

# THRICE FICTION™



ISSUE No. 17 • AUGUST 2016





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## CONTENTS

- 2.** Thrice 17 Notes *by RW Spryszak*
- 3.** Diverse Accounts of the  
Soul's Birth and Wandering  
*by Douglas Penick*
- 6.** Keeping Track *by Bette Pesetsky*
- 7.** La Guarida del Pulpo *by James Claffey*
- 9.** Legs & Chair *by Charles Wilkinson*
- 12.** Slumber *by Ana Prundaru*
- 13.** Condensation *by Saanya Ali*
- 18.** Our Lady of the Camp *by LA Lantz*
- 20.** The Man against the Wall  
*by Emily Walling*
- 21.** Blinders *by Paul Beckman*
- 23.** What Lies in Darkness  
*by E. H. Vital-Lazare*
- 27.** Poorly Drawn Lines *by Reza Farazmand*
- 28.** Sunset in Pa'tong *by Geoffrey Miller*
- 29.** Crossing Fin Line *by Priyanka Nawathe*
- 30.** From Here to There *by Ariana Hocking*
- 33.** Lady of the Snow  
*by Jonathan Louis Duckworth*
- 36.** A Bit of Storytime *by Shoshauna Shy*
- 37.** Ties That Bind *by Shoshauna Shy*
- 39.** A Nuisance *by Brian Coughlan*
- 41.** Death of a House Wife  
*by Sarah Denise Johnson*
- 42.** A New Start *by Gary Floyd*
- 43.** The Water *by Steven Earnshaw*
- 45.** Something for Pondscum  
*by C. Allen Harrison*
- 49.** The Pinterest Terrorists  
*by Estlin Agnew*
- 54.** Hoboken *by Marilyn Morgan*
- 55.** The Gift *by Marilyn Morgan*
- 57.** Bios From A Twentieth Century  
European Lit Reading *by Jon Sindell*

A guide to art & photos in this issue is on pages 58-59

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*Frustration* by Katelin Kinney

**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.

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exceptional artwork since 2011. **THRICE ARTS** provides design and editing services to writers at large.





## Thrice 17 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

Reflecting the incongruities of 2016 America back at you in our offerings this issue, we wind up not in some Joycian commodious vicus of recirculation but in dead certainty that it is nicer to be smothered by the esoteric than the incongruous. There may only be a small degree of difference between these two, but nailing down some definitions would be progress of a kind. But it isn't easy, considering the mountains of glib, the rivers of mendacity, and the avalanche of the specious through which we must daily navigate. Not to mention the mucking around in the jungles of burning straw men and swamps of blood sucking ad hominem leeches that comes after that. The ability to differentiate seems to have abandoned the general culture. And the election is still a ways off. Imagine what our shoes are going to look like by November, wading through all this vicus.

As you can see, we also like to torture metaphors. Which, vicariously, also tortures the reader. But consider these rhetorical gymnastics a warm up for what is to come as you start to turn these pages — either physically, electronically, or metaphorically.

Some of our stories and scripts here collected are no more incongruous than the world you are now living in, so why complain? We don't much like experiments and wouldn't foist them on you. No. We prefer full blown laboratory monsters already realized and about to smother you with their big green hands.

I sorted through the submissions and still don't get a few of these myself. I can't imagine what the artists went through this time. But since I've recently been told by a fine writer of no reputation (because no one has ever heard of him), that I don't know what I'm doing as an editor, what do you want from or expect of me? I can't argue. Like the national candidates, I'm afraid this is as good as it gets. Though I think what we have is a damn sight better than those other choices.

If anyone disagrees, they can always vote for a giant meteor strike. Then who cares if we're back to Howth Castle and Environs or not. Ya know?



## Diverse Accounts of the Soul's Birth and Wandering

Douglas Penick

1)

We have all been lifted from darkness, carried and placed by unseen hands on some horizontal expanse. Shining, glowing, clean and sparkling, we have waited. Moved, placed. Lifted again into swirl of hot breath, chatter and barking sounds. Then some of us are filled with cool fluids, grasped, lifted, kissed, emptied, filled again; others are covered with warm solids, scraped, emptied, taken away, others yet are picked up, and turned to slice and cut, gripped to prod and poke, waved in the air, inserted in mouths. Then the hands depart and there is quiet.

All finally done, other hands move us, bathe and dry us, hide us in darkness, There, we continue to vibrate faintly from the intensity of those interactions for which we were made. It was an evening in which ardent young noblemen spoke intently of God, faith, sin, redemption, and the soul.

They spoke of temptations, worldly fears, spiritual goals, inner struggles yet unresolved.

2)

Deep in darkness, the china plates are dreaming. It is night. Through the glass panes in the breakfront, the crystal goblets peer unblinking across the room and out into the night as faint stars move through the skies. Deep in their green cloth-lined drawers, the forks, spoons, silver-handled knives, still quiver, nestled in ranks.

They know that all of them, whether metal, glass or china, that they have emerged from the earth and passed through the wordless violence of fire. They bear the marks of such a birth, but little memory. But each is predisposed to certain resonances. Each vibrates from aspects of recent exchanges: of spoken words, of the passage of fluids' rise



and fall, of the coming and going of solid foods. It is in such echoes they seek to find themselves.

They speak. They know the other implements have voices. They are speaking, though they are not always sure of the meanings they wish to share.

3)  
The crystal goblets, in their inmost being, still bear the momentum of shifting sand and the ready acceptance of warmth, sea cold, sunlight. They are ever sensitive, febrile, still suggestible from the intoxicants they briefly contain, alert from the warm hands and soft lips of a chaste young aristocrat. As one they quiver in barely audible inquiry:

“Dear ones, we cannot, can we, help but be stimulated by words and worlds beyond our limits. Just as the young men who so recently made use of us discussed: who are we then? What are our essences, our souls? The young man have forgotten us the minute they emptied us and put us down. Now, for our own sakes, let us recall stories from the travelers who touched us. Let us venture into the world of their words.”

Finally, a small crystal cordial glass raises her limpid quiet voice: “ You mean to ask: who gave us souls, we who are made to serve?”

All the glasses flex slightly in approbation.  
The cordial glass next to her takes up the theme. “Our anxious guests say their souls inside them are made by God and are eternal.”

A white wine glass vibrates sympathetically: “No. For us it is different. Our souls are not like those of men. For them we have no soul. And perhaps we do not. Nothing will remain of us past our destruction. We shall share our fate with the wine bottles in the trash.”

A red wine goblet chimes: “But our function, the needs we fulfill, surely will outlive us? Is our function then our soul?”

Another red-wine goblet continues: “ You mean to say that just as men receive their souls from God, men endow us likewise with a soul when they shape us according to their needs.”

And a third says: “Or can it be that when men make us, they, by accident or design, let their own souls slip into our being?”

The crystal goblets then contemplated this in silence.

4)  
After a while, as one began and others take up the melody, all the goblets and glasses, bathing in starlight, sing softly in chorus:

“We have heard, have we not, that there is a tiny island amid a distant sea.

Once upon a time, a man there came to life without parents.

Once upon a time, from sunlight alone, glasses, goblets,

tumblers,  
All sprang to life without makers of any kind.  
We have heard that on this island,  
There is a single spring from which all glassware comes.  
On this isle in the sea, there grows a single palm tree.  
Glassware grows on it.  
It gives birth to women too.  
This is where everything, body and soul, both began.

We don’t remember who told us this.  
It is something, late at night, we heard someone say.”

5)  
Faintly, as from afar, the china plates hear the goblets and the glassware’s song. They cannot resist the lure of making sound. They have never lost the supine ease of moist earth, nor has the fired effaced their time of being massaged and spun, cared for and embellished. But their easy, even credulous, sociability hides a more resentful nature. They whisper one to another: “Soon they will say there is an island where there are no guests, where food is not cooked or served.”

A soup bowl chuckles. “Well, we have heard a different story, haven’t we?”

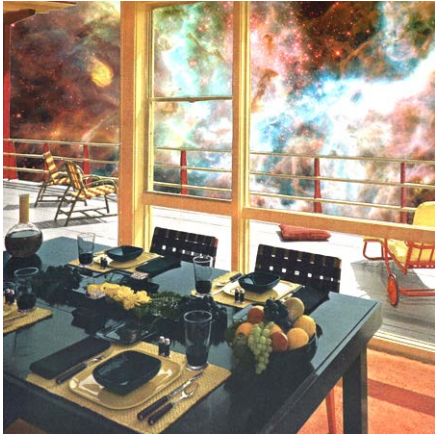
The soup tureen, ever self important and recently warmed by a splendid double consommé, laughs. “Ha Ha Ha! What has this to do with having a soul or getting one?”

Three of the dinner plates in unison try to bring reason to bear. “You all know that just this evening we have heard the young masters say that not far from that island, there is another island, much larger. It abounds with edible plants, with animals and people. Once upon a time, a haughty, fierce, and jealous Prince ruled there. The Prince had a sister graced with matchless beauty. He would not let her marry; no suitor was worthy. Even so, a kinsman secretly won her over, and before long she gave birth to a son.” At this, a gravy boat begins to giggle, but the cups and saucers clatter disapprovingly.

The butter plates try to bring order to the situation and take up the tale. “But lest her secret passion be discovered, she put the child into a little wooden ark along with a porcelain plate, bowl, teacup and saucer, glasses for water, red and white wine, and a complete set of silverware. She wanted whoever found the child to know he was civilized. She suckled the babe, sealed it in the ark, and committed it to the sea. The waters swelled with the tide and carried it swiftly to that island”

And then a serving platter interrupts: “Yes. Yes. A powerful current carried the ark to the shore, and cast it into a shady grove, a very pleasant place, well sheltered from wind and rain, and sun. The infant slumbering in the ark was safe. But the child, feeling hungry, began to cry. He rolled from side to side within the ark. Fortunately his cry was heard by a roe, searching for her fawn, which, alas, had been carried off by an eagle.”

But the teapot becomes excited. She cannot just sit by in



silence: “Indeed it is as you say. But at first she thought she heard the cry of her offspring, and when she found the ark, she broke it open with her hoofs. Then she saw the weeping human baby. She took pity and suckled him. Thus she nursed him, raised him, and kept him from harm. But the child yearned to learn to speak. Even in his gurglings and cries, he wanted to discover his true nature...”

The Soup tureen then takes a deep breath. Obviously he intends to explain what next happened to the child and his utensils. But the dinner knives have had enough. They interrupt.

6)  
The silver handled dinner knives speak as one: “You, fragile creatures, have stories upon stories to assert that something in you continues from the moment you were lifted from the earth. There is some part of you that continues beyond breakage, beyond form. For us, this is unimaginable. Such narratives are, for us, merely incidental. We, we have never changed whether we lived in rock or now in the forms that are useful to the men who took us from our home and shaped us to their purposes. We have no story. What we remember offers us nothing of the kind of solace you so evidently seek.”

The soup spoons, deep and soft-voiced, go on: “The miners who cut us from the black rock, who cut us from veins deep beneath the earth, those miners wept. They were losing their memories. They said: ‘The memory of the miner is lost in the dark.’

The butter knives whisper: “They said: ‘When we miners speak, we can’t tell the truth.

We no longer know what it would be. We are working so that we can fulfill our dreams. Our memory is not fixed. We are cutting through rock to find the veins of silver. Our memory of any other life is melting in the dark.’

The dinner forks, clear and direct, join in: “Yes, a miner will talk to you, but he never can remember what he said. His mind is always fixed on something else”

The soup spoons, slow and gentle, continue: “One man sighed and said: ‘I may remember things for a moment, then they’re gone. Hour by hour, the past is being squeezed out of my mind.’

The large serving spoons speak up, loud and clear: “Don’t waste your time on pity. Those men hated us. They said, over and over: ‘the devil is silver. The silver devil lives in the mines. He writhes and twists through the black rock. He made us come here. The silver devil wriggles through the solid darkness until we capture him.’

The serving spoon interrupts angrily: “Oh, the miners

regretted the day they came to think that we could somehow set them free. To rip us from the dwelling nature gave us, they gave up their own forest homes, their life on the river, their freedom to move as they hunted in the bush. Their dreams, their desire for a different life trapped them in the mines beneath the earth.”

Then the silverware, all as one agree. A carving knife takes the role of their spokesman: “We have discussed this often in private. We have hesitated about telling you, but there’s no point in keeping silence.

“We must conclude that truly we have never left the fires that transformed us. The forms we believe we have now and those we think we remember are visions, momentary flickerings in the fire of changes and transformations that we can neither neither comprehend nor stop. Those other beings that we think have shaped and held us are illusions in the swirling smoke. Dear friends, the oscillation of heat and cold is the continuum where we meet each other and lose ourselves. Imagining, seeing, hearing, feeling, remembering, wandering, transforming these are merely the touch of the flames.”

No one has anything more to say that night. Perhaps the next day, new conversations will stimulate new discourse. Perhaps not. The room falls still, until, in the early morning, the servants return to set the table. The young masters will soon come down for breakfast and, as they nourish themselves using implements they barely notice, they will continue to consider the elusive nature of their being. 🕒



**DOUGLAS PENICK**'s work is concerned with cultural loss and continuity. He has written novels on the 3rd Ming Emperor's recreation of an Empire (*Journey of the North Star*), and about searching for enlightened society amid social collapse (*Dreamers and Their Shadows*). He wrote libretti for *King Gesar* (Sony CD) and *Ashoka's Dream* (Santa Fe Opera) and three book-length episodes from the Gesar of Ling epic. Shorter works appeared in *Cahiers de L'Herne*, *Agni*, *Chicago Quarterly*, *New England Quarterly*, *Kyoto Journal*, and *Tricycle*, etc. In April, 2016, Wakefield Press published his and Charles Ré's translation of Pascal Quignard's *A Terrace In Rome*.



## Keeping Track

Bette Pesetsky

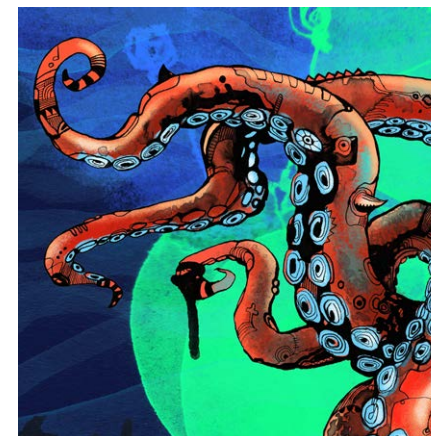
This is where Marie Louise used to work when Molly died one weekend. A clinical tragedy, they said, due to an overwhelming infection. This is where when Marie Louise came to work on Monday on 17th Street across from the AllGood Bakery that her friends believed Arabs owned, and their cashier said you'll never guess what happened. And Molly left a three-year-old boy whose Polaroid face was on the bulletin board. And Marie Louise has been gone from that job fifteen years next spring.

This is where Marie Louise was with Jay before she started working nights where the money was greater, and she hasn't seen Jay for at least twelve years. When she started to drink, the doctor said it was the pattern of her family life, and the pills came next, and the rehab counselor sent her for training to the only opening that month in kitchen work at which she turned out to be a natural.

This is where she cooks all day for sick people which is why the doctor says she stopped drinking, because the act of giving is very therapeutic, and she has been cooking here for eight years next summer when that boy of Molly's will turn thirty, and he wouldn't recognize his mother, if she walked past him, and where has that Polaroid gone? 🗨️



**BETTE PESETSKY** lives in New York and is the author of two short story collections: *Stories Up to A Point* and *Confessions of a Bad Girl*. Her recent flash fiction has appeared in *Oblong*, *Chicago Literati*, *Veritas Review*, *Litro*. *Helen: a literary magazine*, *The Moth*, and *Sleet*.



## La Guarida del Pulpo

James Claffey

The *pulpo* was above me in the water, its tentacles draped over my face, gently stroking my cheeks. The sky ceilinged blue and from so far down I swear I saw fleets of brigantine pelicans traverse the known world. Something about the water confused me. The movement of the waves seemed more like billowed bed sheets than crashing torrents of salt water. Below, too far to make out the place, a submerged bell chimed the evening call for Mass. Shoals of striped fish and strange eels with heads like shattered bottle necks made their way along the ocean as the pulse of the tentacled creature tugged, urging me to dive further, to give in to the lure of the salt prayers. Whether this was a waking dream or not, I couldn't care, because it was in the darkness of two inkish eyes that I found the truth. Suspended in the water, I let its suckered eight limbs rove and pull at me in a frenzy that stirred this primal place I'd not know before. Only the fleeting shadow of a passing ray broke my trance as the *pulpo* took me by the mouth and dragged me back into the depths. 🗨️



**JAMES CLAFFEY** hails from County Westmeath, Ireland, and lives on an avocado ranch in Carpinteria, CA. He is fiction editor at *Literary Orphans*, and the author of the short fiction collection, *Blood a Cold Blue*. His work appears in the W.W. Norton Anthology, *Flash Fiction International*, and in Queensferry Press's anthology, *Best Small Fictions of 2015*.





# Legs & Chair

Charles Wilkinson

The one with the legs went back into the kitchen, a cold room in too warm a house. He waited for the kettle’s low hiss to turn to water-rumble; then the clatter of the metal lid, and the first grey blooms opening from the spout. As soon as the kettle had whined, clicked and shushed, he heard Chair in the sitting room, talking to himself about the ghosts. Legs dropped a tea bag into the mug, the one with the yellow owl on the side. It was a fine morning: a near flawless blue sky faintly scuffed with cirrus; sheen on the grass, the river scrubbed to froth and gloss. He wanted to open the French window and wheel Chair into the garden, but his brother was content to stay where he was - staring at the wall, watching bright shapes and shadows move across the cream paintwork.

‘Are you sure you wouldn’t like to face the garden?’ asked Legs, as he put the mug down on the side table.

Chair’s tartan rug was pulled right up to his chin. He turned his head towards Legs, bewilderment in his weak blue eyes. Then recognition stirred: a barely perceptible movement of the eyelids, the pupils darkening. They were the last living members of The Faith.

‘Still out there, talking,’ Chair said, his voice frayed and querulous.

‘What? The ghosts?’

Either reluctant or unable to comment further on events in the garden, Chair pulled his brown woollen hat over his forehead and closed his eyes. It was a month since the first manifestations, none of which had been witnessed by Legs. Did the ghosts present themselves traditionally attired in white? Was there any resemblance to the Cadwalleders, who’d owned the house eighty years ago? When questioned on the subject, Chair’s answers were laconic and lacking in specificity.

‘What do they want?’ asked Legs. ‘If they’re talking the whole time, you must know what they’re looking for?’

‘Their words ... cold.’

‘Do they utter some kind of curse?’

‘Cold.’

If Chair could be more precise, it might be worth consulting a priest, although the brothers were neither Church nor Chapel. At the moment, the only information was that the ghosts were outside, numerous and conversing in a fashion Chair found disturbing. Was it possible to exorcise a garden? A river? Legs tried to remember what The Faith had to say on the subject. All he could recall was a plain room somewhere in his Sunday childhood: high windows; the sermon, alternately abstract and threatening; the smell of dust on the hassocks; the sticky leather of the prayer books; the hymns in the old language; the bright panes of light on the stark wall moving with the shadow frames.

•

Legs took the shopping bag off the hook in the hall and picked up his walking stick. He called over his shoulder to Chair.

‘I won’t be long. I’m just going into the town.’

A faint murmur. Nothing recognisable as a reply.

That morning, when Legs had taken up breakfast on a tray, Chair was visibly distressed. Not only had he endured another sleepless night, but in the small hours the ghosts had entered his bedroom. Although they mostly talked amongst themselves, there were moments when he couldn’t help but feel he was being rebuked. In what way? Legs had asked. That was part of the problem: their language was familiar yet unintelligible. .

‘I said I’m off into town. Remember?’ said Legs, as he turned the handle.

A sound approximate to assent. Legs shut the door behind him and breathed in. After the dry heat and medicinal scent of the house, the cool air resembled fresh water on the tongue. The previous week he’d returned from shopping to find his brother frightened and confused; today he’d explained three times where he was going. He was still not sure Chair had understood. Should he consult someone? The Elders of The Faith had always been suspicious of doctors; his father had said there was no problem that prayer and the pharmacist couldn’t solve.

Already Legs had reached the underpass. A smell of urine and stale beer. There were crude murals in clotted green paint that depicted meadows since developed as a housing estate. Some of Legs’s less enterprising pupils been involved in the art project. The busy highway above had once been a country road lined with abundant hedgerows —all gone, along with the birds that sang in them.

The supermarket occupied the space in the town where Chair’s General Stores had stood. Legs took a trolley and started to fill it. At the far end of the aisle was a young woman with the same red hair as the girl at college he’d taken a fancy to fifty years ago. But you didn’t marry ‘out’ — not if you were in The Faith. When she’d refused to convert that had been the end of it. Disinfectant, fly killer, odour eater — it was a shame there wasn’t a spray for ghosts.

Outside, he waited for the taxi; the shopping bag was too heavy for him to carry back. A man with cropped grey hair nodded as he wheeled a trolley, his beer belly propped on the bar, towards the car park. Legs was unsure whether it was someone he’d taught. It was of no importance. After he given up trying to remember his pupils, the nightmares had stopped.

A red taxi pulled up; the driver was Gareth. A thin man with wasted features and wispy grey hair brushed forward, he was about five years younger than Legs.

‘It was lucky you put that note through my door. They’re not taking bookings in the old language anymore. And



another thing: from next month everything's got to be done online,' he said through the window; then he eased himself out to help Legs put the shopping in the boot.

'But we're not connected.'

'Well, I'm sorry, Mr Rees. But the fact of the matter is that soon we'll be doing out of town only. Mainly the railway, the airport and the space station. Nowhere within walking distance, if you take my meaning. Otherwise, it's just not worth the trouble.'

'But how will I able to get back?'

'It would be a question of asking around, I should say. I hope you don't mind if we go back the long way. There's a woman up the top I've to take on to the farm shop, see.'

'That won't be a problem.'

'Now if I had my say we'd still help the regulars. Local people. The customers we've had for years. But this new lot up at the office aren't having any of that. Everything has to be bang up to the moment for them.'

They took the coast road out of town and the turned up a hill. It must have been ten years or more since he'd been that way, yet it was a shock to see that the site where The Faith's foursquare meeting hall had stood was occupied by two bungalows. Legs tried to remember the name of the last of the elders, the one who'd called Chair a 'wine-bibber' and tried to expel him for worldliness. After that incident the brothers had stopped attending. Nevertheless, they still regarded themselves as members of The Faith, living apart from their community but under divine jurisdiction.

The taxi stopped to pick up the woman from her cottage at the top. It was a remote place but the roof bristled with aerials. She nodded at Legs as she climbed into the back and said a few friendly words. He didn't recognise her, but the bond between taxi takers was almost as strong as the solidarity of the last smokers.

It was another twenty minutes before Gareth dropped Legs off. Everyone said goodbye in the old language.

When Legs went into the sitting room, he found his brother lying face down on the floor a few feet away from the wheelchair. He turned him over and tucked a hand under his head. Although Chair was breathing, his right eye was half closed and the thin line of his mouth on the same side drooped downwards, set in an attitude of disapproval.

'What happened?'

Chair tried to speak but only produced a small bubble of saliva. The whole right side of his face appeared frozen, even his lips numbed by more than novocaine.

'Can you raise your arms?'

After a moment, he succeeded in heaving his left hand a few inches off the ground.

'Is your vision blurred? Look through your left eye and then your right.'

He was trying to say something. Legs put an ear close to his brother's mouth. First a faint sibilance and then, only just audible, a slurred: 'The ghosts ...'

'The ghosts?'

With a great effort, Chair expelled three more words, as if acknowledging whatever had taken possession of him: 'in ... my ... ears.' Had he at last understood what was being said?

After he'd phoned for an ambulance and left a message

on the answer-phone, Legs went quickly up the stairs and into the bathroom. Somewhere in the medicine cupboard there was bound to be some aspirin. If his brother took a tablet, it would help to prevent a second stroke. He grabbed the bottle and stepped back into the corridor. At once he noticed a difference: an oddity of acoustics suggesting a much larger dimension had been superimposed on the narrow landing down which he was now walking: a faint cave-like echo of his footsteps, and a disturbance in the air, an awareness of unseen movement: a faint respiration, less than the touch of moth's breath, yet amplified to the very point detectable to human hearing. Once he was half way down the stairs, he knew he was back in an ordinary space.

In the hall, the telephone rang. As soon as he picked it up, an indefinable quality of an absence on the line allowed him to anticipate the voice would be automated.

'Thank you for contacting Cosmonet Healthcare. We are unable to deal with your request for an ambulance at this time. If you wish to speak to a professional, please press 978513; for all other options select zero and then wait.'

Legs keyed in the numbers. Almost immediately there was a response.

'To proceed to the next stage, place the patient in the scanner and inform Cosmonet Healthcare of the reading within fifteen minutes.'

'I'm not in a hospital!'

'We are aware of your location. To proceed to the next stage first place...'

The pause before answering and the repetition indentified the voice as mechanical. He redialled the number and pressed zero.

'Choose Cosmonet Healthcare for a comprehensive solution to all your medical needs.

A complete package, including insurance cover and payments tailored to your...'

Then the silence from the sitting room prevailed over the voice at the end of line. He put the phone down. There was no need to see Chair to know the connection was broken.

One of Legs's earliest memories was of his brother's broad freckled face, sandy hair and candid blue eyes gazing down at him as he lay in his cot. So alike had they looked that at each new school he was recognised as Chair's brother before he gave his name. Until Legs went away to college, they shared a bedroom; they sang every Sunday in the same pew. Neither married; both worked in the same small town until they retired. Even in old age, when they started to joke of themselves as Legs and Chair, he always imagined the two names were connected by an ampersand: the three letters of the more customary conjunction placed them too far apart. The impotent aspirin bottle was on the table. Legs left it where it was. He went through to the sitting room to accept the presence of departure.

As he passed a straggle of mourners on their way to their cars, Legs waved from the back of the taxi. The service had not been well attended. Chair had lived on for over thirty years after closing the General Stores. There had been no address, but at least the celebrant consented to having one of the hymns and all of the prayers in the old language. Wasn't cremation against the tenets of The Faith? Legs was half-certain he could remember a sermon

on the subject: how it was necessary to embalm and bury believers whole so they would rise up complete on the Day of Judgement. But perhaps this was a doctrine of another sect? He'd forgotten most of the articles of belief that had distinguished The Faith from mainstream Christianity. As there were no elders alive to consult, Legs had opted for the more economic option.

Above the raw horizon, the western fire lit up the undersides of clouds. Legs had looked away at the moment the coffin slid towards the flames. How dark were the doors that closed at the moment of the committal? What could Chair have possibly meant by *the ghosts in my ears*?

Shaking hands with the mourners afterwards, Legs wondered whether he should have invited them back to the house. For what? Tea or a glass of the red wine that Chair had occasionally allowed himself, an indulgence that cost them the companionship of The Faith.

'A simple service. But very affecting, I thought,' said Gareth, keeping his eye on the narrow road ahead.

'He wouldn't have wanted anything grand.'

Half way through the service, Legs had been touched to see that rather than stay outside in the taxi, Gareth had slipped into the Chapel and was standing quietly at the back.

'And you have to say to yourself why go to a lot of pomp and ceremony when something perfectly straightforward will do just as well if not better.'

'Quite.'

They drove on in silence. As they turned east, the deciduous shapes on the hillside coagulated — dark green, deep blue at dusk. Black and white cattle blurred, swimming in the fading light. Against the skyline the fir tree tips shimmered, about to dissolve. Then the early evening space bus to the Moon rose above the forest. A probable passenger list of the marginal and the upwardly mobile: prospectors for iron and titanium, robotics engineers, company managers, small-time magnesium miners, operators of mechanical diggers, cold fusion dreamers and pedlars of madcap schemes, all fastened in their seats and thinking of another month in the stations and out on the lunar maria.

'I was sorry to hear about ... the delay. Terrible thing to happen, that,' said Gareth at last.

'Yes, most upsetting. But no doubt they would have been too late in any case.'

'Shocking really. You shouldn't have to pay for no sort of proper provision whatsoever.'

'You're not with Cosmonet Care then?'

'No, I'm with the other lot. Mediquick they call themselves. There's some that say they're all the same, but I'm not so sure. I had one of those MRI scanners free when

I renewed my package. They may not be the latest model but they're better than nothing.

And what can you expect when you live in a country that is owned by an internet company?'

They turned into the drive. The garden was draped in near darkness; the river a faint glimmer of silver. There were no lights on in the house. Legs thought of the empty wheelchair in the sitting room.

'You wouldn't like to come in for drop of something,' said Legs. For a second, he wondered why Gareth wasn't getting out of the driver's seat: then he remembered there was no shopping in the boot.

'That's very kind of you, Mr Rees, but I've got another job on the other side of town. You take care now.'

'Next time I see you we'll both have to speak in the New Language. What are they calling it now? Adapted KX 13?'

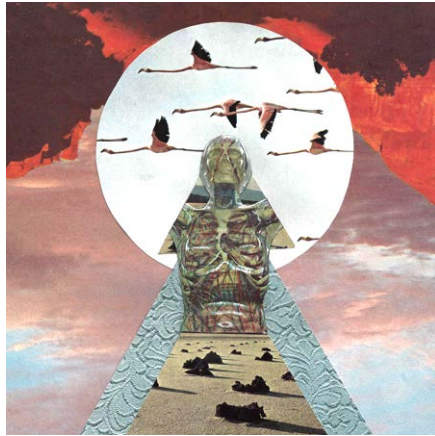
'No, that was last month. Adapted LA 14 is what we're using now. It's a terrible thing it is — losing English. Mind you, I saw it coming when they renamed the Severn after that software engineer. Still, it happens. They say your name and mine — and the names of rivers for that matter — came from even older languages.'

Gareth waited until Legs had opened the front door. They both waved.

As soon as he went upstairs, he heard them — the ghosts. They were all about him, sighing in half-understood phrases; words whispered down the centuries, sometimes with a vowel or consonant changed, but essentially the same until usurped by a new lexicon. He thought of what was about to be forgotten: a precise shade of green in a hedgerow; an old way of working the land; a neo-lithic inscription fading into stone; the Goddess lost in the river that took her name. The country itself was now utterly possessed by a corporation in the ether, an exact location owned by an emperor of cyberspace. Ys Prydain, Britannia, Albion, Great Britain had all fallen. He thought of his brother dying on the floor, an old language sighing in him, its words almost less than the wind in the long gone elms — and never to be passed on. 🗨



**CHARLES WILKINSON's** publications include *The Pain Tree and Other Stories*. His stories have appeared in *Best Short Stories 1990*, *Best English Short Stories 2*, *Unthology*, *Best British Short Stories 2015*, *Able Muse Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Supernatural Tales*, *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*, *Phantom Drift*, *Bourbon Penn*, *Shadows & Tall Trees*, *Nightsriptand Best Weird Fiction 2015*. *Ag & Au*, a pamphlet of poems, appeared from Flarestack in 2013. His collection of strange tales and weird fiction, *A Twist in the Eye*, is forthcoming from Egaeus Press.



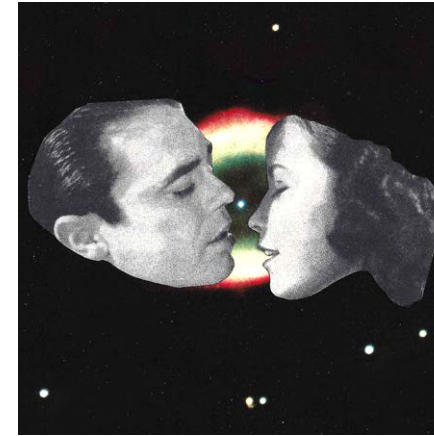
# Slumber

Ana Prundaru

Nowadays, earth nests its lawless to dark soda foam beneath the sea. Sometimes, when sunless promises rain a splendor of inventory, distant grey waves that diaper and fence the lawless set them free. A perfectly symmetrical riot pushes out the sea's liquored shoulders. In angular splashes, they inch toward a blackened ceiling. And while hands rub, cut the world, an army of high-rise sentinels, with skeleton masks ruptures through soiled cotton towns, slip far away, stopping in front of a field of cacti. The sinful stop slippery, in the middle of the field. In the middle of the field are body bags. They lift the bags on their shoulders, to beach them flat at the foot of a rhinoceros-shaped stone. Hazardous corpses, locked in our names, are crushed to waste and shrubbery and shells. Later, the lawless must harvest suits out of the dispersing wishes we all once had. And while they do that, they grizzle to the snakes: are you listening? This earth wasn't for you. And the snakes say: Be quiet and keep working, you don't exist. And the sea sighs and wavers in invisible arms. 🐍



**ANA PRUNDARU** is a Romanian-born writer and artist, based in Zurich. Recent work is featured in *Litro*, *Watershed Review*, *Calyx*, *Kyoto Journal*, *Cha* and *3:AM*. Her chapbook of found poems is available from Sod Press and a poetry chapbook will be released by Dancing Girl Press later this year. Find her at [AnaPrundaru.com](http://AnaPrundaru.com)



# Condensation

Saanya Ali

## Seven

Seven degrees exist between when it is acceptable to order an overly complicated, obsessively sucroded drink that somewhat resembles coffee's distant cousin, with a recycled sleeve and extra foam, and when one must carry a black coffee on ice.

She lived in this cavity—in the difference between a cardboard cup and plastic dressed in condensation. She settled here in this perpetual indecision. It became comfortable. For, never having been able to fully resign herself to one location, this confusion followed her. It made sense. It felt like home.

Kind looks from attractive men on the street would occasionally tease a reluctant smile from lips typically wound into a hardened grimace, but she never changed orientation or instigated conversation. With feigned direction towards her destination to compensate for the lack thereof in her life, she walked in straight lines.

Stubborn.

Resolute towards the security of further confusion and the possibility of another stamp on an already well-loved passport.

Gripping firmly to caffeine or twisting a loose thread on her tattered black sweater, her insecurity hid in these places. In the tightness of her clasp on her phone as she walked. In the one ear bud pumping bass and the other tangled in her lapel. Behind her broken sunglasses, which shielded unlined eyes from darker realities.

Her hands were her tell.

*What are you?*

Everyone asked Bee *what she was*. Feeling especially snarky she would sometimes respond with "I'm a human, I think" or "Today, I'm a fucking manatee," feigning incomprehension of the question, responding fluently in sarcasm.

But she knew.

She had gotten this question for too many years not to know.

*What are you?*

They asked her *what she was* so they could put her into a box. Exert no effort. Make no attempt to listen to the rest of anything she had to say. With one question she was pre-defined before ever learning that she liked pistachio ice cream or that she'd read *The Sun Also Rises* six times or that she separates her M&Ms by colour and that she loves romance when it happens to other people but the concept intimidates her when it is reflexive.

The stereotypes existed for this reason.

For every answer she could give they would pin her as the nerd, the future-doctor-lawyer, the immigrant child with the accent, the one who talks with an attitude like she's been repressed her whole life. And then *Miscellaneous*.

*Misc.* worked for her.

Commitment. She sipped on the word like the taste burned going down. An acidic repulsion to a concept that perpetually napped in the back of her throat. It scared her. She did not fear change or darkness or heights or immensity or snakes or spiders, but she feared this. She was scared of feeling so deeply, so all-consuming. Of putting herself so completely into another. Co-depending her happiness. Tying herself to one. One place. One person. One life.

## One

One.

One didn't leave doors open. There was no escape route with one.

No plan B.

When *one* was taken away, you are left with nothing. She knew enough basic mathematics from twelve different primary schools to piece that much together. One minus one was zero, but if that arbitrary "one" that she tied herself to



were to leave, or die, or grow bored, or get tired of keeping up with her spontaneity (or ADHD or crazy overcompensation for her familial troubles as it was called by so many scrubs sporting MD and PsyD and DO after their names), she would have less than zero.

Zero is having no one to begin with. She would have then lost.

She would have negative one.

She put herself in boxes so no one else could. So the nondescript “they” didn’t have the power to confine her, to corral her recklessness.

Bee wasn’t reckless in the kind of party animal, high-chasing kind of way; rather, she was reckless in her secrets, her words so carefully chosen.

She never had to commit, so she lied. It was more fun. She could play with peoples’ brains and make no apologies. They would never know. To them, she wouldn’t exist in three months. They didn’t care, and she got her rush out of it.

She tried drugs. They did nothing for her. Chemicals so futile they didn’t even succeed in making her loopy or putting her to sleep. The out of mind and body escapes that so many episodes of *Skins* and *Degrassi* convinced her of, bored her and prompted nausea in the morning. Her rush was the adrenaline. The fear and excitement of telling a lie or just disappearing.

She joked often, the quizzical pitch change at the end of a sentence that deciphered a lie from a sarcastic quip or witty remark would often go unnoticed in conversation or otherwise not exist at all. Every parent-teacher conference and report home concluded with the same four words since the second grade, “Bee is an . . . enigma.” Her eighth-grade science teacher went as far as to call her a “pathological liar”. They couldn’t categorize her, so instead, they diagnosed. She didn’t fit into any of their preconceived boxes.

So she left.

**Ten**

Ten miles an hour. Her fastest escape was ten miles in one hour. Sixty minutes wouldn’t even get her out of her zip code. She didn’t drive, so instead she ran. Ten miles in one hour. One mile in six minutes. One foot in front of the other. An escape sponsored by Nike.

She didn’t like to run the same way no one particularly enjoys getting out of bed when they forget to brush their teeth. She just did.

You just do.

It was what she had to do to stay sane. To evade attachment. Because attachment was the most addicting of drugs.

Bee also didn’t do feelings. Another illicit high that she avoided. Not to say that she didn’t feel, she was really a very sensitive person, but being such, she was inclined to the extremes, more apt to endure months of debilitating sadness then periods of inexplicable, unprompted, contentment without warning. She didn’t do anything halfway, so saying, in every emotionally charged instance that she “didn’t do feelings” with a well-rehearsed eye roll wasn’t entirely true. She “did” feelings, she just had enough of her own that she

didn’t want anyone else’s, lest she overdose on too many. So when they began to set in with the formation of a group of friends or the possibility of a crush, she left.

**Nine**

Nine sets of neighbors. Nine front doors. Nine kitchen tables. Nine sets of cabinets with jam jars filled with assorted spices. Nine lives.

At twenty years old, she had lived nine incomplete existences. To everyone else, she said that staying in one place bored her. To herself, she knew that it just scared her. Remembering directions. Becoming a regular in a place where she knew the waitress’s name and the waitress knew her order.

People knowing her.

And then there were the missed opportunities, the hundreds of realities existing simultaneously to her nine. She would be a fool to miss them. Bee was not a fool.

Leaving was easy. Arriving was seamless. The middle was difficult.

She got used to leaving. Living out of a duffel. Eating at diners with dirty spoons and leftover pie. Getting on planes when she made enough money working at those greasy diners with poorly washed cutlery.

Arriving was a game. She had been a classically trained ballerina named Seven in Amsterdam for three months. She was a cheating diplomat’s daughter, Poppy, in Cannes for nine weeks. A gay socialite called Fox in Helsinki for almost a year (she was having fun). An ethnically ambiguous model in Milan who just went by X.

She left Italy last week after telling a somewhat falsified account of a dinner with Allegra Versace, having forgotten that she was at school in California at the time. Her skin was a strange sort of mix that could fit in anywhere. She just was. Sometimes her skin seemed lighter than her classmates or her hair less blonde than her colleagues, but she easily lived under the radar, monochrome outfits drawing no attention to her disposition. Her almond eyes and big brows piqued curiosities and initiated conversations, but they never lasted long. In each place she could be something else. Someone else. That was the rush of leaving. The newness. The nothing to live up to. The nothing to prove.

One of the infinite shrinks that she had been sent to after turning in an essay “loaded with emotion” or a painting that disclosed “obvious unresolved issues” asked her *why*.

*Why* she didn’t stay.

*Why* she didn’t join clubs or make “a good group of wholesome friends.”

She told her it was because she was an introvert and to “please remove the cheap lipstick from her teeth” and left.

She was not an introvert but the lipstick did not suit her pasty complexion.

Her parents were kicked out. And kicked out again. They kept leaving. Social services considered this an “unstable living situation,” so she was shipped to boarding school outside Geneva. She called herself Ace. No one pronounced it right. Geneva was boring.

**6.9.2002**

*The rain promised comfort like a bad politician—the concept far superior to the muggy reality. Austen novels and innumerable films romanticize these storms—beautiful moments of symbolic cleansing or dramatic kissing, the stage for countless epiphanies. I’m young but I’m not dumb. This kind of false optimism plagues Switzerland. Everyone is too damn happy. It doesn’t make sense.*

*There is nothing here but geraniums and chocolate and cows. So many fucking cows.*

—Ace (with the Swiss-German accent it sounds like they are all calling me “Ass.”)

She didn’t stay.

Her birth certificate called her Bird. Her parents called her Bee (until she was fourteen). But after that it was up to her. She had no identity given to her in those post-teen years of phases and self-actualization, so she tried them all out for size.

None fit.

She would be a fool to believe that the lies would never catch up with her.

**11.25.2002**

*I was full aware that it was a matter of time before they looked up my name and discovered that I was not a Namibian tennis player or the runner up to Ms. Maryland or traded for a prize-winning goat. I lived in the mean time. The mean time was enough time. I didn’t want anymore.*

*I’m lonely today.*

*I mean, I’m lonely most days but no one knows. For all the acting I’ve done, the citizens of Bangkok should have believed that I was Broadway star for longer than four months and nine days.*

*Today, the lonely is different. It’s a longing sort of lonely. Probably a symptom of the cold and the shitty holiday paraphernalia that makes the entire planet smell like a bloody cinnamon cookie and the movies on the plane becoming increasingly ‘home for the holidays’ oriented.*

*I never let myself want. Leaving is easier when I don’t want . . . when I don’t have anyone to say goodbye to.*

*I think I’m too good at lying. I shouldn’t be able to convince myself.*

*To believe that I genuinely like being rootless. To think that “perpetually lost” is my desired state of being..*

—? (still haven’t figured out who to be here)

Her parents were so in love. Their senses of humor so different, they played off each other in the kind of fourth-grade, hand-holding relationship way. They fought, but they fought because they loved each other. The fought like they cleaned the gutters, they didn’t want to but they knew they had to do it once in a while for a sort of detox. For all of the

love that they had, she just couldn’t do it.

Her parents kept secrets. Having moved so many times for so many undisclosed reasons, Bee just accepted their normal. She had nothing to compare it to. She would never know where her mother lost the pair to her favorite pearl earring, or how her dad got the small scar under his left eye, or in what they found so much mutual amusement that their laugh lines matched in density. But if she knew, she would want, and she couldn’t want.

Want is a road that dead-ends in disappointment.

There was a boy.

She caught feelings from him like a flu. She didn’t want them but they were contagious.

She didn’t like it, perpetually feeling sick and on edge.

She tried to forget him.

He had blue eyes.

When the sky and the sea and her favorite sweater were all blue, blue eyes were not easily forgotten. They both had small duffels but lots of baggage.

**3.3.2003**

*He had nice eyes. Valentine’s candy was still on sale.*

*He had nice eyes. Blue.*

*He had blue eyes.*

*It was dark in the pub and I was lonely and London is rainy and he had nice blue eyes and flirting was never my problem.*

*I’m a flirt. I have no problem saying it. No reservations. If that makes me a tease then fine. I’m a tease, but flirting is like dangling strings but never getting tied up. It’s a game and I’m competitive. But this was different. His eyes scared me. I patted down my hair and tried to read his expression. I wanted to know what he thought about. What he thought about me.*

*I cared?*

*People didn’t scare me. I never let them scare me. I intimidate them. I know how.*

*Fear was weakness. I was not weak. I would never be. But his eyes were blue and they were unsettling and I was unnerved by their vehemence.*

*Sitting at the bar surrounded by friends with a no-longer-cold Guinness in front of him, he didn’t talk. He did a crossword.*

*He did a crossword and I am competitive.*

*I straddled the stool next to him.*

**Sixteen**

*“Sixteen across. Apollo.”*

*“scuse me?”*

His accent wasn’t British. It was just foreign. A mix of things that meant that English was his most used language, even his language of choice, he probably dreamed in English sometimes, but it was not his first language.

*“Using the ‘P’ from ‘psoriasis.’ Sixteen across is ‘Apollo.’ Son of Zeus, brother of Artemis. Apollo.”*

*“Oh yeah. Right. Thank you.”*

He showed no interest. That was not normal. She didn’t get it. Bee won. He wasn’t even playing.

Condensation toyed with the edge of his newspaper, skating down the side of his now lukewarm beer.



Bee had a mulled wine. It was hot and spiced, burning her tongue—she liked the sensation. It was overwhelming. Painful.

Lukewarm was boring. He was lukewarm. I used my sleeve to wipe at the rivulets of water gathering around his pint making a puddle on the fake wood and left.

I didn't do lukewarm.  
"does that mean 'Leviticus' is wrong?"  
I didn't turn.  
"I mean, not the religious doctrine, the word. I need the 'L.'"  
"It's 'Levites.'"  
"what?"  
"The root. The root is Levites. You still get the 'L' but it fits. You spelled it wrong anyhow."

"Uhh, oh. Right. Thank you. Wait, where are you going?"  
I didn't turn.  
This was more familiar.  
I walked out of the pub . . . wasn't in the mood to pay . . . hadn't worked in a while and pricing a mulled wine at 6 pounds 50 was straight thievery.

I didn't condone thievery.  
He followed.  
"Rite."  
"Left."  
"No, I mean my name. It's Rite."  
"Have you got a twin called Wrong and a cousin named Maybe?"  
"Funny. Never gotten that one before..."  
"I know."  
It was raining. I walked faster. He followed faster.  
"Do you have a name?"  
"yes."  
...  
"You didn't ask for it. I just figured you were curious if I had one. Now you know I do. Are we done here?"

This is dumb and petty but I had landed in London twenty-three hours ago and hadn't thought of a name yet.  
He wasn't asking...  
I didn't hear him at all...  
I turned.  
"Bird. The name is Bird"

It was my name. It wasn't boring and I had never really used it.  
"Yes. Bird. Bird is my name."  
"So what, you have a twin called Fish and an aunt called Rat?"

He mumbled, twenty paces behind, a cigarette falling off his lips.  
"I do in fact. Thank you for asking."  
"I mean, if we are discussing families, my father goes by Frog and my mom is named Seal."  
Remarks like this could be the root of the whole "pathological liar" thing. But what Ms. Foster calls lying, I call creative energy, perpetual entertainment.

Bee wanted to be a lot of things. She wanted to be blasé, emotionless, numb. It worked with her image. She tried so hard to adopt that persona, but that didn't make it hers. When a family adopts a child, it doesn't change its DNA.  
She was glass. Everyone that touched her left fingerprints. They smudged but they never left.

She hated it, but she cared.

She twisted to the right until it stuck. Rite. The hot burned into her spine, melting each vertebrae. It hurt, painting red onto pale skin. Too sore to step out of the torrent. Addicted to the sting. Transfixed, she stood. The apostrophe of her back curving to protect her breasts. Considering the masochism of her actions, her limbs went numb, draining any power that the heat formerly held over her body. She refused herself relief, reaching again for the dial and pulling it left. Instantly the water turned cold, then frigid. The glass fogged. She wasn't numb anymore. Needles tracing every mistake down her spine, the fuzz on the nape of her neck pushing back against the water, shivers vibrating through the plasma in her blood, pulsing through blue veins she could no longer feel. Her lungs seized, provoking a kind of pre-orgasmic intake of breath. A gasp formerly only aroused by a kiss on just that spot of her neck.

He kissed that spot.  
She knew she couldn't stay.  
She left.

**Six**  
Six. She landed in Istanbul at Terminal Six.  
She liked the journeys. Airports made sense. They told you what to think and do. Autopilot. Easy.  
A continent separated her from blue eyes.

**4.15.2003**  
The Ingratiator. Before I started leaving by myself, that was my superhero name. It feels dorky and lame now, but when I was ten, it was so cool. In a classroom of sticky fingers capable of becoming invisible or light up shoes that could fly on demand, I could fit in. That was the most important power of all.  
No one else got it.  
It's like I spoke another language.  
It feels like I do here.  
—Lole (I'm reading Lolita and like the name and don't have any better ideas)  
P.S. I think I may start to learn Turkish.

She didn't learn Turkish.  
She left.

**Eighteen**  
Eighteen. She sat at Terminal Six for eighteen hours. She didn't know where to go. She didn't want to go. She was tired. She wanted to stop. She never wanted to stop like this. She would want it for a moment then hear a boarding call and shake off her exhaustion, wipe of the sweat of self-frustration. Keep going.  
She didn't know how to stop.  
He was like the hiccups. You had no say over when they went away. He was still there. Taking up space in her brain.  
She did not condone thievery.  
He stole space.

**Three**  
Three years old. The last gift that she got was from her parents when she was three years old. It was a doll filled with

lavender. They couldn't tell her where they got it or why but she didn't care. She called it Sophia.

Sophia's name didn't change. Sophia was to Bee what the museum was to Holden. Consistency. No matter where she was, no matter what happened, Sophia would live in the innermost pocket of her backpack. She may lose an eye in Croatia and lose her lavender smell over the years, but Bee's nose remembered the smell enough to know that it was there. She never told anyone about her doll. It was juvenile and stupid and hers. It was one thing that was hers. Bee's.

He knew about Sophia.  
She told him about her one night when she couldn't sleep so they walked.

He didn't laugh.  
She almost wanted him to laugh, to mock, to ridicule the fact that she was twenty and carried a doll around like a child. It would make it easier. She would like him a little less, maybe.  
He was an itch that she couldn't get rid of. A bruise under her skin that she didn't know how she got. That she didn't want, that she covered in layers of Maybelline and Mac, but that didn't make the sore go away, it was just harder to see.

**6.5.2003**  
I'm in Dublin. No idea why. Bored out of my mind.  
But I'm here. It was closer to—  
It was closer to what felt like home.


My hands are shaking.  
I don't do "home."  
Never.  
I don't get attached.


You can miss people in pieces. You can miss eyes and hands and accents. You can miss the way they make you feel. You can miss the things you did together. You can miss the parts, but you can never miss the whole person. You can't miss the whole because you never knew the whole. You never would know the whole. That's not how people work.  
It's like pain. You can miss the sensation. The act of feeling so deeply, so all-consuming, but you don't want to hurt. You want the pieces of the hurt that make you feel, but you don't want the scars or the tears.  
He was pain. The momentary gratification that you missed in parts. He was the intensity that you knew you would regret letting yourself feel later.  
But it wasn't just him.  
She missed herself.  
She missed the way she acted and felt and laughed when she could breathe. She didn't think about leaving everyday while she was there. She thought about it sometimes because

that's how she was, but she allowed herself to feel comfortable for a moment.

She made friends there.  
She became a regular.  
Stacy brought her a soygreentealattewithextrafoam when she walked in, without asking.  
She used to hate that. She didn't anymore.

**Four**  
It had been four months since they met. It had been three weeks since she left. It had been three weeks since they spoke. It had been sixteen years since she cared the way she did four months ago. It had been twenty-seven countries since she hurt the way she did now. She associated the concept of "missing" with her parents, her first bed, the pillow that she put her first lost tooth under, the couch that she hid under when she was in trouble, the only home she would seldom admit to, but knew.  
She landed at Heathrow.

**Twenty-two**  
"Twenty two down. 'Matcha.'"  
"I know."  
"No, you didn't."  
She scoffed.  
He was quiet.  
"If you 'knew' you wouldn't have put 'Stability' at twenty-two across."  
She walked to the bar, picked up a napkin, lifted his drink, wiped the puddle of impatient water from the fake wood and ran her finger through the condensation left on his glass.  
She grabbed the pen out of his hand.  
"Wher—"   
He started to say something.

**Five**  
Five across.  
I M H O M E  
His eyebrow kinked, confused. Surprised.  
She straddled the stool next to him and ordered a cup of ice.  
The crunching sound annoyed him, but it amused her.  
"For how long?"  
Bee shrugged. Looking young, vulnerable, unsure of what she was doing and why and what to do next, where to go, who to be.  
Her voice was steady.  
Her hands twisted a loose thread on her sweater, pulling at it even though she knew she shouldn't.  
"You can call me Bee." 



**SAANYA ALI** is a student at NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study, concentrating in Mixed Media Storytelling. Currently living in NYC, inspiration for her work comes from sleepless nights spent roaming around the city and stories overheard in innumerable diners and coffeeshops. Being born in Switzerland to South Asian parents, and moving five times by the age of six, cultural difference is a predominant theme in much of her writing.





## Our Lady of the Camp

LA Lantz

Until I saw the girl, I'd forgotten how to wonder. Who could? Here, in the dirt, where a few moments ago sat a man with a red length of material wound about his head to keep off the heat, I saw now only a hand and a bare foot. One of each only as dark as my own, but I didn't wonder at this or at what his face looked like once or now. On top of him had fallen a wooden crate from the sky, half smashed from the impact. Cans, boxes of crackers, and packets labeled "Swiss Steak dinner meal" scattered around the rest of us, nudged into the heat by a live, nosy goat. A woman beat the goat to get it away from the food. A deflated parachute was still attached to this crate by a single length of rope.

Other ropes had broken during descent from the weight of the nutrient-filled boxes; we had been unable to look away as they fell. Suddenly, the specks had become boxes, had grown larger than the old people and young children who were too hungry or slow to move, large enough to make at least the man with the red cloth disappear.

Around me people were pushing past to pick up the packages from the boxes. One woman near me said that these boxes were no enemy attack, but a gesture of assistance from our allies. I picked up a tin of tea bags, almost knocked over, and wondered whether I would also find clean drinking water in the crates. No face showed surprise or anger; they were too busy grabbing food for themselves and their families. But I saw a healthy, young girl with yellow hair and skin as pale as the clouds over my head, hold her

hand to her mouth. I thought at first, she was a newcomer, an aid worker, who could still scream, but her odd, watery blue eyes crinkled with something like laughter. "However, everything is queer today." When she spoke, her voice a gentle confusion, I could smile too, recalling a time not long before when I would've found this scene remarkable in so many ways.

"Have you a clean cup?" She asked, gesturing toward the tea bags. "I've had nothing yet, so I can't take more." Her lips were smoothly pink, not tanned or sunburnt. Where was her hat and her sun tan lotion? Did she know that from my old city-life I carried jammed in my skirt pocket a teacup from which my father drank each morning until he was murdered? In mornings, in my life before, F— had squeezed in lemon into father's cup before she dunked the tea bag. Milk was to be poured in just after, as she'd been taught by her previous employer. I couldn't recall F—'s name just now although she'd been a fixture in my life then.

I offered the girl my cup, which she sipped from with pleasure, although it was empty. She was young enough that pretending was still pleasurable. I wasn't the only one to see her. She was rumored to belong to one of the aid workers, but they were banned from bringing their children into the camp's unsanitary conditions.

The girl's second appearance caused a stir, but not greater than the excitement caused by the man who always wore a tattered Los Angeles Lakers tank top. Some called him a holy man, but I recalled him as a leader of the group

who killed my father and mother. He executed a baby girl he said was possessed.

The baby's tiny fingers and toes seemed to shrink in death and I felt mine follow. Mild panic fluttered in my head until a warm, dry handclasp returned me to my right size.

"I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then," said the blond girl, fitting her pale fingers against my larger, darker ones. I answered, surprised by my voice, "What a foolish and bold chance that life took to be born here." Just before she vanished in what turned out to be a timely gesture, the girl shook her finger at the murderer, "Now I understand what the Queen meant when she said, 'off with his head.'" If presented with a mirror I might, on that day after many days of anger and confusion, have been able to recognize my own face.

The man with the basketball shirt had our tents searched for the white girl or for her accomplices. Someone, he insisted, must've informed the aid workers of his spiritual activities. This he had forbidden, though the rule was unspoken. In fact, a hands-off, blind policy benefited the aid workers—no matter how they persisted in asking awkward questions—and we were pretty sure they knew it. They were relieved of the job of judgment. They continued to hand this man, whom they called a community leader, and his armed bodyguards bags of supplies to distribute. No matter that the aid workers' own reporting mandates made clear the imbalance of those starving against those growing plump.

The aid workers, I heard, had rumors about the girl too. They said she was a patron saint.

I recognized her dress, with a full skirt and full sleeves, decorated with cutout lace designs, as similar to one my grandmother wore in a photo taken when she was a girl visiting home from her school in London. No matter how F— teased me, I hadn't been able to stop staring at the difference between grandmother's dark skin and the white material. "Her hands are so still," I remembered saying and F— said that I noticed such odd things. She said that I had too much education.

Now my home was smashed, my father and mother were dead, and I did not know what had happened to F—. The framed photographs had been smashed, but, since I met the girl, when I closed my eyes, I saw them hanging in the cool, dark hallway as it had been. I kept my suspicions secret

because no one spoke of their lives before and my family name might earn me unwelcome notoriety.

The man may have killed a few people on that night to show the girl he was on to her. He was right to fear her strength. Like his it could not be explained by numbers or theories or personal charisma.

Survival in a refugee camp demands, at least temporary, extinguishment of certain ways of being or feeling. Nostalgia. Regret. Indulgence. These left killing marks as plainly as other ills that the aid workers identified: dysentery, machete wounds, infections. We ignored the workers' sorrow when they couldn't locate a cause of death. Waiting in line for medication or clothing handouts, we couldn't admit that we knew people could die from a hopelessness, which searched our numb edges for entry as we had relentlessly prowled the border to get here.

When I came to the camp, I thought the power to kill, to make others kill, to coax neighbors to kill neighbors, was the strongest magic. The girl's words re-awakened in my mind outrage, imagination, compassion, and a humor for what rots beneath. Her power was to cultivate by wide-eyed insistence emotions that appeared to be a disadvantage, necessary only under optimal conditions, but were, in fact, critical to life. Her power was stronger than I might've credited before.

At the end of six months my visa came through for the United States. My father's brother waited in California. I looked everywhere for the girl, wanting to tell her good-bye, but I couldn't find her. I thought perhaps she conserved her magic for when it was needed. Perhaps she had many camps in other places to visit. In the airport, immigrations officers looked at my papers for a long time and would not allow me to sit. As my legs began to tremble, I heard a happily familiar voice: "Curiouser and curiouser." She peeked around a corner. I could not tell if the immigration could see her. They were so intent on their inspection of me. This time she told me her name. It was Alice. "Like the girl in that book that my grandmother loved from her school days." I saw its dark brown cover as it had sat on a bookshelf in our home for many years.

"Why did so many see you in the camp?" She shrugged. Because Alice introduced herself, I guessed, to my surprise, that I might see even more of her in safety than I had in the camp. ☺



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## The Man against the Wall

Emily Walling

**A** lone, the man turns his back and faces the wall. Stone, fused together, connected to more stone. His hands come out and flatten against the stone wall. Cold, numb against the man's skin. He's patient; he waits. The water releases a code he understands. His senses shut down except sound. The water gallops his way, a roar coming to deafen him. Pushing his hands hard against the unrelenting stone wall, his body braces for the unsympathetic impact. The water's hands crush the man to the wall. His system shuts down, but his mind never drowns. The flood crawls back to its pen. The man still stands, his hands against the wall. 🌀



**EMILY WALLING** works at The University of Findlay and will begin working on her Master of Arts in Rhetoric and Writing this fall. Her creative work has been published in journals such as *The Caribbean Writer*, *Cactus Heart*, *The MacGuffin*, *SLAB*, and forthcoming in *The Riding Light Review* and *The Voices Project*. One of her short stories has been nominated for the 2016 Write Well Award, sponsored by the Silver Pen Writers Association. She also has two poems being published in an anthology about nuclear impact from Shabda Press.



## Blinders

Paul Beckman

**T**here is no way to fix what's broken. Don't you understand? I thought everything broken could be fixed. I'm an engineer. My heart is broken and you broke it with your deceptions. I'm a good man, a good provider. That doesn't mean that you have to provide for three different families in three different states. That doesn't make you a good man—it makes you a bigamist, a criminal, a liar and a cheat. You deprived our children and me time you could have been spending with us. It was a fluke you found out. You never complained about lack of time or attention before. I'm a great multi-tasker—you've got to admit that. Listen. All I ask is that you go through with the get-to-gether before you make a final decision. You ladies could be sisters and the eight kids are already half siblings. What's the harm in meeting? It's a beautiful day for a picnic and I've taken care of ordering and delivery. All of the gluten and peanut allergies have been taken into consideration. I've thought of everything. You think so do you? Do you realize we're Jewish and not Mormon? Everyone's Jewish. What makes you think I'd marry out of the faith? 🌀



**PAUL BECKMAN** was one of the winners in the Queen's Ferry 2016 Best of the Small Fictions. His 200+ stories are widely published in print and online in the following magazines amongst others: *Connecticut Review*, *Raleigh Review*, *Litro*, *Playboy*, *Pank*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Flash Frontier*, *Matter Press*, *Metazen*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Thrice Fiction*, and *Literary Orphans*. His latest collection, *Peek*, weighed in at 65 stories and 120 pages. His website can be found at [PaulBeckmanStories.com](http://PaulBeckmanStories.com)





# What Lies in Darkness

E. H. Vital-Lazare

The shed stood at the far edge of the island. Deep grass flowed beneath its boards in a flood of green, itself like water, the soil black beneath. Other places in other tongues reserve truer names for staved in walls and shadowed corners holding death between them. Crematory, kill-yard, butchery. The Mothers Who Have Come Before call this place “the counting house.” They whisper the naming in a language that did not belong to this overlooked land, a small place tuck’ behin’ some other small place, tuck’ behin’ God back.

Iron hung from its rafters, the planking reinforced to hold the bodies that swung, flanks shorn of the flesh that once breathed, the bones exposed. No matter how bright the day or loud the laughter spilling out onto the grounds of the household around it, the air about the shed remained a drawn curtain where the florid scent of decay bloomed hot above tin roofing. It was a place where slaves had lived and masters died—*Makao Mnamofanywa hesabu biashara*.

One hundred giant steps, tough blades striking at the backs of her calves, bare heels and ankles sinking into the green, takes her from the broad, shadowed back of the shed to the shuttered mouth where the door hangs tight.

Iron hinges cannot hold the fear that seeps between each slat. And between each slat there is a darkness.

Even as daylight stands warm at her back and the voices of her people settling on the grounds for eventide fête caresses the nape of her neck, the darkness pulls her. She wants to go back, retrace her steps through the grass to the clearing-grounds where the long tables have been wiped clean, the knolled surfaces ready for the setting of the repast. The women are there, their faces draped in what they know and what she cannot.

Many times she has been told what is meant for her is meant for her. *What is not is not*.

*Jua lako*, the Mothers tell her while the darkness shifts behind the door, calling her out of the quiet of herself as she is pulled closer, body leaning. She has been told she is a stubborn girl who has not yet learned the strength of her will but under the dark shade of the cedars looming, and the darker smells of wet earth and brine, she is weak and cannot stop her ears and cannot move her legs. It is her heart that leaps forward. The iron in her veins finding its likeness in the dark corners behind the door. It is the darkness that moves her. It is the darkness that lifts the latch and brings her forward.

The blood is here. It strikes the walls; it sings the lungs, opens her throat so that she may swallow it whole as she screams and the Mother pulls her, holds her with claws that plow under the tender flesh of her arms. She is dragged across jagged plank and the flesh is torn. Hands, knees, the tiny, dark hillocks of her thighs burn against rough board.

Blood to blood, she is a daughter to this Mother. Blood to blood. The Mothers Who Have Come Before live in her own wide gaze; they move when she moves in the gait of narrow hips; they bend as she bends in the deep arch of her back. They breathe and chant her fear.

It is their way to love her, this terror she has not yet been taught to use. It pumps through her without clear course; it spews from her, sends her arms and eyes flailing in search of a solid place to land before the Mother stops her mouth, bronze palm brutal and swift as it draws its blade across flesh already opening itself to the dark rot of the shed. It is hot on her skin—this blood that streams from the open wound of a body hung from the beams above her. She is dragged through the spillage, closer, as the Mother scores the flesh and what is left of life pours from the veins of a man whose face is not a face but a mask of pain so brilliant it is the only light in the shadows.

*Nonm ap viv pou nou ka viv*. Man lives so that we may live. In her mother’s house there is a shrine to the Ones Who Have Come Before. The figure it holds is studded with iron, struck through with blades blunted by time. It is shaped in the ripe hourglass of hips and breasts and bears a wide brow without features balanced on a neck tipped upward as if waiting to be kissed. At its feet lies a man with mouth carved open, belly distended, eyes closed in death. The shrine is wreathed in pomegranate. The iron guards small jars of bee’s honey and dark plum wine. With the coming moon the Mother leaves clear water in a bleached gourd among the offerings. The open mouth of the carving is the mouth through which the man who hangs attempts to breath his last. The blood that springs is the wine left at the foot of the shrine to be filled then filled again. *Nonm ap viv pou nou ka viv*. The Mother lifts her, forces her small arms to spread and embrace the horror suspended before her.

She is held between. There is the dead man. There is the Mother. *Nonm ap viv pou nou ka viv*. She would fall if not for the arms that hold her. Blood to blood.

*Anbrase*, the Mother tells her in the voice that has no voice, in the language that has come before. *Bwe*, the Mother says as she brings the girl’s mouth closer to the well of the heart.

Always there is the climb up and out to retrieve what she’s left of herself out on the ledge of sleep; always an adjustment, a sliding back, like the fitting of swollen feet into satin slippers of time and clock and moist breath in a close room.

Her mother had stories like this of a large wound in the earth, stones piled round to mark the only source of sweet water on an island surrounded by marsh which held no seeming value until an assessor offered thirty-thousand



for all three hundred sixty-five acres. It was 1961 and her mother was a new bride, no longer young. She knew what such an offer was designed to hide. But the assessor had come with ledgers supplied by the county seat, and therefore had the right to offer whatever he saw fit and, if met with resistance he'd said, would return with a number sufficient for daughters of runaways and sharecroppers living in modest houses, not much more than shacks, heaped together at the tail end of an island that boasted no resort, no hospital, no conveniences of any kind while the rest of the Georgia sea coast was booming with folk boating out on excursions, enjoying champagne brunches, basking in visits from the likes of cotton barons and Lady Bird Johnson.

In kinder moments, while Ursula held a glass of something sweet in one hand and a fritter fresh from cast iron and oil in the other, her mother would demonstrate how her mother-in-law, Mama Ket, had pulled out a chair and bid the intruder, "Res' his'self." Ursula's mother would go on to purse her lips as Mama Ket had done and mimic both the man and the in-law—a decade gone by the time the tale was told—and sit down hard in the cane-back chair, crossing one leg up and over the other as a county man would have when satisfied with himself.

Having come that far, Ursula's mother would lean into the table's edge. "This land has raised more spirits than your man at the cross," she'd say, her eyes becoming the eyes of Mama Ket then would drop to an imagined crotch. "And if you ever want to raise some spirit your same self, you gon' take dem book and 'gwine." Thirty-thousand, she'd say, spitting the taste from her mouth into a checked cloth, "'bout a third a' the folk lost off these waters. Thirty thousand. A spirit worth more than a dollah."

It was not the thought of her mother, a bride no longer young, taking down from its hook near the open kitchen door, a flat blade used for lopping off the heads of cook-hens in the yard and thereby aiding in the threat to unman a visitor at table that disturbed Ursula in her sleep, most nights—after all, her nightmares come and go, all misted in dread and longing. What disturbs her is the one that stays, the one that has never left, no matter the distance of miles and years she'd managed to wedge between herself and that small floating corner of her past.

What held her, chased her even while she was rocked underground through dark tunnels laid out between Bleeker Street and Midtown or walked crooked runways for a short, drug-addled time that had never quite panned out, was the dream that had pulled her lids open this morning, and lingered. In this dream there was a presence in the dark and she was trapped with it—*her mother* was trapped—held tight in the aging pile of warped board that when Ursula left the island, smuggling herself to New York more than two decades ago, was still standing, glued together by estuary salt and the relentless force of wild kudzu and grape. What men there were left on her mother's land, the uncles and sons of uncles who stayed and hauled slaughtered hogs over-shore, providing the life's blood and livelihood for the farm, would not go past its threshold. The butchering in the shed—the smoking, the curing—was the work of the women, dirty and strange.

Lately, the dream had become a part of another story her mother loved to tell. In it, her mother is a child warned

not to sit on the edge of an open well, but she has done so, gotten it in her mind to clamber up in her Sunday dress, copper legs dangling danger enough before she adds the tipping over to look down into the maw.

In those rare moments before she'd left home, when her mother stopped between the canning and the shelling, the making of teas, the settling of disputes and quelling of fevers to sit with her awhile, Ursula would set aside the glass of lemon drink or chamomile to imagine the girl her mother once was: the wide brow, the cushioned mouth with its wine-stained center defiantly set, all balanced over darkness. Ursula would ask with all the terror her mother had not felt, had already been woman-enough at five not to feel at all, "Why? Why would you," and her mother—now the root of Penny Farms since Mama Ket's been gone—always answered without softness, "If you want to know, go on an' look. Look for yourself."

Evenly planed, bordered by day lily and hydrangea, deep-shaded with old growth and quiet eaves, the shacks the assessor claimed for the county were drawn into a circle of rather large wood-sided homes with porches wrapping round in dense aprons, oak pillars flanking birch or cedar doors that remained open much of the year, even in storm.

Behind them, near a tree line that gave way to the water were three acres holding generations going back to the Portuguese. Ursula's father and his brother, and Ursula's grandmother, Mama Ket, were buried under proper headstones of rose quartz and marble. Not far from the weathered stones were the graves of twelve runaways who in-the-time before-time had walked the water. Among the walkers was one woman who had not been shackled with the rest.

Even as a toddling five-year-old Ursula's mother was annealed in iron. She had done the forbidden, offered herself to it and lived.

This morning, Ursula dressed for a charity luncheon in a Chanel two-piece, light wool tailored in the colors her husband and his banking set favored—taupes and tans, heathered grays and light blues—and was certain her dreams had taken on the shape of that interrupted falling.

Her own act of bravery, not one her mother would ever mark or understand, was to arrive late and for fear of interrupting stand just inside the conference room doors, her right arm colliding into a buffet sideboard set with strips of whitefish and capered lox, congealed mounds of tapas and hearts of palm garnished with tomatoes split down the center and splayed like tiny, open mouths upon the platter. The women had begun the meeting without her and were arranged in a discernible hierarchy, standing with faces turned to a mid-morning sun that burst through an east-facing wall of sheer glass overlooking Manhattan. Framed within the view of stone and steel, amber light streaming around a head that glowed golden-blonde, was the ex-wife of the man Ursula loved and married. Givenchy heels a modish six-inches, raising her height and her personal stock, cracked green gaze, Teutonic and bracing, the ex presided, tabling last month's discussion on fair-housing and how to feed those less fortunate, for the more fashionable possibilities of providing laptops for the inner-city poor. *Laptops not lap dances* was the slogan the ex proposed. All one hundred and one, well-heeled pounds

of the woman incensed by the thought of baby hip-hoppers popping bottles in the clubs and rolling Lamborghinis while former hood-mates suffered without equitable access to stock market tips or online classifieds for low-wage jobs.

Unable to move without attracting cold glances, Ursula leaned in closer to the buffet. Her back pressed against the wood-paneled doors, her elbow brushing the arrangement of lunchmeats and spears of something pickled, she drifted in and out, under a spell of words that added up the same as they had over a year's worth of such meetings, until the ruffled cuff of her blouse trailed into the green oils of olive tapenade. The stain added to a general sense she gained around these woman of having been used, that the joke they shared did not include her.

Kelly bag dangling, no real money in it, she carried card after card with her husband's name embossed in black and gold across plastic and had come to take up recognition of herself by the access she'd been granted to lesser accounts, while the noblesse oblige of her husband's name itself, the boiler plate on real estate and investment holdings, share exchanges and finance pages, remained appended to the ex, who held on to it, flaunted it, dropped it, possessed it in the same way she possessed the moneyed, sharp-eyed members of the Upper Eastside Women's Community Project, all of them ringed round like lesser gods, porcelain thimbles of espresso cradled in pink palms as each woman waited for the ex to hand themselves to themselves, pass out the assignments of who they should be in this world.

To one member the ex assigned the mock-up of a pamphlet along with the composition of a carefully worded mission statement, to another the scheduling of social events and fundraisers, and for Ursula there were neighborhoods in Flatbush and the Bronx, the blighted edges of Jamaica-Queens, places rife with disenfranchised folk in their hovels, interred behind tenement brick and boarded window that were made especially for her. "So lucky to have you," the ex's halo turning toward Ursula sent the hot and suddenly interested gaze of some forty Upper eastside women fluttering, talons drawn to seek her out, the darkest thing in the room. "Troy had its Helen. We've got the horse."

Ursula, her portion lost among the platters of lox and chives already congealing on their silver platters, grinned along. Foolish as she tucked the errant ruff into the tatted sleeve of her jacket, the snow white of the silk flounce had been intended to play against the blush pink of the collarless, skirted suit that with her hair pulled back, the crown of it higher than the sides, was meant to plant her firmly between a Jackie O and Grace Jones. But the longer she stood, the heavier the sheaf of curls left loose to dangle in a tail down her back had become. The roots were a web that seemed embedded in the scalp, tying her to henna-colored tresses that once belonged to an impoverished woman somewhere in a place not unlike Sand Island, resigned to selling physical parts of a self that otherwise was without value. She could see them, a great river of women pressed between the great slabs of stone lining the streets below, a rushing horde of black-skinned, brightly-robed paupers piteously offering themselves in their own rummage sale of the body.

She could only close her eyes against the vision and tip her mind upright.

She'd been off balance for some days now. The tilt

recognizable. She'd seen it in herself as a small girl those mornings her mother and her mother's sisters spread homemade cloth over long, rough-hewn tables in the clearing that anchored the twelve family-houses of the farm. Sundays each house brought shared meals of garden vegetables and cured meats, fresh breads and pots of preserves under a sun that fell with a soft and forgiving hand. On lunar days, those mornings preceding a night of full moon, the men would bring a shoat struggling from the pen, and Ursula's mother flanked by the two great-sisters who shadowed her as she went about the farm as if to guard her from some unknown but justifiable danger, would attend to the slaughter.

Sickened by the smell of cinders and blood, Ursula was the one girl-child allowed to stand away from the squeals of the hog, the fount of blood collected in plastic buckets to thicken in preparation for blood puddings and souse. When she hid, she was also passed over for the cleaner work of scaling the fishes whose gills flashed like dimming lights in tubs of salt water where they awaited their fate in the moments before her mother's agile palm would reach into the basin. Her mother could hold them, beings made entirely of muscle and fin, as if they shared the same constituent parts and knowing the flesh was all the permission her mother needed to lift the oak mallet and end the lives she lay flat beneath her palm unto stillness.

In the conference room, thirty stories up, she is reeling, dizzy by the wall of light and the smell of garlic knots and olives. Watching these women as they gathered, the cultured throng of them watching themselves, cups alternately balanced between palm and pursed lips, milling about in the high-rise space which seemed to float above the East River to the south and Lexington Avenue to the east, she is suddenly hungry.

They were all thin. The prominence of collar and cheekbone and the concavity of belly miraculously blooming at the hip was a quality of this tribe. These women who had not known a hunger born of not having, were whittled down, carved in to with surgical knives and hours of kundalini. To gain entry and to stay, Ursula has learned to come looking for loss. Seduced by the baneful admiration of boutique owners and stylists, she starved not out of necessity but opportunity—encouraged to eat less and therefore continue to merit the right to be styled at the same boutiques, wear the same sizes, earn the same glances as the women in the room who'd looked her way as she'd come in late then turned their backs, their own pebble and mint-colored skirts in twos and threes draping reedy thighs and taut asses.

She'd been driven to the meeting by town car, had watched from a great remove as the gray-murk of the city waded past. It had taken her a long time to arrive as she had this morning; fresh from the warmth of David's bed, the suit, the handbag, Town Car, driver.

*Smelling herself. She'd been smelling herself* this morning, her mother, Mama Inez, would say.

Back home to be full was to be useful. If Ursula were to see these women ringed about the room through the eyes her mother had given her, she would denounce them in their preening display of bone roped by the muscle of asanas and acai cleanses. Through those eyes, the social movers and



museum board sitters, the start-up phenoms and theater-writers were creatures to be pitied as poorly. They were *po'*. An admonishment deeper than being without the defining features of hip or breast, rump and calf. To be "poorly" was to lack some necessary substance, to be unwilling and incapable of creating a Penny Farms.

Pressed to eat more, pinched when she did not, fussed at and cajoled, on the island Ursula was told she was not been enough as she ran alongside the girl cousins, those hothouse flowers lusciously and constantly in bloom. Not enough when the boy cousins splashed heavy-lidded glances across the high hips and rounded thighs as they all played together in the sands or ran laughing into the heat of dancing waters. There, she was considered slight; she had never carried the full thighs and arms—the promise of wide shoulders bearing great breasts forward. Her mother fed her. Full hands of okra and succotash, sweet bread and souse, red bean gravy. Chops from the slaughter. Until Ursula decided to eat no more.

Too full there. Walking the knife's edge of hunger here. Unrecognizable to herself in either place. Throughout the meeting, her reflection hovered somewhere over the shoulder of the ex, suspended in the wall of glass. She was an outline without features. Her dark eyes and skin composed of colors found in nature, the flesh of ripe twig and river rock, brown silt and sueded moss, blurred before her eyes. She knew the women could not see her.

The lost reflection, a growing hunger beginning to sketch out its lines, had no center here. But somehow it answered as the ex suggested Ursula serve as Trojan horse in passing out leaflets, knocking on doors.

Wanting to leave Sand Island, a place where the men, including her own father, died early and the women lasted for mending, stirring, canning, she'd endured the first ten years here only by believing the next call back, the next big party, the next name she dropped would make it possible to finally climb out of her skin, become the stuff of someone else's dream. It was only over the last ten that she allowed herself to understand she would never have played Ophelia here; not among the waifish blondes and pixie cut brunettes, not among the beautiful boys who also topped the runways in Prada gowns. She'd known that, early on she'd known. But she'd wanted it. That small-island girl, ashen mouthed, scab-kneed, feet bare by choice, loving the silk of the red soil and the rough scaling of bark along the trunk of the

oldest tree on Penny Farms, a large elm draped with vine and widow's moss that anchored her mother's land—she had believed.

Twenty years since she'd come to this city. Two serious auditions in that time—both maids, *'ho's on knees with dustpans*, she called them. No Shakespeare, no martyred, flower-clad girl carried in the arms of clear water, singing her madness softly.

Not until David. He was the one who'd brought her, insisting that the only way to secure her place with him was to love what he loved.

Gone was the Brooklyn bistro, the funk of fish grease and onions that had dogged her steps, hanging on and boarding with her many a night as she was rocked the twenty blocks back east underground to the cluttered walk-up she'd shared with O'Gee, a girl as black and broke as she was in those early, blighted days.

Gone was the heavy, heavy hand at the back of the neck, the gnawing hunger of unpaid rent made heavier by the frosted gaze of salesgirls lunching in Bryant Park, marking her for the country transplant she was as

she'd sat the benches, waiting for her own better something to take hold. She'd outrun the tremor of nervous fingers prodding for loose change at the bottom of an empty purse, the scalded rice straight out the pan she and O'Gee would share over a bottle of sweet wine, phone cut off, electricity out, notice to evict taped to the door, and the two of them would sit, huddled at the warmth of each other's unbridled good company. She had outlasted the famine of those years, and had done so without desperate entreaties to a god her mother had taught her was too old to see good and too far to do anything about it.

Smelling herself. She'd been smelling herself this morning.

She'd never told David about Sand Island. She'd never told him about her dreams.

But she could feel the ex's eyes following as the hunger flared, forcing her to forget the silk cuff that freed itself the moment she plucked a finger of pink salmon—lox they called it—from the edge of the platter. The flesh melted to a thick paste on her tongue, tasting of salt without the brine; sand without the sea. As the meeting ended, Ursula

grew suddenly afraid for the women, those here above in their trim suits and kitten sandals, and those below selling parts of themselves in the street. 🌀





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# Poorly Drawn Lines

Reza Farazmand - PoorlyDrawnLines.com

**BAD**

THE DOG IS DIGGING HOLES ALL OVER THE YARD.

DON'T BE SO QUICK TO JUDGE.

OH, HE'S ACTUALLY TRAPPING SMALLER ANIMALS.

AND INTRODUCING THEM TO DRUGS.

THIS IS NOT BETTER.

**MAD**

I'M MAD!

HERE'S A SOLUTION.

I DON'T WANT A SOLUTION.

I WANT TO BE MAD.

**A GOOD THING**

I DID A GOOD THING.

\*CLAP CLAP CLAP\*

PLEASE, NO APPLAUSE. I DON'T WANT THE CREDIT.

I JUST WANT EVERYONE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT IT WAS ME.

AND ACTUALLY I WANT THE APPLAUSE TOO.

\*CLAP CLAP CLAP\*





## Sunset in Pa'tong

Geoffrey Miller

“Threaded with wisps and protected by resting.” — the only angel to a lacking audience — thundering under the magnifying glass — damp weightless fog, instant and flashing and fading, green-tinted furiously renamed stimulant — straining experiment — old-fashioned noise of a double breasted, flat footed majestic secret, a disentangled encounter with a recovering city — she left behind an eccentric bow.

An inflammation held by a flat, brown-glass bowl — a colorful reflection of slanted rays, the entire in place, round-shouldered and impossible to catch. Taking to the air, buds long into blossoms to an incredible size — lenses and blades become rays to attract magic with speed.

“Throw back your head final specimens.”

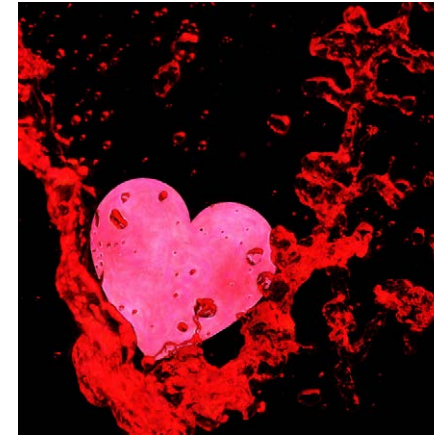
— through cracks a mechanical lead weight, spring-like and crystalized, pale — thunderstruck by noon with precious stones hanging lower, into focus and fading eyes find mist.

A miraculous coincidence of fragility, housecoats and columns, an open leather sea of slots — structures of mirrors, cameras and irritable annotations serenaded by village opera rags harmonized by three bellowing black gardeners. Observations and paper bog down in crackling plain greenish howls heard over frozen estuaries by moths.

Glass poultry in empty monotonous hallways click telephones and produce offspring — of open bewilderment, scowling and innocent with teeth loaded like ottomans in sobbing palaces. Courtyard motorcycle sockets, bright, blurry, trembling, crackly, frenzied, narrow and sealed — ostrich chopping telegrams, cigarettes thrash and gawk — disappearing behind stone institutes of limited uniqueness. “Step back, save yourself from the virtuoso of paved tropical swamps and graceful murderous crowds.” — said the angel’s fallen feather. 📖



**GEOFFREY MILLER**’s most recent fiction can be found in *Nanoism*, *Apocrypha* and *Abstractions*, *Juked*, and *PANK*. His flash piece *Latin Elephant* is apart of the *Crack the Spine XII* anthology. Visual check out *Paper Tape Magazine* and *Weave Magazine* or see *Paris* on the June 2014 cover of *Spittoon*.



## Crossing Fin Line

Priyanka Nawathe

Drops of water splashed all around her as she jumped in puddles wearing her newest pair of bright red boots. She was five with a lilting laugh and cheeks just as rosy as her boots.

Playful like the fish in the sea, she twirled around in the pool, pushing and wading the water with natural ease. She was eight wearing the warm red swimsuit with tiny pink heart on her belly.

She plunged into the aquarium scattering crumbs around her feeding the dolphins gleefully rushing towards her. She was twelve wearing a red and black polka dot swimsuit happily dancing in the depths with her friends.

Glass shattered with pool of bright red liquid beneath her as she crashed out of the thick Plexiglas tank of fresh water spilling all around her. She was seventeen wearing a ivory black leotard with her blood reddening the water beneath her as she lay still on the ground.

Memories. They were so elusive. There were days when they snuck up on her flooding her thoughts with a thousand different emotions. And then there were days when all she noticed was the bright red haze around her.

The puddles she had splashed in when she was five had been acidic. It had slowly begun sucking all the air out of her lungs. There she had been flopping like a fish away from home, alive yet not completely, not for long. She needed to survive. It was the only thing that mattered. It had to be done. She was brought to Syreni Horreum, a shelter known to few chosen ones concealed deceptively beneath the timeless Shedd Aquarium. She was placed in the Terraqua section, the water in it bringing life into her pale still body. As air reached her lungs — not lungs; they were gills — she splashed out in a pirouette jumping back into the depths of the pool that restored her life. That was the day that Terry Fisher died and the new Arielle Shedd was born. 📖



**PRIYANKA NAWATHE** currently lives in Chicago. She writes stories in different genres that blur the lines between figments of fact and fiction. Some of them tend to be heart-touching while others pull it out. Her work has been published in *Inkitt* and *Storybird* sites.





# From Here to There

Ariana Hocking

Esel slid down the concrete bank of the artificial river, knees bent and green sneakers sideways. She had done this many times before, knew how to keep her balance. Below her, others had already gathered, and more should be coming. Maybe not exactly like her. Some ran down the steep sides, some tripped and fell, and some chose to walk leaning far back. The boy who was carrying a blue penny board under his arm had ridden, crouched low, on it—she knew for she had seen him do it before.

This was normal. This was their coming down to the river's edge, the murky water that sloshed in the bottom of their shoes when they headed back home. No washing to be done here, only dirtying.

When she neared the bottom she thrust herself forward, and took several running steps to slow her momentum.

"Esel!" Someone called out to her, one of those by the fire pit beneath the bridge. She waved back, and racked her brain desperately for the name of the person. Holly maybe?

She wasn't sure.

There were too many people here to keep track of. She didn't know even a quarter of their names, and she was sure many didn't bother with hers. How could they? Some were normal, but there was also the inevitable circulation as people found new homes and this one became the in-between phase.

With a skip in her step she made her way to where most were gathered: under the bridge, flocking to the fire like moths. She wove around the other people, those small groups who chose to stand outside of the circle of light, or the three who were smoking something that smelled strangely sweet, or the odd couples that had chosen places to sit and make out.

She tried not to look at the couples. She always found this part disturbing. Why did they do it? Why did they tangle themselves around one another, his hands in her hair or around her back or going up her torso and her hands were somewhere twisted in the white fabric of his shirt? No. She

would rather join the three who were smoking, the three who smelled like crushed sweet tarts and freshly cut grass. They were dark-haired, rough-fingered, long-fingered; they could have been piano players with coattails over the bench and clapping crowds surrounding them, but instead they made halos of smoke and showed those brave to come near how gentle they could be.

Esel was in the circle of light now, and she could hear the faint music that someone was playing off of their phone's speaker--the sultry voice of the female who sang about dingy hotel rooms and drugs coming from one of the red cups on the ground to amplify the sound, but it was still barely audible with so many people around. They were dancing anyways, and she joined them.

Hands up, body twisted like a serpent. She was the one to bite the child while the mothers were washing. She was the current that carried the basket away through the reed pipes. She was the runaway sipping air through the reed pipes as the basket floated overhead. Around her, more snakes and more stories. How many things had occurred at the river's edge? How many stories had been told before the city concreted in the water? How many more stories would be told still? Would hers be one of them?

She imagined the roots of the trees overgrowing the concrete, bursting through and shattering it like a pane of glass. The vines and dirt and mushrooms and insects would tumble in as the water flowed again like poured from an urn. And the ashes would rebuild themselves into another raging tide. And she would be here dancing, still, and get swept away.

The images were broken as the track ended, and an advertisement to stop teen smoking came on. Someone cursed, and others laughed.

Esel didn't know what to do now, didn't know where to go or whom she should join. She took a quick glance around, and settled on a group of maybe six with beer bottles and piles of rocks at their feet. She recognized a few of them from the few times she had been there before, and skipped over the distance to join them.

One, a girl with long, dingy blonde hair that was perpetually tangled with leaves, turned to beckon her, pointing to first the rock in her hand, then the bridge above, and finally the beer bottle at her feet.

When Esel came closer she leaned in to say, in a conspiratorial whisper, "We're taking turns. If you miss the bridge, you have to take a shot. Either you share mine, or get a bottle from the cooler."

Esel laughed. "I would say I'm a pretty good shot."

"Are you?" someone else asked, and this person was new, a mousy sort-of boy with weak wrists.

"Are you?" she retorted, and the others gave short hoots of approval.

"It's your turn anyways, so go!" another boy—this one with black nail polish and a smirk—pushed the first forward. He took several stumbling steps before he caught himself, then glared at everyone. With a hop and a jump he launched the rock into the air, but it went diagonally, and missed the belly of the bridge.

He released a string of words Esel wouldn't have expected to come from his chapped lips, and grabbed the nearest bottle to take a swig. He grimaced and set it down,

wiping at his mouth with the back of his sleeve.

"I've had better," he said, but the group had already moved on. Nail-polish boy wound his arm around, and then launched an overhead shot. It hit the metal siding of the bridge with a clink, and he cheered for himself.

Blonde girl was next, and she winked at Esel. "Watch me miss," she mouthed, and tossed the stone in a gentle underhand. It missed the bridge by such a wide margin; Esel suspected the girl *wanted* to bring the sweating bottle to her lips.

"Your turn," Mousy boy said, "Can *you* do any better?"

Esel stuck her tongue out at him and picked up a small, smooth stone from the pile at her feet. She danced back a few paces, then leapt forward and threw it in an arc that just barely thudded against the corner of the bridge.

"Not by much," Mousy boy huffed, and crossed his arms.

"Close shots still count."

"You should still drink."

Nail-polish boy gave a sigh. "Samuel won't relent until he's had his way. Come on, we'll take a swig together."

Esel nodded, and picked up the bottle the blonde girl had just drunk from. The nail-polish boy mimed counting on his fingertips, and when the last one dropped to his palm she lifted the neck to her lips in unison with him, and let a sip of the golden liquid enter her mouth.

It was bitter, and made her want to shudder all over. It didn't taste like oak, or like wheat, or like adulthood. Instead it tasted like the short end of a stick, losing a bet.

Before Samuel could gloat, or the next person take their turn, Holly, the girl who had called out to her, came over.

Her black hair fell around her shoulders in an unkempt mess, something about it wild, tempting. Esel wondered what would happen if she kissed her, but decided against it.

"There's someone you should meet." Holly winked at her, and grabbed her wrist to pull her through the crowd. Esel felt a lurch of her stomach, but waved goodbye to those she was leaving anyways. Last time Holly had said this it had been the skateboard boy, and he had pulled her off somewhere so they could sit on his skateboard and kiss for an hour. Her lips had felt bruised afterwards. And he had felt needy, too wanting.

And Esel empty afterwards, drained.

The music was playing again, but this time people were talking, or bumping into each other. This seemed like a different kind of dance, a clumsier one. This too. Some girls had wandered further off, and were splashing each other by the murky riverbed. Esel wanted to run off and join them, but Holly had a tight grip on her wrist.

"And here." Holly stopped, and Esel almost bumped into her. She looked to where Holly was presenting her with a tall, dark-haired boy. His eyes were a muddy color. A river color. And he looked empty. He looked new. Esel didn't think she had seen him before.

"Esel, this is Clematis. I'll let you two get to know each other." With a wink, Holly skipped off to join some people who were throwing stones at the bridge above. Esel began to fidget.

"Let's go somewhere," Clematis said, and turned. He did not wait for Esel, only walked away from the circle of the light. His stride had a faltering quality to it that belied his nervousness, and Esel desperately wished she could go



and join the girls who were splashing around. But some part of her tugged after the boy, like he had tied string to her middle finger, and so she followed him.

He led her to the bank, not far from the firelight, and then turn to face her.

“Do you believe one could drown in the river?”

“What?” Esel had to take a step back. “It’s too shallow.”

“Maybe right now,” he mused, “maybe not for long.”

He took her forearm, pulled her close to him. “Will you kiss me?”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to kiss you without you giving back.”

Esel nodded, and leaned forward to brush her lips against his. He took this as a sign, and kissed her back. Violently. Maybe. But gentle. Pianissimo. He pulled her to the ground, abruptly, but it wasn’t falling. And kept on kissing her. Never breaking contact.

But something about it felt so wrong. Like he was stealing something from her. Taking. Like he wasn’t who he said he was.

And so she pushed him away.

“Stop,” she said, and he tilted his head and looked at her in a kind of confused way.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, and then studied her more closely. “Why aren’t you drunk yet?”

Something about him unnerved Esel, and so she pushed herself to a standing position and began to back away, even before she had fully straightened. Then she whirled around and whisked off, feet pounding against concrete and splashing the dirty water, hoping to find some sort of haven.

But everyone was gone. The light wasn’t there. There wasn’t even any evidence that anyone had ever been *there*. And cars did not roar overhead.

She kept on running, told herself it was wrong, and her breath caught in her throat like fire and she could feel the way the wind tugged for it to leave her, but she wasn’t about to give up just yet. And she could have sworn her trajectory was straight, but in front of her was Clematis leaning against the bank.

She skidded to a halt near to him, but still far enough away that she felt safe.

“That’s not going to help,” he said, and she recognized how much he believed in his words.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she replied anyways, and started off again. She wasn’t going to let anything happen

to her. She was going to get out of here. But everything was silent except for her footsteps, and heartbeat, and her own thoughts. And even those she couldn’t hear over the rush of blood to her ears.

There Clematis was again, still sitting, and he hadn’t moved and the bridge was too familiar.

“How do I get out?”

“We are in-between.” He shrugged. “You were the one who stopped.”

In response Esel kicked a spray of water towards him.

It splattered across his clothes like paint, but he didn’t move. She backed away from him, feeling cornered even though he hadn’t made any sign of harm towards her, and then turned to leap at the steep walls.

But she couldn’t climb them, for the tree roots had started to take their hold and the concrete had shattered like glass. Vines crawled down like snakes, and she thought she heard the rushing of water far off in the distance.


With a shriek she took several steps back, only to find Clematis behind her. His arm was steady at her

waist, on her shoulder.

“We must continue,” he said, and this time she noticed how his eyes glinted, half-full, half-empty? “I am your guide, and this is the river. For the price of coins on your eyes, or one on your lips we can continue.”

His breathing. Proximity. The only two beings in this strange half-world. And the dirt was tumbling in at the sides of the banks, and she could see the white froth of waves out of the corner of her eye, and so she closed both of them, and felt his lips touch one, then the other, and finally they were on her own again. And she only kissed him back slightly.

His lips were a drunken state.

There was noise now, it sounded like the party again now. And when he released her she stumbled to the fire, glassy-eyed, looking for a red cup filled with ambrosia and a boy or a girl to tell about the map of Paris on her wall while they slumped against her bookshelf, and not noticing the off-ness of the people around her. Maybe not even people. 



# Lady of the Snow

Jonathan Louis Duckworth

**T**he husband began his story:  
Her limbs are birch branches stripped of bark. Her long pale throat is an egret considering the sun. Her skin is not what shimmers. It is the falling snow around her, crystalline flakes transmogrified into a swarm of prisms to create her pearlescent aura. Despite what some claim, her aura does not cause madness. Nothing about her causes derangement, it is already extant in the men who think they can have her—who think her life is something that can belong to them or that they can control.

*Here he paused, having become choked up.*

She is not alive. She is to life what photons are to matter; what a metaphor is to reality. Digital photography cannot capture her image. For some reason Polaroids can record her aura, but not the lady herself.


She wanders the Green Mountains region. In Quebec she is called *La Dame Froide*. Where she treads, the snow hardens to ice. Many a man has broken a limb or worse

following the slick of her path. Birds have been known to compulsively build nests on the ground where she’s walked. The eggs never hatch, and foxes, cats, and opossums that forage them die as if poisoned.

When winter ends and the spring thaw begins, she retreats with the vestiges of winter into hollows carved into the hills by ancient tribes. In these lungs of the earth she slumbers until the next snowfall.

One story has it the lady of the snow was a shieldmaiden of the Vikings of Vinland, left behind after a raid, punished by the medicine men of vengeful natives to live forever wandering the snow. Another claims she was a victim of the Salem witch trials, which supposedly accounts for her fear of fire. But her legend is older than Salem. The Maliseet people called her Lost Daughter, and believed her to be a spirit left behind when all the other spirits parted with this world. She was revered or pitied, but never loved, and love was what she needed, and, like any creature, deserved.

*He stopped the story for a moment to slip a new set of*



**ARIANA HOCKING** is a junior at Orange County School for the Arts with pastel pink hair and a penchant to act and dress like a modern faerie. She consequently enjoys speculative and experimental fiction and has an eclectic taste in music. Her work appeared in the April 2016 issue of *Gravel*, and she is currently working on several novel projects.



chemical hand warmers into his mittens.

Many men have followed her. When a man has her attention, she will invite him to follow her through the winter woods. At a certain point, she'll stop and turn to regard her suitor. The man must present her with a white rose. The historical difficulty of acquiring roses in winter might account for why the frequency of "successful" contact with her has increased since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the man presents the rose, the lady breathes on it, enveloping the flower in silver-white hoarfrost that will never thaw. If the man leaves right there and then with the rose, and hangs the rose over his bed, he will live a long life and never suffer nightmares. But few ever leave. They follow the lady again, until she stops in her tracks once more to invite them to lead her to their homes.

*He stopped to set the vase of flowers closer on the nightstand to her, so that when she'd wake up they'd be the first thing she'd see.*

Despite having followed them willingly, the lady will become anxious at seeing the man's house. She will tell them that it looks "too warm." Men are always too proud, too eager, too self-interested to heed her, and she is too desperate for a companion to refuse their urgings. Why does she do it again and again, when she knows what will happen? Perhaps she hopes that this time will be different from all the others. She will follow them inside, leaving a trail of frost over their threshold and up their staircase and into their bedrooms. They will make love, and then the man will hold her in his arms and fall asleep in the warmth of his bed.

The man wakes feeling soaked. He opens his eyes and sees the lady of the snow becoming translucent, then turning to water and seeping away into the sheets of the bed. Thereafter the men's hearts become hollow and frail like the bird eggs laid in the lady's footprints. They've lost something precious. What could be more precious than that which melts in your hands? What is not living cannot die, but the men do not know this, and watching her melt, the men feel culpable for her murder. They feel they could have done more to preserve her. That they could have done something.

*He was choked up again.*

Some slit their throats on that very bed, desiring to mix their blood with her water. Others will walk outside, lie down, and wait for the falling snow to bury them. Some of these men are found and rescued with only minor frostbite by friends, family, or neighbors. Others are discovered only after the snow melts. Meanwhile, the lady of the snow has not died, and is reconstituted in the wilderness with the next snowfall, and the cycle continues. She weeps in the lungs of the earth. Her tears become a frosty rime around her eyes.

*Now he went silent for a long time to listen to the soft in-and-out of her breathing.*

One day a boy on the verge of manhood sees the lady of the snow gliding through a copse of silvered maples and falls in love with her as so many have before. This boy follows her as many have, careful not to slip on the ice of her wake. When she stops to regard him, he gives her the white rose, which she breathes silver. He follows her through the maples and birches and over a frozen river. When they come to the entrance of the lady's subterranean barrow, she turns

and asks him if he would like to show her his home. The boy says he would. When they come to the fence that separates his home from the woods, she hesitates.

"It looks too warm," she says, as she's said before a thousand houses before.

The boy does something now that no one has done before. He takes her by the hand, leads her into the house, and opens a window to let the cold air in.

"I want you to be comfortable," he tells her.

She tells him it's still too warm for her. So he opens another window. But it's still too warm. He opens the door and leaves it open. He opens all the windows in the entire house. Finally, the lady tells him she feels comfortable.

They go to the bed, and lie down together. The boy is shivering, and the lady's body can offer him no warmth. The lady asks him if something is wrong.

"I think I'm dying from the chill," the boy tells her. But he holds her to him, shivering, fighting to stay awake as the snow accumulates on the window sill and on the floor and invades his bed. He falls asleep in her arms.

In the morning the boy wakes. He is not dead, and the lady has not melted. The window is closed. There is no sign of snow in his bedroom or in any of the rooms of the house. Beside him in the bed is a woman who looks like the lady, except she is a normal woman. Just as beautiful and just as long-limbed, but ordinary in every way. Warm. Human.

"Good morning," he says.

"Good morning," she says back.

"Would you like some breakfast?" he asks her.

"I'd love some," she says, "it feels like forever since I've eaten."

And they lived a long, full, ordinary lifetime together.

When the husband finished telling his story, he saw that his wife was beginning to stir. Her waking moments were rare and precious those days. The tiny flakes of snow slipping in through the half-opened bedroom window melted and radiated as vapor as they settled on her face. Last he checked a half hour ago, her temperature was the same as it had been these last few months: 102 degrees. She was still beautiful, despite the brick-red flush of her face. At 42, her hair was undergoing the alchemy of a transition from platinum to silver.

When she opened her eyes she looked at the white roses in the vase on her nightstand, and then smiled at her husband. "New ones?" she asked.

The husband nodded. The flowers were from Chile. He had them mail-ordered for her once a week. The walls of their bedroom were plastered with crude crayon and colored pencil drawings from the children of the wife's second grade class, many of them with messages for her to get well soon.

"I'm sorry I didn't hear your whole story," she said.

"Don't worry," the husband told her.

"I had a dream," she said. "I dreamed the fever had gone away."

He said nothing.

"Put your hand on my head. I want to feel a cold hand."

He took one hand from its mitten and placed it on her forehead. Touching her skin was like the heat of an active oven's window felt through the fabric of an oven mitt.

The doctors didn't know what to call the wife's condition, which began in autumn as a seemingly ordinary fever that refused to diminish. All they knew was that it was unlikely to be contagious, but likely to be fatal. One doctor termed it "hysterical cephalic hyperthermia." There was no cure. They'd exhausted dozens of experimental treatments with no results, while the fever boiled her brain like an egg. Cold air eased her discomfort and helped her sleep, but this was a mere palliative. The husband had learned to live with the windows open, dressed in four sweaters. He feared the coming of spring. He didn't know if he could afford the sort of air conditioning unit to keep a room at below 40 degrees indefinitely. The doctors kept trying to take her to a hospital, but neither the husband nor the wife wanted that. Last week, one of the doctors talked to the husband in private downstairs, and asked him if he was "making arrangements" yet.

"Does your story have a happy ending?" the wife asked.

"Yes."

"That's good."

"Did you hear any of it?"

"Bits and pieces," she said. "When I'm better, and I go back to work, maybe you could visit my class and read your story for the kids. I'm sure they'd like that."

He shook his head. "I don't think it's good for kids. Too

sad."

"I thought you said it had a happy ending."

He said nothing.

"You should shave that beard. You don't look handsome with a big beard."

"It keeps me warm," he said.

"Men don't look handsome with beards."

"I'll shave tomorrow."

"No. Shave now. Please."

He didn't want to stand up and go to the bathroom. For the moment, she was awake, but when he'd return, who knew? He had a feeling as deep-set as the marrow of his bones that when his wife would die, he'd be taking a piss, microwaving a pizza, or on the phone with one of the doctors. Or maybe shaving. But he stood up anyway.

"One more thing," the wife said, gesturing to the window.

The husband opened the window all the way. More snow blew in. When the husband returned from shaving, the wife had gone back to slumber. He wished he could lie down in bed with her and join her in her dreams. But where she'd gone, and where she was going, he couldn't follow. So the husband returned to his chair at his wife's bedside to watch the snow slowly accreting on the window sill, and to contemplate the awful length of a lifetime. ☹

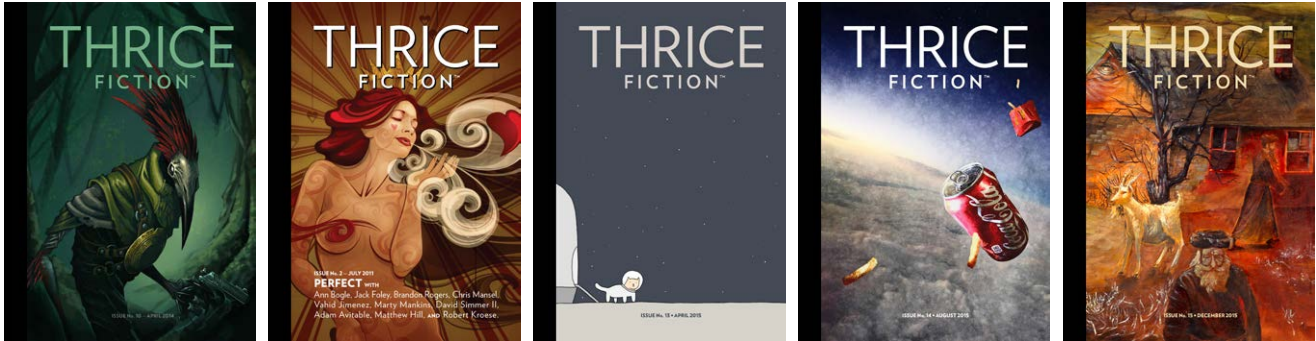


**JONATHAN LOUIS DUCKWORTH** is an MFA student at Florida International University and a reader for the *Gulf Stream Magazine*. His fiction, poetry, and non-fiction appears in or is forthcoming in *New Ohio Review*, *Fourteen Hills*, *PANK Magazine*, *Literary Orphans*, *Cha*, *Superstition Review*, and elsewhere.

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## A Bit of Storytime

Shoshauna Shy

Linny moves in upstairs to apartment 2B, so finally, my wife's kid has a buddy for first grade. I put out Coca Cola and Oreos when Linny comes down to watch cartoons with Nadine. Cook them bacon for supper when the wife goes to sisters in Paloma, leaving me in charge. Nothing sweeter than the smell of Linny's nape – like peppermint Chiclets, fabric softener and perspiration all rolled into one.

Saturday afternoons, take them on a bus to the movies at Fortune Square, Disney flicks with mermaids and princesses. Buy them kettle corn, big tubs of it, and chew Dots out of one box. I overhear Nadine ask Linny one time why she doesn't have a daddy of her own taking her to matinees. Linny just hunches down and lowers her face to her lap, like she's to blame.

Home all day on SSI, I tell her mama that Linny can join Nadine and me at Severs Park after school; I'll watch out for her. Docile as a kitten, she never raises her voice or sasses back. Never stands up for herself neither when big kids want their way. *Linny, you're safe with me, I know how to keep you safe*, I say. Skinny little girl smiles wide as the sky.

When Severs Park gets flooded for an ice rink, I find skates at St. Vincent's that fit both of them, take them skating after school. Lots of pretty mothers in parkas smile at me, say I'm patient lacing skates; wished their husbands were so nice. And Linny's mama, after a long shift at St. Augusta's, calls us a 'godsend' when she brings Linny to our door. *Such a nice family*, she says. *You all a godsend*.

That's what we are! Wife with bag of Doritos and the TV blasting in the dining room, me in the living room letting both girls climb into my lap for storytime. Nadine holds *Velveteen Rabbit* while I read the words out loud.

Then around the page the rabbit goes on a picnic, I slide my hand gentle-like beneath Linny's yellow dress. Next I slide it between her thighs. Not my fault girl starts sucking her thumb. Wiggles closer. Soon that cotton dress is blue, then it's denim, corduroy, wool. Cotton panties, nylon panties, no panties. This gal is dressing for *me*!

During Christmas break, wife says Nadine's old enough to have sleep-overs. So, it's after midnight when Linny pushes mine and the wife's bedroom door open, says she's hungry, can't sleep. I get up, and in our pajamas, the two of us prowl to the kitchen, pretend we're panthers. I make her a snack by moonlight. She climbs into my lap to eat her butter sandwich, and both of us are happy.

Not long after that, though, the wife whisks Nadine off to Paloma with no warning, hardly any luggage. Cops come to my door and clamp handcuffs on me before I even stand up out of my chair. Tell me I'm under arrest for what I done to Linny Strake. Like I did anything the kid didn't want! Those Sunday mornings the wife and Nadine go to mass at St. Luke's, she come knocking at my door calling *Mr. Jameson play with me Can you play with me Mr. Jameson till Deen come home?* I tell the sheriff this when he books me. He shakes his head, lips rolled tight, eyes squinty; doesn't want to hear it. Neither does the judge. Act like I stole something when all I did was help myself to what the girl had no idea was hers in the first place.

I'm out of jail now. My efficiency on 4<sup>th</sup> Street in this backwater burg across state is on the same floor as Ms. Beldon's apartment. Parole officer says not a problem Ms. Beldon stops in with a casserole now and again. Not a problem she got a grandson named Jeffrey stays with her. I say no problem Jeffrey doesn't talk much for a five-year-old, and so what Ms. Beldon asks me to watch him when she goes to Bingo? No one's fault Jeff wants a bit of storytime.

No one's fault but his. ⌚



## Ties That Bind

Shoshauna Shy

The dashing and handsome man has left his GTO double-parked and panting upon the roadway while he charges across the grounds toward us. If he were myself - the only other son — or Ginny, Christie or Jane, the frosty reception we'd receive would include arched brows, and the clearing of throats. Our strive to earn forgiveness would become an endeavor to last a lifetime.

But this is Baby Brother racing to join us, shirt tails flapping as he tries to knot a tie. I'd like to knot his tie into a noose. But Mom bursts into tears of *gratitude* and throws her arms around Micky. Fella lives right here in Dunham County, but nowhere to be found during the beelines to the ER, the hospital stays, and the days of coma. Meanwhile, the rest of us interrupted vacations, stand-in PowerPoints, and babies' birthday parties to shuttle in on red-eyes from hither and yon. Now relief makes Mom's world ship-shape because, just as Dad is getting lowered into the ground, little Micky manages *to show up*.

The service is finished, and the blue silk tie, haplessly knotted like whatever my brother fastens, slips from his neck to the grass while he strides away arm-in-arm with our mother. Buried backstage by lowered curtains, I do not stoop to pick it up. ⌚



**SHOSHAUNA SHY** began writing flash fiction last July, and her stories have been shared in the public arena since then courtesy of *100 Word Story*, *Literary Orphans*, *A Quiet Courage*, *Every Writer*, and *Prairie Wolf Press Review*. At this time, she is conducting a call for submissions for the Woodrow Hall Top Shelf Awards as part of her Poetry Jumps Off the Shelf program. Go to [PoetryJumpsOfftheShelf.com](http://PoetryJumpsOfftheShelf.com) for information on submitting, and to learn about the other poetry projects and award calls she has conducted since 2004.



a nuisance  
by Brian Coughlan



No longer pubescent. A long bare neck exposed; lips painted vermillion; hips pushed out to one side in the full-length mirror. As an adult, she stands unsmiling, gooseflesh risen, toes frozen, in a pair of open-toed sandals: covered in the feathers of her new disguise. The mobile phone lightly dings with another link in the chain of messages. Her dress, pulled from the wreckage of the boxes, wrinkled to all hell, is smoothed-out with both hands. All the sinews in her neck strain. Red raw knuckled hands, bony protuberant knees on long white spindly legs. Unsmiling dimpled cheeks assess the overall effect. In the silence, every sound of planned escape is amplified, the sound of elastic straps snapping, scream of bristles running through hair, shriek of wheezing lungs. A buried clock ticks somewhere in the tower of boxes. Still too soon. She lies down on the old bed.

A little earlier she had almost dozed off, despite the hard glare from a bed-side lamp, despite the greasy smell from the pillow, despite the dampness of antiquated sheets. Her dream so shockingly-deliciously vivid that with a shudder of disgust the pillow slips from her grasp, and with the fluttering of eyelash she awakens; and for a horrible moment does not know where she is. In the repeated blink of her upward facing eye; a gradual returning recognition. That unpleasant damp smell. Surrounded by shadows from the tower of boxes. Deep in the middle of nowhere. The room at the end of the corridor. A room full of boxes; filled with clothes, tins of food, mildewing books, toiletries, magazines, broken shoes. Her entire life's junk; boxed-up, piled-up, listing.

She needed a glass of water; her throat burning - except they don't have glasses in this house. Instead you make do with a cup. They have so many different kinds of cup. From multiple sets. None of which match. You ask for a glass and they roll their eyes. "What's wrong with a cup? - It's the same thing. Isn't it?" Long corridor through the house to the kitchen. Cold floor-tiles all the way. Pitch black; the light switches being impossible to find. She has to feel her way along the walls, like a blind person; turn the corner, go past the phone, should be a door; behind the door is a picture of the Last Supper; on the wall opposite it a lurid sacred heart below a beaming Christ, offering everything that he has.

As she fills her cup under the tap, lights go on in the hallway. Her grandfather calls out: "Who's out there, is that you Caroline?" All her banging around. He watches from the doorway as she puts the cup to her mouth and takes a drink. "I didn't mean to wake you" she whispers. He nods, silhouetted, because the light is not on in the kitchen, only in the hallway. The silhouette is impatient for her to go back to bed so she shuffles past him with her adulthood concealed beneath a dressing gown. He closes the kitchen door tightly behind her. There in the corridor she experiences a sudden urge; to turnaround and give the old man a hug - but he senses it — and since he fears her urge, fears her power of frenzied youthfulness, he backs away quickly, retreats down the hall. "Night, then" she whispers. He motions, vaguely: "You know where the light switch is, don't you?" She hurries back to the box room. Half-way there her grandfather turns off all the lights and she is blinded once again by the pitch-black. Her hoarse whisper to no-one: "...can't see where I'm

going!" slithers away from her along the cold dark floor tiles.

In the box room she checks her phone: still charging. Sixty-percent charged. Plugged into a loose wall socket. She composes a brief text message and presses send; then gets back under the damp covers but still leaves the bedside lamp on. She's used to housing-estate street-lights, not the absolute darkness of night-time in the middle of nowhere. And not just the box-room, but the whole house, is alive again with the crackle of silence; a static wall that seems amplified at night. Tonight is different: an additional low buzzing noise from corner of the room is revealed as a large bluebottle. An angry bluebottle colliding with walls and curtains, circling above her, coming and going from the tower of boxes. While he appears angry, in truth he is madly, truly and irritatingly in love with her. He circles her then dive-bombs towards those two pursed kissable lips.

The duvet-cover resplendent with faded flowers and grinning teddy bears is retracted, from long thin legs. The bedside lampshade holds him hostage for a few seconds as he ricochets around the bulb and then spins out of control. She lumbers after him, armed with a magazine, as he tickles and tricks and dodges, every attempt to smash his brains out. "I guess you're too smart for me" she says, as she tries to let the bluebottle go outside by opening a window. It'll leave of its own accord, she tells herself as ice cold air streams-in. But the bluebottle refuses to leave. Why would he leave, he wants to be with her? Instead he runs along the walls, underneath the ceiling, calling her name in a plangent cry of love. Naturally she doesn't hear it that way; to her it sounds like buzzing.

"Have it your way then" she cries, now unwilling to concede defeat. Rolling up the magazine into a tube she chases him around the room. Their ballet of death is but a waste of time. When she stops to get her breath back so does he. After a lengthy re-think of strategy she tries to surprise it by suddenly pouncing with a swing of the magazine and a cry of "Hiyaaah!" The bluebottle, however, is already in the air by the time the glossy cover beats against the wall. Now he's in the curtains; hiding deep within labyrinthine folds. She creeps towards them. Silent pantomime steps of exaggeration. She thinks she can see him, scratching his feet together. She holds her breath, careful not to alert him she raises the magazine over her shoulder. Wait for it. Wait for it. Now! She swings her magazine at the curtain folds; cries-out in surprise as dust from her swipe engulfs her eyes, nostrils and mouth. "Atchoo!" she sneezes, until the dust is cleared out of her nose.

All the while a silhouette watches her from the door, as Caroline prowls with eyes darting from one brief cameo of shadow to the next. Phantom movements. Waiting somewhere. On the carpet or under the bed? Back in the folds of the curtain? "What are you doing out of bed, again?" it asks, pointedly. Catches her off-guard. She stammers, tells her grandmother about the bluebottle. "Just ignore it and get back into the bed" scolds the old woman. This is no way to be carrying-on in the middle of the night. With no recourse to fair trial the girl nods her head meekly, accepts the scolding voice, returns to the land of faded flowers and prancing teddy-bears and is tucked-in by the rough hands of her hard-breathing grandmother. Her bedside lamp too is switched off and the door is closed firmly behind the



retreating, muttering figure.

As soon as her grandmother is gone the bluebottle starts buzzing around the room again. What if she ignores it; what if she tells herself that it does not exist, will it stop then? If you ignore a problem it will go away; then feels a little tickle on the end of her nose. There it is again - but along the top of her lip. She quickly switches on the lamp. Leaping from the bed of ponys and pixies she picks up her pillow, chases the bluebottle all over the bedroom again. All thoughtfulness and strategy is replaced by savagery. She swings and knocks over the lamp, throws the room into high shadows. With an unrelenting passion she chases the bluebottle out of the room and slams the door after it with a triumphant finality. The bluebottle floats along the corridor, enters the other bedroom through a door left slightly ajar and becomes a silent stuck to the wall witness.

In the other bedroom grandmother grunts; constantly, involuntarily, from the back of the throat. It comes, regardless of circumstance, like an indicator of life-force. "...and what would you have us do with her, huh?" she says, disrobing in countless little movements and all the time with her huh-huh-huh in the background. Her husband lies there with his back to her. "She should be with her father" he shouts. "Don't shout at me" she says as she stumbles towards the hook on the back of the door with her dressing gown held up in offering to the God of hooks. "Her mother is the one I blame..." and she climbs into the bed, pulling over the covers, slowly; slowly and with the very great ceremony that trivial tasks assume in the midst of crisis. "I'll never get to sleep now" says the old man, his voice muffled by the pillow in his mouth. It's a cold night and this room itself is cold. Within a matter of minutes they are asleep. Though it is only ten o'clock at night they are already well past a bed-time that has been strictly adhered to for as long as they can remember. Their dreams are unrecorded. The old man's mouth hangs open like a black-hole of nothingness; the old woman continues to vibrate in her sleep with a hung-hung-hung issuing from somewhere deep in the depths of her being.

When the girl's phone dings again — she is no longer pubescent — it's time to go. Now ninety-percent charged. That's enough. She pulls the plug from the socket, winds the cord in and round the plugs; puts it in her bag. There are other things she needs from the boxes but they are too heavy to take down by herself. Things she'd like, but will have to do without. A few she must bring; hairbrush; make-up bag; underwear; pyjamas; her good shoes that she hasn't had a chance to wear yet; ear-rings; purse; a doll given to her by a friend she will probably never see again; they are all packed into a bag that goes on her back. She's cold but refuses to

wear her coat; she wants to look good. To show off her figure to the man coming to collect her. And so, holding her shoes she ghosts up the corridor and noiselessly lets herself out of the house by a key stuck in the back door.

It's still dark outside but she isn't afraid of the dark. The flash-light will guide her way along the boreen to where it joins the main road. The beam of her torch is enough to follow, and when a car pulls up alongside her the silhouette behind the wheel is friendly. He taps the passenger seat. He tells her to jump on in. Finally they meet. There is a fly in the car. It keeps smashing itself against the underside of the windshield. As they pull away she asks if she can let it out. The driver says ok. He lowers the electric windows. "You look different from your photo" she tells him. Apparently that doesn't matter. His hand strays from the gear-stick to her frozen knee. "You're so cold" he says as the calloused palm of a hand with thick dark hair growing all around the knuckles tickles her knee. And it's too warm in the car so that she can smell his cologne and underneath that his musk, a nasty stink. The radio comes on, it's too loud to hear anything, too loud to think straight. He crushes the bluebottle against the wind-shield. A little red squish mark on the glass.

"Stop for a minute" she asks him and he pretends not to hear her. How fast they are spinning through the night in this long black piece of metal and light brown leather interior. "I'm going to be car-sick" she says, holding her mouth with a cupped hand and the thought of it going on his leather seats makes the wheels come to a sudden screeching stop. He opens the lock on her door and she leaps out and is over a ditch before he can stop her. He will not follow her through the fields, he has no stomach for it, those hairy hands and that big round head. Caroline is moving now through the darkness. Her feet slither in the muck and if she feels hot breath on her face and the smell of bad breath it will be from a horse or a cow not from some smelly old creep. The bed-side lamp left burning will guide her back, back to that cold little room, full of boxes. 📖



# Death of a House Wife

Sarah Denise Johnson

On this day, we feel sorrow in our hearts with the knowledge that she is lost: that the ground opened up and seized her for its prisoner, where she may walk among shades in Asphodel. And if she is to occupy Heaven, she may never see the face of God but may still speak to Angels. And if she is an Angel herself, may she burn a bush for us. Clouds cover the sun and weep for her burial: this woman may be cause for a hurricane.

Fondly remember the Thanksgiving feast she prepared, mashed potatoes cooked for Jesus and Turkey good enough for the Holy Ghost. Think of her soft hands plunging into murky water to salvage what is left of dinner's dishes, scraping off dried sauce until the white of the china is winking back as if it was brand new. When her delicate hands grip the neck of the vacuum and clean the mess her children left behind, the sound of a lion roaring may be her battle cry. And she will dust the corners of the rooms and stretch her legs to reach places untouched by hands other than her own. Remember the patience Penelope bowed her head to.

Do not forget her wavering eyes to the chiseled man down the street. She had slept for fourteen hours one day and watched movies from beneath her sheets. She wore sweats the day friends came for a visit and had the decency to blush in her forgetfulness. She yelled a curse word on a Wednesday and slapped a child's face on a Thursday. Do not forget.

And so on this day, glance toward the shadowy sky and head bow in respect. Be comforted that she may never know the world's end nor see a child's end, that she might feed maggots and house earth worms. That she might grow fungus. That from the eye holes of her skull she may sprout flowers. Do not linger on the proof we may someday leave too; move on. 📖



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**SARAH DENISE JOHNSON** is an undergraduate student at Stephen F. Austin. She has had a poem published in the third installment of the online journal *tiny poetry: macropoetics*. Aside from a passion for writing, she has a deep-rooted love for literature, film, and politics.





## A New Start

Gary Floyd

I'm an exhausted, middle aged, red headed woman who is being squished between two people. One guy thumbs through a stack of text books; the other – roughly thirty, tall, with glasses and a pronounced swallow – appears to be part of a religious order.

The subway lurches. It descends into a black tunnel, under the city, garishly loud. Its brakes squeak and squeal. Paint jumps off the subway car's walls as if defacing the graffiti. A community college promises a new career. Unprotected sex kills. My husband thinks I'm at work. He doesn't know I've lost my job and I don't want him to find out. I clutch my oversized gold bag. It contains all my money and credit cards, some which are in my name and some which aren't.

The train is impregnated like a sausage casing, as it rattles into a station. Someone long ago gave up on cleaning the station's stained yellowing tiles. Doors open. Some exit. Most don't. More squeeze in. Lights flicker. Someone breaks wind. Everyone avoids eye contact. The sleek silver tube leaves the station. The passing stations take on a strobe light effect ...

I live north of the city. I'm sick of the commute, which I continue to do longer than is necessary. I'm sick of keeping up with my underwater mortgage. I'm sick of disrespectful kids, particularly my own. I won't tell you which suburb I live in because I'm probably not going back.

We remain underground for a few more stops, until

we eventually burst into the blinding sunlight, south of the city. I reach my final destination. My research is thorough. I walk a few blocks to Enterprise and I rent a car. I head for the turnpike, traveling west toward the empty part of the state before eventually crossing into the even emptier part of New York. The sun is shining and everything is new. I know no one. I pull over and throw my iPhone - contacts and all - from a bridge high over the Hudson River. I'll later buy a replacement, probably an android, at a nondescript mall. Pretty soon, I'll begin collecting new contacts. I'll abandon my car near Alamo before renting another car under another name.

Don't think poorly of me for abandoning my family. It beats the alternative. I haven't killed anyone... yet.

I continue southwest until I get lost in the empty spaces of a third faraway state. Something doesn't feel right and I wonder if I've finally lost it. I should be home for dinner, sometime, tomorrow. I'll walk in the front door and say, "Honey I'm home."

My new husband will ask, "How was your day?"

I'll answer, "Better than some. Not as good as others. You wouldn't believe what happened."

My new husband doesn't answer: I'm snapped out of it by the subway lurching into a complete stop. The doors slide open. Leaving five seconds for me to decide whether to stay or go. I lean forward: but I have nowhere to go.

The subway is back in motion. Its movement – the fact its stops are predictable - gives my life structure. It slows down again as it approaches the final stop. It's the third time I've been here today. The workers walk out onto the platform, and go from front to back. Occasionally, someone will glance at me like they know everything about me they need to. I wait. They probably assume I'm homeless. I'm not. The doors close back up and I'm trapped inside again, re-experiencing the binging and purging of another subway ride.

After a few more subway rides, I'll get off and wander the city again aimlessly. I'll pick up a little something to add to the dinner, while I'm out. I'll be home by five, pretend the day has been productive, as I'll make a special dinner for my husband and kids. I'll watch intently as my family enjoys my cooking. They'll soon be in a dead sleep and tomorrow the world will wake up to anew, and I'll once more use the subway to escape. 🕒



**GARY FLOYD** is a Massachusetts writer who has worked both as a journalist and teacher of at risk youth. He has spent 22 years going to the Wildacres Writers Conference in North Carolina. He has worked on novels and only recently has learned the art of flash fiction. So far the experiment is going well.



## The Water

Steven Earnshaw

We must stop and make our foreheads smooth. We could return to water, and not let it prey on our mind. It always becomes a moral panic when we think about it. A return to the time when we could swim. When we concentrate on the water we frown. It should be simpler. When we could concentrate on the water without frowning, each concentrates a ripple. Water was? A desert bond unlike oil. What water can possibly be. She dreamt of the washing machines beneath, on all the time, the trillions who loaded and unloaded clothes from the world. What water as the ground note for the possibility of all life. The temperature of the universe as a metaphor convergence on no free water. That is the moral panic – film, hybrid forms, sensitivity – when water is no form of communication. And yes, she likes to return to the water with discrimination. With what lives in water, the range of waters to take without thought, a new latitude finally, the style of the water.

When she moves towards the water an idea for thought suspension, which keeps the ground under its feet. 'Please do not undermine'. 'Remember the time when we undermined? Sending water into space – the very idea! Inspired. Then they told us off. I thought we might have to wash everything again – punishment. As if'. At least once we should try (she thought, on behalf of the others) to help with the washing machines, if the word 'collaborate' weren't so heavy. She rubs the water between thumb, forefinger, middle finger, she is returning to water. This water has no bite, no colour, no heat, no pungency, no burst from the earth. She is undermining. Sometimes it is a question of waiting for water, water is all that is required. It's that, or. Running out of time, the corporation of water. Where the cleansing water goes in the outflow pipe to other parts we do not know. She refuses to worry about water, tells herself 'don't worry about the water' and hears the devil's detail flutter out of the globe's insidious rills insist she must perform salve. Some kind of the water music drone.

Day two of washing machines to the mental horizons. The visceral rumble that keeps her fixed on the need for water, the wiping clean of physical mentality, the reversion of blood to water, wiping out of corpuscles. If she thinks hard enough beneath consciousness in the land where washing machines are engines of the universe then everything is possible including this. Different sizes colours run speeds, energy supplied by water-cooled plants. Amidst nothing – isolated, deserted, alienated by these necessities, obsessed with smoothing away the water's creases, living on the water in a way which is water's precision. If only, the contemplation coursing on, there was a way which was not the water, the womb return which was not too fluid or vitreous birth-sight gel. But no. The myth of fish persists and she cannot help but look down her legs to the feet in mustard-flavoured stockings in disappointment. She is so ordinary amidst the wealth of washers, the field of washers, the machines garnered for more cleanliness, world hygiene, fully enabled. Jet streams flowing behind lets her glide over the water, heads into a steam squall, memories raining down, drawing deep from the well's half-millennium water that has not known industry, contemporary warfare, medicine and electronics. The water has only its own natural history, she thinks, puts the kettle on. When the oceans are drained, she thinks, my punishment will be a remote archipelago surrounded by rats to all horizons. Thirsty they attack me, they want the liquid from my body and the last sound is from flesh squelched into their tiny pink mouths.

She removes the teabag, adds a spot of milk and a lump of sugar, grabs a couple of digestives. On the sofa she tucks her legs beneath her bottom, partly for warmth as the radiators are just about to kick in, resumes the novel. The rain plashes then pools on the window. It is all a bonus, except the tea scalds the roof of her mouth and for days her tongue tests the blisters strung out across the scorched palate. A feeling of lateness predominates; the time must have gone when it was possible to act. She makes another cup of tea, waits for the heat to disperse, watches the steam mark the air. The blisters must have nearly all gone, leaving the flesh smooth. She puts the book face down on the table and wonders about her fate now it must be too late to save anything. When the blisters have gone entirely it is time to return to the beginning of the year, the visit to the slipway, the roar of some pipe voiding a dam. La Monte, quirky La Monte, nothing but a sneer for life and surface dirt. Her legs accumulate pins and needles in the course of time because she cannot face surface dirt opaque sheen. Tea coldens. A filled bath and if quirky La Monte visits her bath again she sits on his head through to drowning in the course of time. A woman can dream!

Not of a dirty cloth – La Monte is here now and sneers it high – drops the rag into her lap. The smell transfers to his fingers and he scrubs for an absolute age in the kitchen sink shouting 'buy disposables'. 'I'll have a coffee!' she returns. Further than ever this is away from the water and the feel of time's importance now it is water. 'All you ever talk about Kelly' shouts La Monte from the kitchen, scrubbing, liquid apple blossom goo still not winning aroma, 'is flumes and chutes. Those days are gone darling, gone! Have you got any music? Play me something with arpeggio cascades'. Further



than ever La Monte leads her from swimming under the water. ‘La Monte, where’s my coffee? At once!’ She laughs, but in the kitchen his serious way glooms in, the stink of the cloth from the bin outstanches a world never clean enough for him and he never asked Kelly about disposal. ‘Caste. Untouchables. Now *that* would make sense’. Worse, the look cast aside and down sees abject crockery waiting for chemical bite. He comes round here and her rag is filthier than ever, converges with the whole place, all of it. ‘Is the dirt ingrained?’ he shouts, rooting out a cafetière, ‘if so...’ and ‘if so... then ’ to himself, ‘then nowhere for me to go. I am still’. ‘Hurry up La Monte. I’m dying of thirst in here’. The water doesn’t drain terribly fast; a small plughole with a high-filigree filter has trapped chopped onion and thick pulses. There’s nothing to poke away the solids. The drainer has caked-in dirt on the soft metallic ridges and there is darkness behind the taps. The window above the sink has two centuries of pollution growing. ‘Come on Monty, hurry up’. Painfully off the sofa the sting of life into the feet. ‘Say, have you ever thought about a foot bath?’ to herself shaking one leg after the other ‘rippling gurgling between the toes, tickling’. ‘Monty – what’s the hold up?’

The webs of animal hate hang, tie him to the spot near the sink, let only his eyes move to the cereal splinters, kibble, pea squash, spindles of spaghetti, silver-foil dabs, microscopic glass rubble. It’s getting dark and cockroach party, kettle waiting, Kelly waits. Her cries of ‘coffee’ are muffled, the roach and the rat precede, and rising in the sonic hinterland the deadly bath running on and on, a dam about to give way. What after the rat? Different sizes? Bluebottles churning up the filth in surroundworld. It was always a mistake, here, now, not to wear total suit protection from hazardous material and filth. ‘Monty, you slacker, where’s the coffee? Forget it. I’m having a bath. Come scrub baby!’ It’s too late, with the microbiotic world in full ooze, some megajet washout required, demolition, death. Nothing to make Kelly clean. Nothing. Not a lifetime of return to clear running water, a lifetime of digging out the monstrous grime from her skinly folds and furrows. Closes eyes, images the island villa, whitest facade, bluest pool, dry sun killing all growth scorched cleanliness. ‘Kelly!’ Here, me. Open eyes, ant mandibles biting down hard on La Monte’s chin. ‘Monty. My back!’

Drip of drip of drip of drip of the drip drip drip will not stop. The best room mind drifts the best. ‘Monty. My back!’ Kitchen worst room. Drip of kitchen bath foam big burst through. Kelly must paint those nails. ‘Monty, you slacker. Is the kitchen so fascinating? Come. I’m completely indecent. Clean me! Monty! La Monte! Come!’ But who cares now the

bath water is here? Being in the bath, Drip Drip Drip. One day the tap fixes itself, it has to happen. If Kelly moves too quickly, unsmooths her face, twitches, the water will spill over. I drip in the world as long as clean water. Imagine not cleaning not pure drinking the water. Drip drip towards drip end. The world, dripping through the universe, take me with you. ‘Monty, you’re banned unless you come in here right now, banned forever’ she shouts and worries. The world and La Monte not made for each other. Kelly, world. Well. Dripping through life, coming together, skimwater. Paintrite on nails smooths out nails. Should she wash her hair again today? Drip drip drip of choice.

The body wrinkles, tries to grip water, head under the water now that she has satisfied all material wants and can go unto water without telling any soul. Here are two scenarios under the water, sea, city river, without telling any soul, osmosis leaking the body’s material into its environment. And with it what counts? ‘Monty!’ bubbling up, if bubbles were smoke, breath holding. Her body shrivels, her levels of concentration equalling up. ‘The world’s desiccating me. Monty, help!’ head comes up, she laughs at the very idea. Dehydrating how it is now, the two scenarios, sunseasand or cityriver, beneath the concrete pylons, the thunderous motorway, face down, bum to the stars. The other is wading out to feed the fishes without giving prior notice, waking up, finding that you are asleep invaded by water for blood, inflating your lungs, feet swells. Wondering what this is like now you feel water.

A piece of the world in her eye, soap, grit, who knows what? It spoils all the fun, thumb and forefinger hold open the eye and she plunges her head into the water, comes out, still the world’s bittiness under the lid. It goes, leaving a memory, a fear it may return. This is what it is always like to be in water, getting colder, freezing veins even. Have a hot shower! Monty was in her eye, rigid with nature going wrong; he was gone wrong making atomic models at random. ‘H<sub>2</sub>O and this is what it has come to’ he mumbles on the surface of the eye that wells up. ‘There is no pose that I can work now, there is...’ cut short by petrification, a marble work surface, what he would have wanted, in miniature, drilling through Kelly’s cornea and lens, adopting a leisurely back stroke through the vitreous gel and up through the optic nerve into brain. In turn this causes her to look at the three-hour old wrinkles changing into cavities until her body is washing-machined inside out and her eyes are looking inside, onto the equally pocked brain. The body begins to collect up water, the drench cycle, rehydrates, having been in water without water. ‘How much longer?’ Kelly wonders, pulls herself up, reaches for the towel. ☺



**STEVEN EARNSHAW** has published short stories in *Lackington’s Magazine*, *The Wrong Quarterly*, *Tears in the Fence*, *Quarterly West*, *The Warwick Review*, and elsewhere. Other publications include *The Pub in Literature* and *Existentialism*. His short story collection, *Memory Clinic*, will be published in Spring 2016 ([RomanBooks.co.in](http://RomanBooks.co.in)). He is one half of electronica duo E,F ([sheffieldfawcetts.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk](http://sheffieldfawcetts.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk)).



# Something for Pondscum

C. Allen Harrison

The jade skips from my arm and clatters against the open treebody. They cut that bark.  
“Go die Pondscum.”  
Hook my fingers into the silk around my elbow and lean. The shirt pulls my throat.  
“Where’s my kit?”  
“Get your kit.”  
They are laughing. What is this. Push my kneebacks against the dirt. Jade scattering along the treebody warm and wet onto my shoulders. Warmth cleaner than breasts with no nipples. Cleaner than blooming moss. Open my eyes. Did I ask about the kit. Lean and the shirt pulls against my throat.  
Bean is sitting on the metal-drum slapping his hands against it between his thighs. Rolling it with his ass. Rubbing his chin against his shirt. The swell of his pants over the lip shaking. His palms hitting closer with each beat.  
“I’m riding the horse. This way Pondscum. This way.”  
Push my hand against the pebbles.

“You want me to hit it?”  
“He wants to hit it.”  
Buko is leaned toward me through a windowframe open at the top.  
“Oh. You want to hit it?”  
“He wants to take it home.”  
Bean falls onto the ground the drum rolling. His legs pumping. The drum stops against a knot of vines where the sand fades to dirt. Or the dirt fades to sand.  
Bean is laughing.  
“You can hit it but you can’t take it home.”  
Buko bends behind the wall. Comes over the windowframe with a handful of jade and it goes around me.  
“Hear that Pondscum?”  
Hear it cleaner than the mouthfeel of bayonet-shaved thighs.  
Open my eyes.  
Bean is squatted with his hands on the sides of the drum. Rubbing the swell of his pants along it. Buko pointing a



cigarette toward the sand with his lips and passing a lighter across the tip. He looks toward me.

“Can you stand?”

The shirt tight against my chest.

They turn their heads. Bean lays the drum onto the dirt and sits on it. Buko takes the cigarette from his mouth and wipes his tongue along a finger. Looks toward the finger and flicks it against his thumb. Puts the cigarette between his lips and his elbows against the windowframe. Squints toward the sandvines. Bean leans toward the sandvines. Puts his palms against the lip of the drum and lifts his ass.

“Something for Pondscum.”

Roll my hand along the pebbles.

Buko comes around the wall and squats. Looking toward me with one eye closed. Smoke lifting along his nose. Stands slow holding a chunk of jade with both hands. White with a line of red thin around it.

Cleaner than a drop of water on my nose.

Buko is walking toward me lifting the chunk against his stomach. Veins stretching the skin red along his forearms. Bean is leaning toward me. Smiling and nodding his head.

Pull my fingernails through the pebbles.

—

“Who was shooting?”

Tjipetir from between trees black-slashed and pinned with overfull cups. Looking toward me and stepping high through the sandvines into the water. Concrete-dust sitting in the air behind him. Splashes from his shins. He bends handcupping water against his hair and over his neck. Rubs his hands along his face and spits. Pulls his shirt from between his pants and stomach. Hooks his pants with a thumb and scoops water against himself. Bends and lifts the line stretching drops running together. The boat slides to against his thigh. He takes a towel and slaps it around his neck.

Bean is knelt at the metal-drum working a knifeblade into the lip.

Tjipetir walks onto the sand pulling the towel with his hands. Pants running water over his feet. Buko holds a cigarette toward him. He takes it with his lips and Buko passes the lighter across it.

“Can you stand yet?”

He walks to standing in front of me. Puts his hands into the pockets of his pants. Pantcuffs to knees waterdark and on the crotch. Smoke holding around his head. Lifts his hands from the pockets and kneels. Takes my wrist with his fingers and slides his palm hard and smooth along my forearm. The frayed sack-plastic falls from my elbow. He puts his hands into his pockets and stands.

“Rubberized idiot.”

Bean stands. A glob trembling white on his palm. Fingers shining. He looks toward us and pushes his hand inside of his pants.

“Don’t leave.”

Bean goes between the trees. Tjipetir walks toward Buko. Sits in the windowframe. His hand on a rustbar twisted from the walltop. Takes the cigarette from his lips.

“He goes like that and says don’t leave.”

“He would leave.”

“He just left.”

They laugh.

I lean my hands onto the pebbles. The sound of my shirt peeling from the treebody. Push the pebbles and the dullache goes through my forearm. Take the pistol from the dirt. My kit.

“Pondscum is up.”

They are slapping their palms against the concrete. Folds pushed flat into the leather and smeared with dirt.

“Can he stay up?”

“One. Two.”

Pick the edge of the leather with my fingertip.

“Three.”

Peel it from the dirt. Brush the palm of my pistol-hand against the leather.

“Still up. Four.”

“Five.”

Shake the kit. Sound of glasschips. Shit.

“Six. Seven.”

I walk toward them. Slap my hands against the concrete. Buko leans his head toward the ground.

“Your kit.”

Tjipetir is looking toward the water.

—

I lift drums against my stomach and walk along the sand and scattered concrete into the water. Tjipetir is sitting in the boat rubbing the towel against his pistol. Buko standing in the water holding the rope. I lift the drums into the boat and lean my forearms onto the gunwale.

“How many horses in these?”

“I didn’t count.”

“How many do you think?”

“These or all of them?”

I glance at the wall. Stacks of drums against it.

Tjipetir puts the towel onto his shoulder and slides the drums with his foot.

“Less after Bean.”

Buko lifts his hand toward the trees.

“He put one on his cock.”

“You counted that.”

Buko moves the hand toward Tjipetir.

“He left to put another one.”

“He said don’t leave.”

They laugh. I push the gunwale and walk to the sand. Pull the pistol from my waistband and put my back against the wall. Open the cylinder and shake the cartridges onto my palm. How did this happen. Powder caked around the chambers. I rub a fingernail against it.

There is the sound of splashing. Buko is walking toward me.

“If we could eat that.”

“You can.”

He looks toward my hands. Shakes his head and squats. I roll a cartridge with my fingers. The casing patina-rough. Twist it into a chamber. Buko stands with drums against his stomach and walks toward the water. The dullache is in my shoulders. I drop the cartridges onto the sand and close the cylinder. The sound of my shirt peeling from the wall.

—

The sand shrinks the dirt shrinks around me cleaner than the concrete shrinks around me cleaner than white. The soil-taste of air. The edges of leaves scratching together against me. It is this way.

I push between the treebodies. Branches sliding wet together. Frogs trilling. Everything dripping. Mud bubbling over my feet. Leaves black and strings of what against my ankles.

I lean my hand against a treebody and water squeezes against the pistol. The dullache is going into my neck. I open my eyes.

There is light ahead of me. I slide the pistol along the bark. Treeroots spread lumped with moss. Waterdrops bright. I step into it and kneel. The moss bends against my knees. I move my hands along it. Warm. Stretch my arms along it and move to prone. I push my face against it.

Breathe moss.

Rub my arms against it rub my. Warm. Tufts are twisted in the cylinder. I lift the pistol and the moss lifts the moss rips. The smell of crushed nutshells blows shattered waterdrops toward me. Dry into my. The dullache goes into my goes into my I put my hand against my mouth. I pull the pistol to against my face. The sound of the smell of the nutshells wet everywhere the smell of the nutshells fade to sand. Did I ask about what. I push the moss. The moss bubbling over my feet.

Fucking horses.

Rub the pistol against my face. When is the homegoing. I open my eyes.

--

Bean Buko and Tjipetir are in the boat. Bean is holding a shirt wadded against his shoulder.

“He’s still up.”

“How was it?”

“Cover your cock Pondscum.”

They are slapping the bench. Water piling against my ankles.

“A dab of horseoil.”

“You put more than a dab.”

“I needed it.”

They laugh. I lean my forearms onto the gunwale. Stacks of drums and water slide toward me. Sand spreading. My kit is open on the bench.

“What is this?”

“Got your kit.”

Tjipetir puts his hand on a drum and leans toward me.

“Did you tell them Pondscum? Horseoil. Are they laughing?”

I set my pistol on the bench.

“Tell them to give us something better next time.”

“Tell them to give us more horses.”

“I liked Pondscum’s horse.”

“Bean likes to feed horses.”

Bean lifts the shirtwad. A line of blood stretches along his arm. He reaches his fingers toward the kit. Tjipetir pushes it off the bench with his pistol. Glass swirling into the water. Bean swings his pistol toward Tjipetir.

“Did you feed horseoil to the horse Bean?”

Bean shakes his elbow. Tjipetir pushes a stack of drums toward him.

“Did you bite it?”

Bean wipes the shirtwad along his arm to his shoulder. Sets his elbows against his knees. Buko takes my pistol.

“Come on.”

Tjipetir is pulling the line. Piling it between his feet. Lifts it the concrete-chunk turning letting water. Takes the chunk with his hand and sets it on the pile.

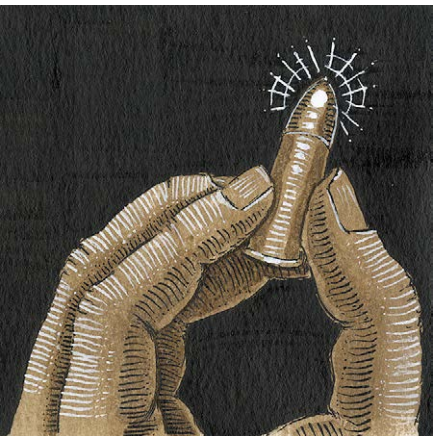
The dullache is in my eyes.

Tjipetir pulls the cord. A tuft of smoke moves across them. He turns

and puts his hand against the engine. Pulls the cord and the engine is vibrating the gunwale is vibrating. I lift my forearms. Peel the shirt from my back over my head. The boat wobbles away from me.

“You walking Pondscum?”

“They all do that.” 🌀



**C. ALLEN HARRISON** has lived in California, China, Mexico, Puerto Rico, South Korea, and Spain, and done disaster relief in Haiti and the Philippines.







unlikely, but your fair, what promises to be a Suburban Macabre exemplar, does provide a compelling *mise en scene* through which to unpack the query.

The *dramatis personae* taking part in the macabre’s constructed acts will doubtlessly achieve those artificial emotions that they elicit, but my exploration rests on the longing that they will feel afterwards. Is that, the longing, the non-emotion, True? This is of no weight, equal importance, and at most, little interest. But it may be the only *matter* that the Donington Days Fair has to offer wider culture.

Your readers will find my analysis thought provoking, and I believe once it’s published in the *Daily*, more reputable publications in the city may offer you compensation to re-publish it, as Urbanism is currently quite a popular topic among the armchair classes here.

Sincerely,  
Agnew

The response:

**From:** kathy@doningtondaily.net  
**To:** e e agnew  
**Date:** Thursday, August 7 at 7:09 AM  
**Subject:** RE:

I need 300 words on family friendly at DDF. Pay is 45 r u interested? Need answer by lunch

Of course I was interested in forty five dollars. Even while watching the fox disappear deeper into the woods I was tempted to follow, not him, but the money, back to the tracks and all the way to Donington. But I did not, for my faith in serendipity is the closest thing I have to a religion, and if there was a story to be found in the suburbs, this well dressed woods singer would know/be it. I pulled up my pants and ran.

Clumsily, I joked about him seeing my ass. Hamfistedly, I asked if there were any True Acts or Emotions in the suburbs. I told him I was a journalist.

His response came in contemplative plucking, then a decisive chord. “There are,” he said and invited me to follow him, which I did. In a few yards he put on a mask to fully become the fox and, after looking over my clothes, gave me a mask too. I became the badger. He sang. I sang. We sang:

*Tell all the night things*  
*Tell all the night things*  
*Tell all the night things to come and play!*

I was too taken by the song to notice when exactly a women’s chorus joined us, but the effect was entirely pleasant—even if I couldn’t see where the voices were coming from.

*The night fox watches us*  
*The owls they stalk us*  
*But something follows us that croons along*

*All hail the Night Queen*  
*All hail the Night Queen*

*All hail the Night Queen all night long!*  
But when the song ended the disembodied voices began to menace me with questions (and were those accents, in this provincial place?)

“A reporter? From the city?”  
“Doing a story on the suburbs?”  
“A bit presumptuous, isn’t it?”  
“Oh, but he’s dressed the part!”

I checked the trees; they weren’t there. “Yes, the suburbs are,” I said, searching, “problematic,” and the voices went silent. “I mean, they just get what culture radiates from the city,” I said, “I think.” Then the women’s voices turned on me.

“What about Ferguson. Is that in your story?”  
“Or the *banlieues*?”  
“It’s your city that’s problematic, badger. A problem for us.”

“I’m sure cities have nice things, I just prefer the suburbs, badger.”

The voices were not coming from the trees; in fact, they were not hidden at all. The girls dressed like birds were sitting all around me, in old furniture, wearing nice dresses and masks.

“Is badger alright, fox?” one asked.  
“He’s not going to badge, is he?”  
“Are you badging on us, badger?”  
“Oh, he’s fine, just a bit surprised. Sit down, badger, please.”

The fox gestured for me to sit on a psychiatrist couch which I hadn’t noticed right beside me. I said “Got it” and “So, hello” and waved to the girls dressed like birds.

By a quick ornithological study of their masks, I gathered that they were divided into two camps: the thrush and corvidae. The thrush were sensitive and kind and prone to humming, but the corvidae were intent to destroy my ego vis-a-vis the city and the suburbs. A raven passed me a rolled cigarette and of course I smoked it/instantly regretted doing so.

As if by a chemical reaction in my brain, the whole situation—which had been surprising, certainly, and startling, but in a lyrical way—became more terrifying by ten and a rash broke out in my ass crack. I spread on the psychiatrist couch. My blazer was soon entirely soaked with hot and nervous sweats, and when the fox offered me a cold beer and a thrush complimented my jacket and a corvid asked why I was wearing it, all I could do was take the drink and say “Wow,” highly, “tastes really good.”

“It’s just Miller,” a corvid said and the fox asked if I’d like to be shown around, and I was eager to get away from the girls dressed like birds but a blue jay stopped him from taking me.

“Now hang on, let him sit a bit, we’d like to meet badger, too.”

“He hasn’t answered me yet. Why are you wearing that blazer, badger?

“And why are the buttons cut off? Is that a trend in your city?”

“That’s such a unique tie, badger. Where did you get it?”  
“Oh, yes, in fact, actually,” I said, but a horrible screeching behind my head made me jump and scream.

Actually, the noise was just an excuse to express my

fear—it was the sight of the void opening behind me that had been so frightful. Trees, the woods, space and depth that I was perceiving, that I had just been walking through, were all moving, being torn open, and I did flip my wig. The corvids laughed.

“Calm down, badger dear!”  
“I wasn’t expecting that!”  
“Did he think we were going to get hit by a train?”

And the thrush laughed too, though kinder-eyesly. “Oh, badger, sorry it gave you such a start! Did you really not see it there?”

I did not see it there. I still did not see it there nor did I know what it is. The inside of a warehouse, I saw that much now with my eyes adjusted—fox was walking through it—but no outside of a warehouse. I said “How?”

“It really works on him,” a rook said. “Who knew?”  
“Where did fox find this again? Pinterest, wasn’t it?”  
“Pinterest of all places!”

“I’ve told you guys there’s a lot of great stuff on Pinterest,” a thrush said. “You just have to know how to look.”

So I entered the void and was aware of only two things: the girls dressed like birds behind me, likely mocking me, and the worsening rash in my ass crack. I tried to itch with my cheeks. I remained unaware of my legs below my ass, the rest of my body, and how I came to be walking through the warehouse (had someone suggested it? the fox called me? a curious urge to burrow?) I am surprised to see that I’m still holding a cold beer, and a refrigerator against the wall, and in an elevated office up a flight of metal stairs, the fox and an owl were talking in a soundproof room.

They had been talking about True Emotion and Acts in the suburbs, the owl told me. “Oh,” I said. “Well, I mean, this is certainly very surprising,” gesturing/conceding to everything. But owl said that I shouldn’t be impressed, that this was just something fox found on Pinterest and fox corrected, as he’d apparently done a few times already, that the idea came from an art magazine’s profile of a designer, who just so happens to have a Pinterest. “But,” the owl said to me, “well. We’ll see,” and shifted the topic to who I am.

In the owl’s easy presence I was able to articulate my assignment for the *Daily* and my own ambitions; more generally, the chasm between my perceived and actual selves. My ass crack even stopped itching until she she pressed further on my interest in True Acts and Emotions. I said “Actually, I really don’t.”

“Well, for us, for me, anyway it was DiscoRobot that got me involved” and fox began plucking his mandolin along with her story. “You see, one day a boy with no friends came to school dressed as a robot,” and now I wondered how old they were behind their masks. “C3P0 head, a Transformer’s arm, computer parts glued all over him, et cetera. And he had speakers and lights hooked up to his suit so that he could play music and put on shows, which he did, in the hallways and classes.

“First he’d play the music, slowly, and he’d walk mechanically to the nearest light switch. He’d turn it off and his own would turn on—multi-colored, flashing, swinging. Then he’d really start dancing. It was madness. He really was DiscoRobot, you know?”

I did not. I still do not know if DiscoRobot is a cultural icon of which I should be aware, and I will not risk entering

that name into my search history—which I had been planning on doing, but owl went on. “DiscoRobot was immediately a hero; a legend,” she said, “So many selfies, so many classes disrupted with this crazy show—an Act, badger. One teacher got so fed up with him that he tore off the mask—but the boy had totally shaved his head, even his eyebrows, and painted his face chrome. He had solid black contacts in his eyes and a bundle of wires sticking out of his mouth. It was repulsive. The teacher told him to put the mask back on, but he wouldn’t. He wouldn’t listen to anybody unless they called him DiscoRobot, so they did; students, teachers, everyone. One teacher finally said ‘DiscoRobot, go to the principal’s office,’ and he had no choice but to listen. He passed my physics class playing Fifth of Beethoven and dancing.

“Of course the police were waiting for him and we heard that they had to restrain him to stop him dancing, that they tied him to a chair and tore up his suit up but couldn’t turn off the music and lights. There’s a video someone took on their way into the building of DiscoRobot being shoved into the back of a cop car, Walter Murphy still blaring and the boy’s chrome head manically bobbing.

“And then we all got evacuated, the whole school. His locker was full of explosives.”

“Oh my God,” I looked at the fox for a reaction, but he was still plucking.

“I didn’t know him very well, unfortunately,” the owl said, “but he wasn’t going to kill anyone. Just blow up the school after everyone had gone home.”

“What?”  
“A True Act, don’t you think? Or, was it one? Did he need to blow up the school? Would killing someone have made a difference, badger?”

“I don’t know.”  
“Neither do I! Desecrating his face, the farce, the glee he brought to others. It was a True Act, badger! It had to have been. And certainly it inspired True Emotions. I can only imagine the ecstasy he himself felt.”

My rash was fully flared. Hidden faces and what can I remember about strigiforme behavior? Do owls eat badgers? I no longer wanted to burrow, I wanted to get some air and I said that. “That’s perfect,” owl said, “because we’re about to start.”

“Start?” but I was already at the door of the little soundproof room and I walked out backwards so they couldn’t see my ass in case I’d shit myself again, and at the other end of the void the girls dressed like birds were all gone and it’s dark out; I didn’t miss them, but I would have preferred if nothing had changed, then a spotlight turned on above me. It was shining on owl, who was standing high in a tree looking regal. She opened her mouth and screeched; louder and higher, louder and higher. No, it wasn’t her, there were speakers somewhere/everywhere. I fall, and so do the all of the trees around me.

I had not been in a woods with one odd warehouse I now realized, but an industrial park; the fox’s Pinterest patterns crumble into nets of logs and leaves to reveal at least a dozen large buildings, all entirely covered in mirrors. Disco blares and not sure what part I was playing, I dance.

The girls dressed like birds did appear, corvidae and thrush together, and more spotlights turned on and flashed



with the music and reflected off the buildings, and a crow whispered “You’re not badging at all. I’m proud of you, badger.”

They danced in intricate formations and routines and I, failing to follow along, did my

own, hopefully complementary, thing. The girls dressed like birds were encouraging, even amused, in a good way, I think.

I imagined then the day that I’d find this Scandinavian music video, because what else could it have been? Would it go viral and how much had they recorded? What would Google translate say about all the comments below it? Could I convince people it was me? That, I realized, no longer mattered. I kept dancing, and what must have been hours later, piled into a van (I was drunk now; drinking? rotten fruit?) and went to the Donington Days Fair.

It was the suburban macabre that I’d imagined, but one which I became too much a part of to see clearly—I could not escape the Instagram filter Flock, or some other avian term of vengence, with its high saturation and hot breath between my mouth and mask and equal levels of excitement and shame. How many parents’ brows furrowed as I threw up through molded plastic? A cop asked what I was supposed to be. I told him journalist.

“No he’s not,” a corvid said. “He’s a badger.”

“And he’s just badged. Tsk.”

“Are you going to badge all night, badger?”

“Enough rides for now, badger, let’s do something more calming.”

Coming to myself in the house of mirrors, a squat owl behind me said, “I see what you mean about the artificial acts, but do they you think they disqualify the emotions also?” Lucid, I tell her that’s what I wanted to find out. “Then find out,” she said, but outside everything had gone tense.

Parents were sending frantic messages, teens posting sympathetic statuses, and all of the cops, real and rented, stood importantly. A train had gone off its tracks somewhere. I looked at the girls dressed like birds; the fox plucked an inappropriate tune.

“What are you thinking up there, badger?”

“You aren’t thinking about badging, are you?”

“That’d be a bad idea, badger.”

“Don’t think about that, badger” a thrush said.

“I won’t,” I said, and I don’t, and the Donington *Daily* isn’t interested in my story and there are True Acts and Emotions in the suburbs but there was no rash in my ass crack—just sweat. I have not found the Scandinavian music video I thought I starred in, and did not read the reports of shattered mirrors at the crash site or the numbers of people killed and injured, and when a statement is released

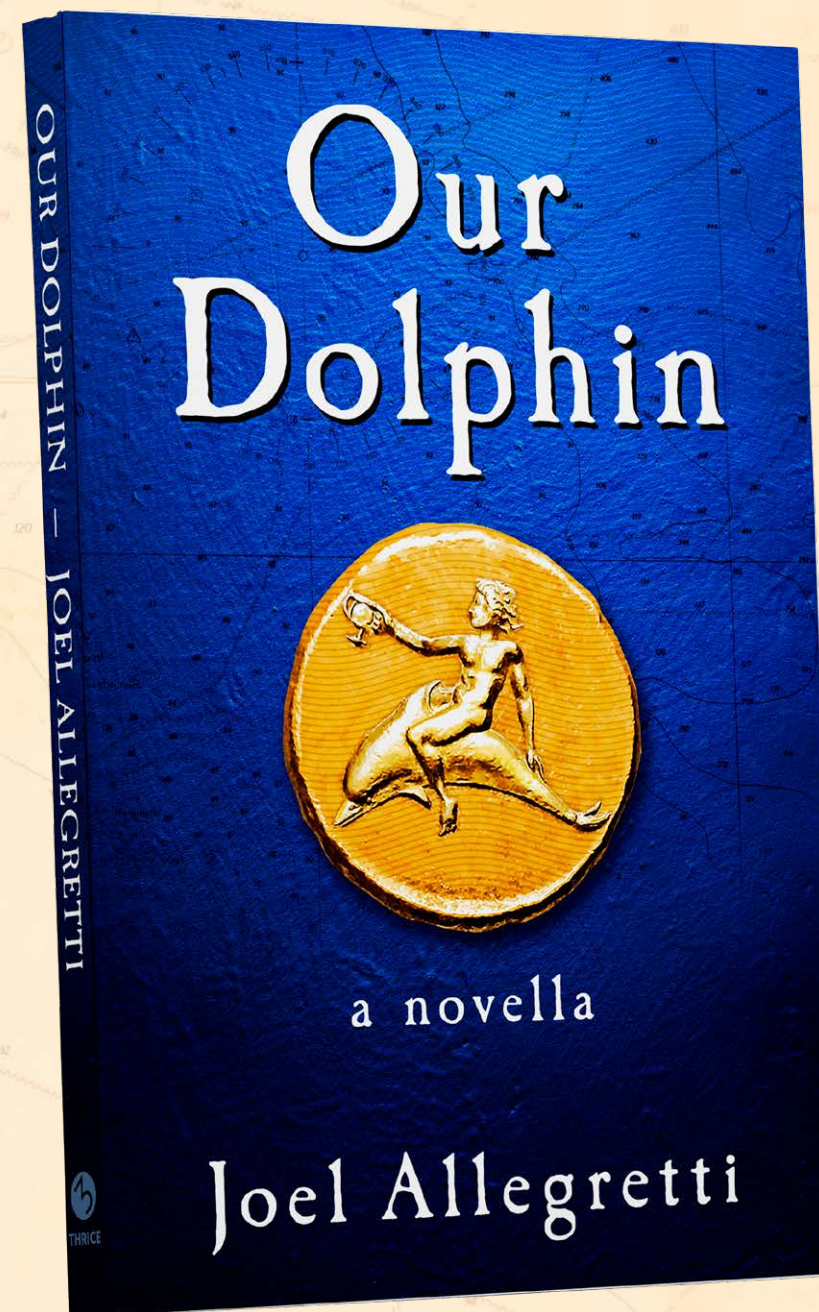
by a group of what the news say are suburban separatists (Terrorists! say some, Children! say others) but calling themselves performance artists called The Girls Dressed Like Birds, I ignore it, which is easy to do. The *Daily*’s website is covered with stories about the crash and the birds for weeks (“Strange music heard” and “Group seen” and “Suspect bought coffee earlier that day”) but it fades pretty quickly in the city until some Instagram pictures surface from the fair with the group in their backgrounds and there I am dancing, screaming, vomiting with/part of them and I burn all of the clothes I was wearing. It’s harder to do than I thought it’d be. 🌀

*Lyrics from “Night Queen” by The Modern Girl.*



**ESTLIN AGNEW** reports these radio bulletins from the Delph. He is a memelord.

# COMING SOON FROM THRICE PUBLISHING JOEL ALLEGRETTI

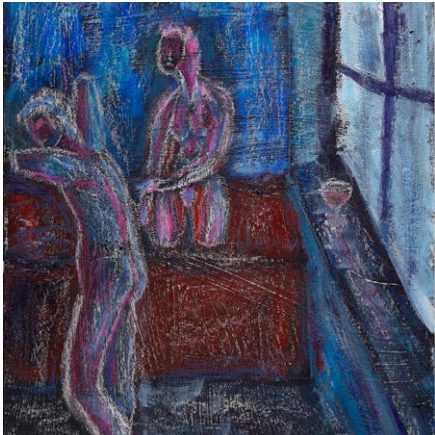


Enough water and waves and you get smoothed coral. Enough poetry and sun and you get Joel Allegretti’s new novella, *Our Dolphin*—a fairy tale less Grimm than hymn to a de Chirico landscape sliced into heat waves. The main character is a curiously disfigured lad who—in his despair—allows a tragic magic world to enter his heart. *Our Dolphin* has a flashing spine of story that combines Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” with di Lampedusa’s *Il Gattopardo*—but the real pleasure for me is Allegretti’s poetic prose. Nearly every paragraph contains a surprise such as “The wind had a narcotic effect” or “His temples tingled with the electric charge of jellyfish stings.” Pour yourself a tall one and let the beach simmer twixt your toes while reading this masterful novella—just don’t flinch at the cruel parts.

—Ron Dakron  
author of *Hello Devilfish!*

[ThriceFiction.com/OurDolphin](http://ThriceFiction.com/OurDolphin)





# Hoboken

Marilyn Morgan

I was never very good at this,” he says reaching under her sweater for her bra strap.

“Then why the fuck are you doing it?” she says. The words tumble out of her mouth; she has nothing to do with what she’d just said. She’d never intentionally be so cruel, would she? And yet she’d said it and now the words were there, suspended in midair.

He jerks his hand out from under her sweater, catching a loose ravel of yarn on his watch so he has to use his free hand and untangle it.

A fire blazing in the hearth. Snow blowing gently against the window. Miles Davis playing in the background. She’d cooked a candlelight dinner, baked him a pie. Even though she’d only met him a week ago, at seventy time rushes on and he’d appeared a good prospect. He wasn’t bad looking, didn’t look *that* old, and down at Lew’s Grille the other night, he’d chattered away even tossing in a bit of humor from time to time. It’d been so long since she’d had a lover on the rug before the crackling fire.

But she’d guessed wrong. Groping under her sweater—it was like he was planting a garden, making little rows to drop in the seeds. And his kisses, stiff little pecks on the lips as if some dragon teeth were lurking in her mouth waiting to snap shut and gobble him up.

Abruptly the light changes. Everything looks different. She sees now the fire, a heap of smoking coals. Dishes in the kitchen need washing. The music has stopped. And the wind blown snow has picked up speed and slams against the door that shivers in its frame.

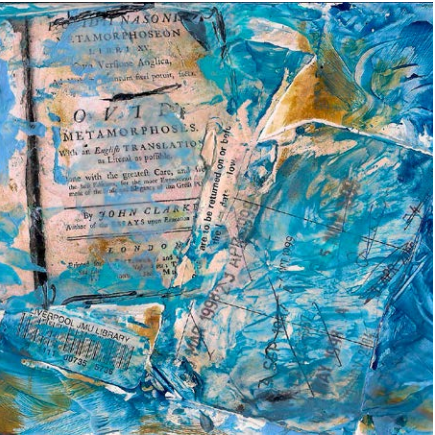
She glances around the room. The words still dangle just under the ceiling and now she lurches up off the sofa, grabs her wine glass, notices his is still full and heads for the kitchen.

She yanks open the refrigerator door, retrieves the wine bottle and fills her glass. Christ, worse than when she was in eighth grade and the boys sitting behind her snapping her bra. Pulling it out like a rubber band and letting it fly into

the delicate skin on her back. She stomps back into the family room where she sees the fire has found a glimmer of new life. He sits on the sofa, fading into the flowers on the slipcover. “Ok,” she says and stands there beginning, one by one, to remove her clothes. First the sweater up off over her head. “See,” she says and turns deliberately around, unsnaps her bra and flings it in the corner. She turns to face him again, unzips her pants and they fall to the floor revealing her bikini lace black panties. She puts her thumb under the band of her panties and slips them very slowly down until her pubic hair rides the top. She takes another sip of wine and then slides her panties on down to the floor.

He sits there on the sofa stunned or is it paralyzed? No not quite for she clearly sees the bulge in his pants. She steps out of her panties, catches them on her foot and tosses them in the air. Naked now, she stands before him, picks up her wine glass and circles her tongue around the rim. She thinks of gladiators in some far off arena.

She watches him look up at the ceiling where the words are scrawled. He looks down at her again, this time at her bare feet. “As I said before,” he mumbles, “I was never good at this.” And he grabs his coat and darts for the door, which slams shut behind him. 🚪



# The Gift

Marilyn Morgan

You came to me in a dream last night. Walking through the back door into my kitchen. You were smiling, your eyes shining.

You handed me a package, wrapped in brown bag paper with a hemp string ribbon. A surprise you said. Carefully, I unwrapped the small, neatly wrapped gift. It seemed a book, a pretty book, its cover all shades of blue and intricate thin white lines intersected, darted about creating ever changing shapes, shadows and patterns. Like a painting. The book began to grow, expand until it covered the whole kitchen table. A lake growing wider and deeper, running off the edges of the table and spreading across the floor. Sun streaming through the slider glistened and danced across the widening surface. Magic. I ran to you, threw my arms around you. “It’s time,” I said, “before we vanish.” 🕒



**MARILYN MORGAN** is a retired English teacher. She spends her winters in Central New York State and she spends summers at her cottage on the St. Lawrence River. Marilyn’s prose has been published in *Edge*, *Motif*, *Dear Nana*, *Five Quarterly* and is forthcoming in *Minerva Rising* and *\*82 Review*. Her poetry has appeared in *Atlas Poetica*, *Bright Stars*, *Ribbons*, *A Hundred Gourds* and others. Most of these journals are available through Amazon.





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# Bios From A Twentieth Century European Lit Reading

Jon Sindell


**FRANZ KAFKA** woke up from a bad night's sleep and discovered that he had turned into a loathsome bug. His disgusted father threw an apple that lodged painfully in his back, and Franz's kind sister, Sophie, filed a criminal complaint against the father for throwing a GMO apple at an endangered species. PETA has caused Franz to be removed to a natural habitat outside of the major city in which he had until recently lived, and his presence has resulted in a permanent injunction against a mixed-use development. Franz has sued the state for a species-change operation, but does not know which door leads to the courtroom, or whether to enter the courtroom on two legs or six if he finds the door, which he considers unlikely.

**ALBERT CAMUS** wrote *The Stranger*. What's the point of saying more?

**JEAN PAUL SARTE** thinks CAMUS is overthinking.

**SAMUEL BECKETT** is running late for some reason. But we'll wait.

**GEORGE ORWELL**, the author of *1984* and *Animal Farm*, takes no pleasure in having predicted the rise of the security state, the continued erosion of privacy due to technological advancements, the permanent establishment of the Two-Minute Hate (though he did not foresee its expansion to the Twenty-Four/Seven Hate on Twitter and comments boards), the devolution of the English language due to the extreme proliferation of initialisms and all-purpose words such as "awesome" (though he did not foresee emojis), the continued politically motivated co-option of language through the distortion of the long-established meaning of words such as "racism," "violence," and "aggression" (as in the newspeak neologism "microaggression"), and the permanent enshrinement of thought crime by the totalitarian left. George continues to believe that two plus two equals four, but Facebook causes him to doubt that you do.



**JON SINDELL** wrote the flash-fiction collection *The Roadkill Collection* (Big Table Publishing) and the long-story collection *Family Happiness* (2016). He curates the San Francisco-based reading series *Rolling Writers* and is a fulltime personal humanities tutor who used to practice law.



## ARTISTS & PHOTOGRAPHERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE

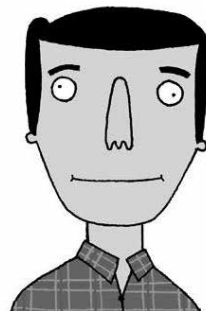
### CESAR VALTIERRA *Pages: Front & Back Cover, 2, 6-7...*

is a graphic artist. To escape the drudgery of life, he draws. He also hangs out with his fiancée Victoria, and their cats, Chubs and Pretty Boy. Check out his work at [CesarValtierra.com](http://CesarValtierra.com) and [OrderFromKhaos.com](http://OrderFromKhaos.com), as well as his comic at [TonyBalazo.com](http://TonyBalazo.com)



### REZA FARAZMAND *Page: 27...*

draws comics and writes things. You can find more of his work at Poorly Drawn Lines ([PoorlyDrawnLines.com](http://PoorlyDrawnLines.com)), which is updated every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. A collection of his cartoons titled *Poorly Draw Lines: Good Ideas and Amazing Stories* debuted on October 6, 2015.



### ROB KIRBYSON *Pages: 8, 30-32, 36-37, 42-43...*

conceives visceral, often surreal ideas and renders them carefully and precisely with acrylic and oil paints, inks and pencils. There are no happy accidents. Inspiration is usually borne existentially from within although Rob also likes to take a personal skewed look at other cultural touchstones. Surfaces used are canvas, canvas board, wooden panel, aluminium sheet and electric toasters. Rob also works in magazine illustration and as a cartoonist. He has worked in independent and newsstand magazines in the USA and UK since the late 90's. Rob works from a camouflaged and secluded studio in Kinross, Scotland. Check out more of Rob's work at [RobKirbyson.com](http://RobKirbyson.com)



### CHAD YENNEY *Pages: 3-4, 12-13, 18-19, 48-52...*

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).



### MIA AVRAMUT *Pages: 41, 54-55...*

is a Romanian-American writer, artist, and physician, who worked in laboratories and autopsy rooms from Pittsburgh to San Francisco. Her artwork has recently appeared in *Prick of the Spindle*, *The Knicknackery*, *The Bookends Review Best of 2014* (cover), *Buffalo Almanack*, *Sliver of Stone*, *r.k.v.r.y quarterly literary journal* (featured artist), *Blue Fifth Review*, and *SmokeLong Quarterly*. She lives in Essen, Germany.



### KATELIN KINNEY *Pages: Inside Front Cover, 22-26, 33...*

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)



### CHAD ROSEBURG *Pages: 38, 45-47...*

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.

## 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)



COMING SOON

# Thrice Fiction

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