven-year-old let her. Her fiction has appeared in *Monkeybicycle*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Oblong*, *decomp*, *Cleaver*, and elsewhere.



FLORIDA SCENIC  
HIGHWAY

FLORIDA KEYS  
SCENIC HIGHWAY

BEGIN

1

NORTH

AMERICA'S BYWAYS

MILE  
0

# Lessons from Incidents That Might've Occurred in Key West

Rosemarie Dombrowski

**I**t's the last piece of land before everything disappears into the sea. It's the freefall from grace at a predetermined time and location.

Everyone said it was a drinking town with a fishing problem. Someone said that the pie was invented by a local botanist, maybe a sponge fisherman. What we know for sure is that it only contains three ingredients. And that Hemingway arrived in '28.

From the plane, you said you could see tiny pieces of land swimming in warm, shallow water. Hemingway built the first pool on the island. Allegedly, it was the only pool for a hundred miles. He moved to Whitehead Street in '31. You lived on Big Pine, Little Torch, and Saddlebunch.

Hemingway wrote *To Have and Have Not* in the Caribbean, but it's about a fishing boat captain who runs contraband between Cuba and Florida. You said it (the island) had air you could swim through. They say that it (the pie) doesn't require baking due to the chemical reaction between the condensed milk and the acidic lime juice.

*The Sun Also Rises* epitomizes the lost generation. It's something you'd likely read in college. It was written in '25, when Hemingway and Hadley were at the festival in Pamplona, which is where the characters are in the novel, which isn't anything like the islands. You said it (the island) was filled with rich people and rednecks and everyone in between.

Hemingway's Brett is shallow and sexually free. Everyone drinks. One of her lovers is a bullfighter. Another is impotent. You said that the residents of Stock Island have a crack problem. Hemingway had a habit of leaving his wives before they could leave him. You said that marriage was the dumbest thing two people could do.

Hemingway's plane crashed twice in Africa. His hair and arms were badly burned. You jumped from 2000 planes in the Keys. You claim that you were only vomited on once during a freefall.

Hemingway's wives wrote for *Vogue*, *Vogue*, *Colliers*, and *Time*. Hemingway won the Pulitzer for *The Old Man*

*and the Sea*. You call yourself a shark, but it's never been about the blood.

Hemingway sank into depression when all his friends began to die. It was during the war, but none of them died in the fighting. Not Yeats or Fitzgerald, not Anderson or Joyce. But none of his wives were dead yet, and he was still years away from Idaho (the days of chopping wood with a faulty memory). But he also wasn't swimming anymore.

Your brother was an accident. Your sister was more of a tragedy. At least three generations of Hemingways have committed suicide.

Hemingway refers to the poor residents of Key West as "Conchs." In 1763, the British moved the Spaniards and Natives to Havana. Today, the city's motto is *one human family*.

Someday, you might tell me to take a photo next to mile marker 0. You might say things to try to comfort me. You might use bible verses to remind me of the fragility of life: *One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth forever*. I might not believe you, but I might jump anyway. 🌀



**ROSEMARIE DOMBROWSKI** is the co-founder of the Phoenix Poetry Series and a poetry editor at *Four Chambers*. Her poems have appeared in *Columbia Review*, *Ginosko*, *Salt River Review*, *Hartskill Review*, the anthology *Poetry and Prose for the Phoenix Art Museum*, and elsewhere. Her collection, *The Book of Emergencies* (a poetic ethnography of autism) was published by Five Oaks Press in 2014 and nominated for three Pushcarts. She's a currently a Lecturer at Arizona State University's Downtown campus.

# THRICE FICTION MAGAZINE CO-FOUNDERS & 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](http://rwspryszak.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](http://Blogography.com)



# THERE'S MORE WHERE THIS CAME FROM

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# THRICE FICTION

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Our first 14 issues are available for **FREE** download at [ThriceFiction.com](http://ThriceFiction.com)



# ARTISTS & PHOTOGRAPHERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE



## CHAD ROSEBURG *Pages: Front Cover, 2, 6, 7, 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.



## KATELIN KINNEY *Pages: 8, 9, 17...*

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](http://katelinkinney.com)



## CHARMA RULAND *Pages: 13-14 (original photo)...*

is a pinhole camera hobbyist and sometimes storyteller residing in one of the pretty bits of Appalachia. When not living in the past photographically, she's living in the present theoretically.



## KYRA WILSON *Pages: 10, 11-12, 15-16 (original photos)...*

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](http://KWilsonStudio.com)



## CHAD YENNEY *Pages: Inside Front Cover, 23, 24, Back Cover...*

makes paper collages in Washington state. You can see more of his work at his website at [computarded.com](http://computarded.com) or send him love letters at [computardedcollage@gmail.com](mailto:computardedcollage@gmail.com).

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