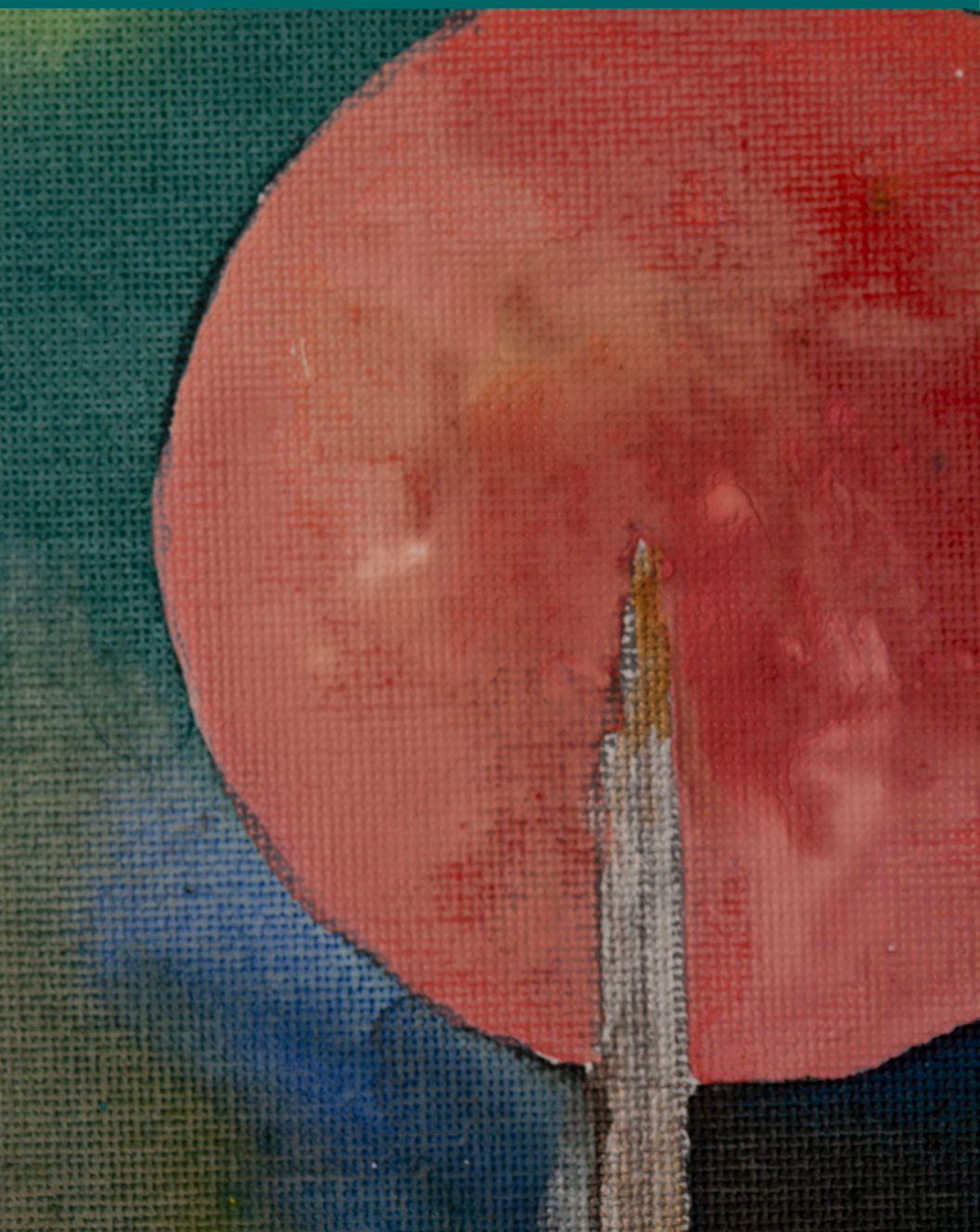


[Alternate Route]



Issue 7 – Summer 2022

# [Alternate Route]

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## Table of Contents

Angela Duggins.....	8
SPARKLE CITY.....	9
CJ Delous.....	12
The Funeral.....	13
The limitless duration of that which once existed.....	16
Tonight I can write such derivative lines.....	18
Cole Kilhoffer.....	22
A modern day love hoarder!.....	23
I work at a thrift store.....	24
Some lapse of judgment.....	25
I told that motherfucker to stay down.....	26
Henry Moraja.....	27
Trans Day of Visibility.....	28
saint sebastian in flames.....	29
give me the teenage dream.....	30
found in 1956's black & white yearbook.....	31
Isabelle B.L.....	32
Marigold Dawns.....	33
John Tavares.....	38
SCAVENGERS.....	39
Edward Michael Supranowicz.....	59
A World of Troubles.....	60
Dancing Thoughts 3.....	61
That Funky Feeling.....	62
Scream 7b.....	63
Mykyta Ryzhykh.....	64
A selection of poems.....	65
A song about my homeland.....	66
This poem smells blue.....	67
Paweł Markiewicz.....	68
Infinite reveries.....	69
The marvel of the freedom: In patches.....	70
Exchange of letters between the pundit and the painter ....	71
Stencil Mageddon.....	73
The Short Story of Robert Long.....	74
Timothy Resau.....	79
Five Flights Up in 1969.....	80
Greenwich Village Memory.....	82
Leon's Dream.....	83



Tre Luna.....	84
Algorithm of the Deep.....	85
Richard Hanus.....	88
IMG 8884.....	89
0RH5160.....	90
3-1.....	91
Image 041.....	92
Image 046.....	93
Tom Ball.....	94
Android Survivors.....	95
Diana and Cross-Hypnotism.....	98
Invention of Heaven.....	101
Lorin Lee Cary.....	104
Angles.....	105
Karine Leno Ancellin.....	108
Rage against the Virtual .....	109
Outis.....	110
Εὐρώπη, The Rape of Europe.....	111
Cassandra's Bearings .....	113
Venetian blinds.....	114
Gale Acuff.....	116
One day I'll go to Hell when I die and.....	117
One day you're dead and your past is behind.....	118
I fell asleep in Sunday School today.....	119
Anthony ILacqua.....	120
On Seeing Chrissy Green's	
Boobs One September Afternoon.....	121
Pramod Subbaraman.....	124
Walls and Women.....	125
September 2000.....	126
The End?.....	127
Caesarean Discovery.....	128
Dystopia.....	129
Stephen C. Middleton.....	130
The Years Shrank Big Mama.....	131
A Sliver for Mingus.....	132
What Plagues...?.....	133
Best Guess.....	134
Leavings (Lost).....	135

George Freek.....	136
POEM WRITTEN IN NOVEMBER (After Tu Fu).....	137
NIGHT THOUGHTS (After Mei Yao Chen).....	138
CHASING THE PHOENIX (After Su Tung Po).....	139
Andre Peltier.....	140
At the Sea Chest.....	141
Talking to Girls About Pirates.....	142
Ivan de Monbrison.....	145
GOD.....	146
Бог.....	147
WAR.....	148
Война.....	149
Dave Barrett.....	150
Butt Dial from Hell.....	151
Thomas Zimmerman.....	153
What I Meant to Say #6.....	154
What I Meant to Say #9.....	155
What I Meant to Say #10.....	156
What I Meant to Say #11.....	157
Gary Beck.....	158
Uprooted.....	159
Clyde Liffey.....	164
Father.....	165
Luke Beling.....	168
Carried in the Arms of Darkness.....	169
DC Diamondopolous.....	177
1912.....	178
R. A. Allen.....	182
The Victoria Leigh, 1958.....	183
Erosion.....	184
Samantha Morgan Silverstein.....	185
I Don't Know David Cronenberg.....	186
Michelle Faulkner.....	189
July Sauna.....	190
Powder Keg.....	191
The City Simmers.....	192
I Am Your Mirror.....	193
Depth Perception.....	194
Ryan Love.....	195
Neighbors.....	196



## *Angela Duggins*

*is an Ozarker writer and artist currently based in Illinois. Her previous works have appeared in Rupkatha, Sirens Call, Danse Macbre, and Rune Bear Weekly and at the Big Muddy New Play Festival. She loves finding the humanity at the heart of the darkest stories. She also loves cheesecake.*

## SPARKLE CITY

*The single hill overlooking a small city. BETTY and CAM are laying down, leaning against a tree, and talking.*

**BETTY-** Anytime I go to new city, I want to find the highest place and just perch. If it's nighttime and the wind blows, the lights shake and the whole world sparkles. For a moment, I remember how small I am, and all of the pressure goes away. I love feeling small... It's weirder here. This is my city you know. I forget sometimes. It's not terribly small. It almost sparkles.

**CAM-** It will someday.

**BETTY-** Where do you think life goes from here?

**CAM-** What do you mean by here?

**BETTY-** Here.

*CAM raises eyebrows.*

**BETTY-** Tonight. Where does life go from tonight?

**CAM-** Welp, I think that we do what we came here to do, and the exhilaration settles, and, tomorrow, I leave basic. Then, you are going to stay here, if you can stay put for once, and you are going to be something great here. I bet, you're going to build a huge library there, and a school there, and a park there.

**BETTY-** And you'll still come back?

**CAM-** I promise I'll come back. Hey, hey, I promise, okay. There's nowhere else I'd rather be.

**BETTY-** ummhhh

**CAM-** I'm going for the both of us. You know that don't you?

*BETTY nods*

**CAM-** Someday, this town is going to be perfect. And we'll have the most perfect little house down there. With a little garden.

**BETTY-** Yeah?

**CAM-** Yeah. And your business is going to be booming.

**BETTY-** Booming.

**CAM-** It's gonna start with that little shop there by the courthouse, but it's gonna grow until you've rebuilt this whole city. Made it all yours. And you and I are going to get our families together here for the holidays, and we're all going to be so happy.

**BETTY-** Yeah, and your mom is going to steal the good silver wear when we're not looking, and my mother is going to flirt

## Angela Duggins

with you like she does every time she sees you.

**CAM-** She does not flirt with me.

**BETTY-** Then why did she look so jealous when I told her what we were doing tonight?

**CAM-** YOU TOLD YOUR MOTHER? This is sick. That's just so sick. Who tells their mother about that kind of stuff?

**BETTY-** We've always been close.

**CAM-** That doesn't make this sound any better! You told your mother that we were planning to... tonight... not even that we have, that we're GOING to.

**BETTY-** You didn't tell your mother?

**CAM-** NO! Normal people don't tell their parents things like this.

**BETTY-** I've told her anytime I've done anything like this with anybody. I swear, I didn't think it would upset you this much.

**CAM-** You didn't think? Maybe you don't know me as well as you think you do.

**BETTY-** Stop that! I love you. Mom loves you. She supportive of everything. She even said so.

**CAM-** That is disgusting. What, is she going to join us up here too? Is that part of the plan?

**BETTY-** What!? No.

**CAM-** Well, why not?

**BETTY-** She's got a perfectly good view from the house.

**CAM-** That's disgusting. I'm leaving. I can't do this.

*BETTY doesn't let HIM leave. SHE grabs HIM by the elbows, looks into HIS eyes, and breathes deep. SHE brushes a loose hair out of HIS eyes.*

**BETTY-** You're just looking for an excuse. It's okay. Everyone is nervous their first time. Do you trust me?

*CAM nods*

**BETTY-** Do you love me?

*CAM nods*

**BETTY-** Then what are you waiting for?

*THEY lean in like they are about to kiss*

**CAM -**Wait, we need protection.

**BETTY-** Don't you think it'll be more fun without?

**CAM-** You are disgusting.

*CAM takes out two pairs of sunglasses from his backpack. BOTH put them on. CAM pulls a remote*



## Angela Duggins

*control out of his pocket.*

**BETTY-** Ready.

**BETTY/CAM-** Set.

**BETTY** (*whispering*)- Go!

*NARRATOR walks on carrying a marshmallow on a stick.*

**NARRATOR-** And, with the press of a button, the bombs they planted under the city exploded.

**BETTY-** Now it's sparkling.

**CAM-** Go build your dream.

*They embrace and watch the fire burn.*

## *CJ Delous*

*is a working class writer from the North East of England. Their work has been published in various online journals. The first drafts of much of their work can be found at [www.wordsforghosts.com](http://www.wordsforghosts.com). They live with their cats and other comrades.*

CJ Delous

## The Funeral

I tried smiling at your funeral,  
to avoid the choking weeds of grief.

Breathing trees  
no longer naked,  
their limbs veiling then revealing  
a diamond-clear sky,  
stood beside the road leading  
to the building where your family was mourning.

(When she asked me where you'd gone,  
I told your daughter you had  
become one with nature;

every flower,  
each lambent limb of sunlight,  
all trees  
& anything beautiful she will see ever see,

I hoped you would've liked that answer...)

A vodka (double vodka) before  
the eulogy,  
& another  
(& then another) after  
it was over.

Then, outside: cold bright sunlight,  
dreaming of you dancing;

the prosody of your body,  
singing again, as petals from  
roses you so adored,  
flow from your hips,  
replacing the weeds &  
loosening their grip,

## CJ Delous

just long enough to bring  
some small relief

from the reality of your absence.

& the brutal eloquence

of silence.







## CJ Delous

Until,  
dragging us back into the past  
tense & yet forcing us forward,  
time gave us one last chance to realise  
how to express a longing beyond language:

the limitless duration of that which once existed.

CJ Delous

**Tonight I can write such derivative lines**

*For S (again)*

Tonight I can write such derivative lines.

Lines such as:

“The moon is cold & beautiful, but so far away from me, just like you”.

The sun shines yet the trees are barren of their leaves.

Tonight I can write such derivative lines.

I love her, & she once loved me too.

Through days such as this I longed for her kisses.

She smiled at me again & again far from noises of the city.

I love her. Yet perhaps now I hate her, after those bitter parting words.

## CJ Delous

How not to love (still) her gentle green eyes.

Tonight I am writing derivative lines.

Thinking of how often I wronged her. Remembering how I lied so many times.

Listening to the old songs, so different now without her.

& the music fades into the ether, like vapour to the sky.

What does it matter that I destroyed her love for me.

I am alone & deserve to be.

That is all.

From my laptop speakers someone is singing. From a shitty laptop.

The night feels empty, & I am alone.

## CJ Delous

My mind repeats every mistake as if to atone for my sins.

My mind will not forgive me.

The sun shines on the same trees we walked between

So often. We are no longer the same.

She has another; a new *amour* more authentic than I; one

closer by birth & blood to the sea touched by three continents.

She loved me. Yet perhaps now we hate each other,

after those bitter parting words. I have never known a love that did not hurt.

Without me she now speaks with the prosody of contentment,

## CJ Delous

writes poetry of new elegance, & my body aches for her.

Though I am not bitter. I will never want her to suffer,

& this will be my last attempt to speak to her.

## *Cole Kilhoffer*

*is a northwestern Pennsylvania native who spent his boyhood hunting deer, playing football, and wasting gas.*



Cole Kilhoffer

## A modern day love hoarder!

I need a goddamn belt,  
Cause every time she leaves,  
She blows me a kiss,  
And I always put it in my pocket.

I don't change pants much so they all  
Have pockets with  
100 pounds  
Worth of kisses.

Sometimes they get so heavy  
That my pants fall off  
And she has to help me pick them all up  
Or give me new ones,  
All while saying,

“It's okay baby, shit happens.”

What a joke.

## I work at a thrift store

I am tasked with giving nothing  
But goodwill,  
And carrying in donations.

The first week I was there,  
A car pulled up around sunset.  
It was October and a warm night.  
Two people got out  
And started handing me boxes  
Full of books,  
Hundreds.

A man and a woman.  
The woman began to cry  
And went back into the car.  
The man explained to me that  
This was her father's library,  
That he passed away 6 months ago.

They both drove away  
After the car was empty.

I stayed outside  
And took my time carrying the books.  
I dug through that old man's life.

The sun set and I went home.  
I counted all of my books that night.

147

I hope they'll have boxes.

Cole Kilhoffer

## Some lapse of judgment

If I make it to heaven and you don't  
I'll fuck with God until he  
Sends me down,

Then we'll drink beer with  
All the best people we've known.  
We'll throw out empty bottles  
Across the alley,  
Over the pearly gates,  
Trying to give the angels a scare.

Cole Kilhoffer

**I told that motherfucker to stay down.**

But he didn't,  
Instead he got up,  
And kicked the shit outta me.

All my friends rushed over  
And pulled him off me.

Brendan picked me up,  
Melina and Julia both  
Crying  
Thinking I was dead.

They took me home,  
Laid my bloody hands on the bed,  
I was awake the whole time,  
But my eyes were too swollen for them to notice.

I didn't speak,  
My ribs hurt too bad.

While I laid there I thought about  
The bottom of that fucker's boot.  
There was a piece of gum stuck  
To his right heel.

And I bet he's still at the  
Party,  
Letting the girls put cold cans  
Of beer on his cheek.

I didn't take my ring off  
Before I hit him.

Someone told me later that  
The Aztec Calendar was on his face  
For weeks.

## *Henry Moraja*

*(he/they) is a young, queer writer from the Rocky Mountain region. His work has been featured in Intersections Magazine and Fiction on the Web. You can find him on Twitter @library\_montage.*

Henry Moraja

## Trans Day of Visibility

I like the way the wind feels on my ankles when I cuff these ratty jeans. I like the way sunlight touches the scars on my chest. I like it when my friends laugh long and loud, like they're living new childhoods lightyears better than the ones they were given. I like coffee in the evening, idling in parking lots, the tinny radio stuck on a song we last heard some neon-and-roller-skates night ten years past. I like the way pink looks on you. I like the way our hands fit together, the way I feel in your thrift-store button-downs. Our queerness is no longer a fault line running underneath our successes. Our queerness is something tangible, growing stubbornly out of concrete, its yellow-petaled head a sign of everything they tried to destroy but could not. I never understood it when they spoke of pride but now I see it in every glint of your deep brown eyes, every freckle on your hands, every time you slide your hand into mine and I don't have to look at you to know you're smiling too.

Henry Moraja

**saint sebastian in flames**

fire licks crucifix  
boy tongues rosary  
wicked grin in stained glass light  
autumn leaves in his hair  
smell of the river & the stars  
he's the next saint sebastian  
all the arrows removed  
teeth filed down to dull his bite  
hands hardened from dirt & prayer  
there's something sick inside him, something  
he wants to runs from  
nowhere to go but up & out  
fly to paris fly farther fly  
until the hot air runs out  
until the balloon crushes itself  
lights up: show's over  
all the actors take off their wigs  
& return to themselves but  
saint sebastian lights the match  
that means everything's coming to an end  
his mother's voice calls him back to the river  
& when he tries to answer  
all that leaves his mouth is smoke

Henry Moraja

**give me the teenage dream**

give me neon plastic & sticky sweet treacle  
nights where stars dip in & out & melt like the clocks  
in that one painting we had to write papers about  
in 10th grade english  
i can't remember who painted it  
because you were in that class with me  
& i spent every lesson staring at your curls  
the dark brown of them almost gold  
almost like a magic trick  
the way your smile opens up your face  
every flowery bit of you so much better than i deserve  
so give me artificial cherry-flavored tongue  
& give me homecoming hangovers  
a play-pretend parody of boy i want to be for you  
give me suburban sunburn  
give me blurred vision & pounding baselines  
just don't look too close at my splintered reflection  
i can't stand the thought of you seeing me  
beyond the picture perfect lip gloss sheen  
seeing the way my pieces don't fit right  
seeing every delusional daydream  
where you on horseback save me from the dragon  
and kiss me in front of a cheering audience  
so let me drown myself in orange crush  
let me burst into radiant laser tag light  
let me be something beautiful  
& indestructible  
& incessantly imaginary  
so you might love me too



Henry Moraja

found in 1956's black & white yearbook

this, our balcony, only a step ladder  
in some dusty history book's theatre  
you, my juliet, sitting where every  
yellowed sign warns you not to sit,  
the rose between your teeth tailormade to drive me mad.  
i raise my hand to meet you, your  
romeo kneeling in reverence  
before the sun rising behind  
your cropped hair, your limp wrist,  
the sideways slant of your grin  
that says it will take more than our families  
fighting to keep us from each other's arms  
more than the tragic destiny still  
lingering in the corners of our eyes.  
tonight we are free of future destruction  
free to make believe in each other's clothes,  
blurring the lines of boy and boy and what  
we were and what we will become.  
your cheek brushes mine, pilgrims' lips  
more holy than the sun, and as i look up  
into the blinding stage lights i realize  
everything i've been writing  
has been about you the whole time

## *Isabelle B.L*

*is a teacher based in France. She has published a novel inspired by the life of a New Caledonian feminist and politician. Her work can be found in the Birth Lifespan Vol. 1 and Growing Up Lifespan Vol. 2 anthologies for Pure Slush Books, Flash Fiction Magazine, Visual Verse, FlashBack Fiction, Cult Magazine and elsewhere. Her work is forthcoming in someshortstories.com, Inksac and the Best Microfiction 2022 anthology.*

Isabelle B.L

## Marigold Dawns

The gold-trimmed teacup with its dainty ear lay on the tar road. The streetlamp shone on the fragile object's beautiful marigold motif like a theatre spotlight aimed at a soloist. A cat crept into the ellipsoidal space created by the light, sniffed the teacup's golden frame, lifted its ginger paw, and moved the cup back and forth. The feline's exceptionally curved claws played hide and seek games, retracting and releasing its grip on the wearisome handle. I stepped closer for an encore, but the cat slinked into the dark and I resumed my pre-dawn jog.

My husband bought me a bubble-gum-colored tea set. The tea set sat next to his hot chocolate bowl. If his car hadn't pirouetted with another vehicle, he would have had hot chocolate number 10,951 for his next breakfast.

The teacup stood right side up again in the middle of the road, but a matching saucer kept it company this time. I reached out for the cup, but the cat lifted and rested its paw on my arm. Its claws surfaced and then disappeared under their shroud of marmalade streaks.

My new possessions floated in bubbly water. I wrapped a tea towel around my hand, its soft fibers absorbing any trace of moisture. The kettle whistled. A steaming waterfall paralyzed the tea bag before it bobbed up and down. I stepped outside to pick fruit from my lemon tree. My husband wanted to ax the tree, but his car somersaulted, saving my lemons. Lemon floated in my new teacup. I followed its limited movement within the small pool of tannin submerging me in a sea of thoughts, pondering the juxtaposition between past and present. Bubble-gum versus marigold.

The homeless road lured. Would there be more porcelain? Birds gathered for their daily dawn chorus and broke the eerie silence as I turned the corner and entered the street. Wayward silvery strands like octopus tentacles wafted into the terracotta horizon. A woman left a trail of ceramics.

## Isabelle B.L

A creamer, sugar bowl, and dessert tray bathed in lavender foam. Warm water drizzled over the delicate marigold surface. I swaddled my newest accessories in a pastel yellow blanket. I lay them down like a newborn baby. I would have been a good mum had he not used my stomach as a punching bag.

When I talked to inanimate objects, he'd called me mad. He'd called me bad when I threatened to smash his beloved hot chocolate bowl. Which one made him slide under someone else's sheets? The mad or the bad side?

The jog became a walk as I approached the bewitching stretch of tar, tea, and trees. Bell miners circled the woman's head creating an olive-green, grey, white halo. A black shawl covered a delicate dress in floral print as if the four seasons emerged at once. Her eyes sparkled like two stars. Will-o'-wisps rose from a cup. Where did she boil the water? I'm mad? The memory of my husband shouting, mad, entered the twilight set.

Thin lips clasped the rim of a teacup. She guzzled the liquid as if it were a cool glass of lemonade on a scorching January day, peered inside, and tipped her head back for the last drop.

I took a step back. My arm hairs stood at attention as if warning of the frail but formidable woman pinching the handles of her tea cup while her pinky finger pointed toward a gum tree.

"This used to be a dirt road," she said. "My best friend and I used to play jacks here. He proposed to me behind the eucalyptus. Slid a ring made of twigs on my finger."

My fingers danced in my pockets. Toes squirmed but I moved forward. "Hello, I'm—"

"Look, I still have it." She held out her hand. "We pushed our baby carriage down this dirt road."

## Isabelle B.L

She hung her head. Dropped the tea cup but it didn't break.

"You shouldn't be out here at this hour. I'll walk you home. Do you have any family I can call?" I wiped my wet palms on my track pants.

"Postman Brown walked to our warped, white picket fence and gave us the telegram with grey letters and dots." I wrapped an arm over her cadaverous, hunched shoulders, flinched but when she rubbed her wet eyes, I rested my arm on her fragile frame again.

"We walked behind the wooden box. We weren't the only ones to outlive our sons."

Depression. Dementia. Delirious? My head felt like a handful of walnuts receiving the blows of a hammer. My gut churned.

"I'm sorry for taking your things. I promise to return the tea set later in the day."

My heart rate slowed when she revealed her toothless smile. She shuffled her feet toward an uneven sidewalk. Tall blades of grass curtained more marigolds. Graceful handles peeping out like fireflies between tree branches.

The elderly woman and I shared the loss of a child never born, of a son who didn't live long enough. Love filled her hazel-grey eyes when she talked about her husband. My marriage drenched in hot pink, razor-sharp hatchets, and pastel-hued gifts for other women.

She disrupted my mental list of what to say or not to say. Pulled my arm and pointed to an empty lot.

"Frank Sinatra played in our lounge room. There, to the right. My husband sank into his armchair, smoked his pipe, and read the paper." —She threaded her arm into mine, took a slight

## Isabelle B.L

lead, and stopped at a corroded fence— "Ginger used to curl on my lap and purr as I stroked my hand across her marmalade coat. There, where the burrow is."

"Your tea set?"

"Keep it, dear. Abandon the old." —Images of the bubble-gum-colored tea set broken into smithereens flashed across wildflowers and weeds— "What a beautiful smile you have." I placed my hand across my mouth. Smile, I haven't smiled since his death.

We reached the main street. A chain of cock-a-doodle-does chanted in the distance. The woman resumed her shambling gait. "Goodbye," she said.

"Wait, I don't even know your name." The woman crossed the road. My gaze followed her haunting frame. Her head of hair like white fairy floss from poplar trees. No, she's alive. I touched her. She spoke to me.

Stone torsos sat erect like children frantically tidying up a messy home when their mother parks the car in the driveway. The gates to the graveyard creaked. My gaze locked on white fluff as if her body had disappeared.

A car's screeching brakes saved my life. The driver's veins bulged, cursing and a string of horn honking froze my squishy knees. He flung his car door. I scrambled to the side of the road.

I searched for the woman and her tea sets during dawns, dusks, and noontides. I foraged streets with empty lots, cemeteries, and stranger's memories, but I never saw her again.

\*\*\*

"Abandon the old." The woman's voice revisited dreams.

## Isabelle B.L

I axed the bubble-gum tea set and scattered the fragments across my husband's grave.

"Take that," I said.

*Sold* dangled from the picket. I baked my own ladyfingers and served them on the marigold biscuit tray to celebrate.

Fly Me to the Moon soothed my afternoons. I embraced the new with Ginger sitting on my lap and cups of tea from marigold teacups.

Ginger followed me to the empty lot where the woman's house used to be. *Sold*. I sat on the sidewalk, took out my pencil and notebook, and sketched plans for a house and a garden full of lemon trees.

The best part of our marriage? Becoming a widow.

## *John Tavares*

' short fiction has been published in a variety of magazines, alternative publications, literary journals, quarterlies, chapbooks, and anthologies, online and in print. (These publications include, in roughly chronological order, *Blood and Aphorisms*, *Plowman Press*, *Green's Magazine*, *Filling Station*, *Whetstone*, *Broken Pencil*, *Tessera*, *Windsor Review*, *Paperplates*, *The Write Place at the Write Time*, *The Maple Tree Literary Supplement*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Gertrude*, *Turk's Head Review*, *Outside In Literary and Travel Magazine*, *Bareback Magazine*, *Rampike*, *Crab Fat Literary Magazine*, *The Round Up Writer's Zine*, *The Acentos Review*, *Gravel*, *Brasilia Review*, *Sediments Literary Arts-Journals*, *The Gambler*, *Red Cedar Review*, *Writing Raw*, *Treehouse Arts*, *The Remembered Arts Journal*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Ginosko Literary Journal*, *Mgversion2>Datura*, *Riverhawk*, *Quail Bell*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Grey Border's Magazine*, *Free Lit Magazine*, *Montreal Writes*, *Yarnswoggle*, *Queen Mob's Tea House*, *Westview*, *New Reader Magazine*, *Event Horizon*, *IO literary Journal*, *Fishbowl Press*, *Otherwise Engaged Journal*, *Mobius*, *New Texas*, *Qwerty*, *Oddball Magazine*, *BlazeVOX*, *Celestial Review*, *Bombay Review*, *Nude Bruce*, *The Account*, *The Elixir Magazine*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Nonconformist*, *Writer's Egg Magazine*, *Aerogramme's The Mobile Library*, *Tuxedo Literature & Arts Journal*, *Syncopation Literary Journal*, *Nzuri*.

Following journalism studies, his short stories and creative nonfiction were published in *The Siren*, then *Centennial College's* student newspaper, and his articles and features were published in various local news outlets in Toronto, including community and trade newspapers like the *East York Times*, the *Beaches Town Crier* and *Hospital News*, where he interned as an editorial assistant.

Born and raised in *Sioux Lookout, Ontario*, John is the son of Portuguese immigrants from the *Azores*. His education includes graduation from 2-year *GAS* at *Humber College* in *Etobicoke* with concentration in *psychology* (1993), 3-year *journalism* at *Centennial College* in *East York* (1996) and the *Specialized Honors BA in English* from *York University* in *North York* (2012).



John Tavares

## SCAVENGERS

After Lee lost his job as a credit risk analyst during what was described as the seventh wave of the pandemic, he simply couldn't find a job in financial services. As soon as Lee was informed he was unemployed, he was kicked out of the office, and escorted from the building by a pair of security guards. Angry, irate, Lee also found himself being pushed and jostled by pedestrians and commuters violating social and physical distancing guidelines as he tried to enter the subway station and descend the grimy concrete stairwell. Remembering the pandemic liquidation sale he noticed up the street in an Army and Navy surplus store, Lee turned back. He looked in the display window and saw an advertisement for an infantry knife, worn, the ad said, by paratroopers of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division during their drop behind enemy lines in the early morning hours of D-Day. Skeptical of the advertisement claim but fantasizing of revenge, he bought the sharp gleaming stiletto and, for utility purposes, a Swiss Army knife.

During the successive waves of the pandemic, the world around Lee had turned dog-eat-dog, and he found the need to

## John Tavares

survive, as opposed to thrive, urgent and pressing. Despite the fact the central bank and federal government was taking drastic measures to stabilize the economy and subsidizing everybody, from the poorest single parent to the largest multinational corporation, no industry, no employer, no company in the investment business and wealth management, was hiring. Lee couldn't even find work as a takeout server in a fast-food restaurant or at the coffeehouse chains. Then he did something that he never expected he would do, something he told himself he would never do; he didn't start day trading exactly, but he started to invest all his savings and investments in the stock market, trying to take advantage of market volatility during the pandemic. Yes, he did something else he told himself he would never do: he bought stocks and volatile options on margin.

When the seventh wave of the pandemic struck, the economy was forced into lockdown again, businesses shut down, and the stock market crashed again. Margin calls forced the sale of his stock and option portfolio at vastly diminished prices, which caused him heavy losses. When the markets crashed further, the broker made a margin call, and all his positions were sold. After

## John Tavares

the debts were settled and interest and fees paid, and his accounts were closed, he tallied his losses and realized he completely lost his savings and investments.

As the months dragged on and the pandemic surged, ebbed, and waned, and surged again, Lee was unable to find work, despite his strenuous efforts. He was forced to apply for pandemic relief and shelter, which translated into his eligibility for a city owned public housing apartment, a bachelor unit, for which he was grateful – appreciative because he never expected he would feel more comfortable, secure, and safe in a smaller apartment. Thus, he learned the hard way one of the advantages of downsizing—an unexpected advantage in his mind.

Now Lee's days were filled with coffee drinking, reading, and note taking, including entrepreneurial ideas, businesses that would survive the pandemic and thrive in the new economy. While he enjoyed these activities, and found they kept him occupied, he felt his life, at least according to his practical side and nature, left him somewhat empty and bereft, and he needed money. He prided himself on being a realist and

## John Tavares

pragmatist, and felt as if he needed to contribute to the economy, to work, even though there were no jobs available. At times he felt a bit lonely, but single life never bothered him, and most of the time he preferred solitude. The pandemic, though, forced him to acknowledge he did appreciate and enjoy the friendship and relationships he somehow managed to cultivate in his work as a credit risk analyst in a cubicle at the regional head office of a credit card and payments processing company.

Pasha, his neighbour in public housing, a member of his social bubble, showed off his brand-new e-bike as he rode the electric bicycle up and down the corridor of their apartment building. He proudly told him he bought the bicycle with money he earned from recovering bodies and turning them into the morgues of the teaching hospitals for research purposes and infection control. Lee read about the freelance work in the newspapers, before some of the news media outlets started shutting down. He had personally questioned the veracity of the reports of these body recovery specialists, this new line of work in the gig economy. But now he was faced with a firsthand report. And why would Pasha lie? The income he earned may

## John Tavares

have left him ineligible for pandemic relief, which was indexed to a complicated formula that accounted for income and hyperinflation. For whatever reason, Pasha felt comfortable bragging about his side hustle and the money his moonlighting paid him.

“Where do you find the bodies?”

“The bodies are everywhere. The latest mutation of the virus, the new variant, is so virulent, so infectious, so pervasive, that virus victims are dropping down dead everywhere. Surely you can see that—the carnage?”

Pasha had been a registered nurse in the emergency department of a large teaching hospital on hospital row, University Avenue, in downtown Toronto, before he was forced to go on pandemic relief. Even though a shortage of healthcare professionals arose from the coronavirus pandemic and nurses were in great demand and coming out of retirement because of the call to arms and the incentives and pay increases offered, Pascha experienced difficulty finding work as a nurse again; his addiction to prescription medications, synthetic opioids, had been so severe.

## John Tavares

“Yes, I’ve seen,” Lee said, having observed with gruesome fascination the dead bodies in the street. The previous evening, during an errand to the supermarket, he had seen two scavengers struggling over the body of a jogger, a young fit and healthy-looking woman, who had slumped dead on a park bench after she stopped to rest during a jog when she started to feel vaguely unwell and frankly short of breath, the victim of an undetected congenital heart defect and an undiagnosed and undetected variant of the coronavirus.

“Don’t you need a hazmat suit?”

“Yeah, but they’re so commonplace now you can buy them in a corner drugstore.”

“True enough,” Lee noted.

After that conversation, Lee decided he would purchase a hazmat suit and personal protective equipment like latex and rubber gloves, disposable face masks, and safety glasses. He started researching the work of body recovery. While most of the authors on websites discouraged newbies from the new trade, if you could even call it a trade, competition had increased and intensified but with each new genetic mutation of

## John Tavares

the deadly virus, with each new frightening variant, the number of bodies abandoned was increasing. Some observers and news commentators were calling it a sign of the decline of civilization. Either way, hospital budgets—at least in Toronto and all of Canada had increased as the deadly impact of the pandemic grew.

Lee started to comb the parks and beaches where he studied as a student during the years he had first moved to the city. Back then, Lee was restless and fidgety at his home in co-op, so he always found it considerably easy to study outdoors, in a park, or at a sidewalk café, if the temperature was right and there was no precipitation. Lee scoured the Toronto Islands, where hipsters, boaters, and beautiful people frequented the beaches, pathways, and recreational trails, but his searches were fruitless.

Lee was ready to surrender, to give up this pursuit, which he began to think wasn't worth the time or effort. Then he walked along the point to the island airport, and several dozen metres away he spotted her. He dropped his back pack on the grass, donned his hazmat suit, and pulled out the zippered

## John Tavares

body bag. She had quite an attractive figure, a physique he undoubtedly would have lusted after, as a typical male chauvinist, if she was alive, but now she was dead, her skin yellow and sallow. First, to document his find, he took out his digital camera, a single lens reflex camera with a telephoto lens, from a time when his office work had him craving for a hobby, and took several pictures from different angles. He even photographed separately the pill container of Xanax tablets and the half empty bottle of vodka beside her. He eventually slipped her into several plastic bags, concerned the odour or even bodily fluids might permeate a single bag, if he transported the body in a single bag alone. Then he lifted the body over his shoulder and carried the one-hundred-pound corpse over his shoulder on the trail to the ferry docks.

As he waited for the ferry, he thought there might be questions, so he made notes of how he had found her, with a half empty liquor bottle and a bottle of pills, Xanax, at her side. Lee realized that she might have not been the victim of the deadly virus, but that was for the coroners and researchers at the hospital lab to decide. Apparently, they were interested in all



## John Tavares

abandoned bodies, since they were researching the pandemic from the perspective of multiple disciplines, drawing on the expertise of numerous medical and health science researchers, and the pandemic was taking a toll on the mental health, as rates of parasuicide and suicide had increased.

Lee carried her along the trails and tourists and residents hardly noticed. The attendants and ferry captain saw nothing – Lee could have been one of the binners who collected beer cans and liquor bottles for the recycling fee refund, but he attracted no peculiar looks or strange gazes. Even hauling a corpse in a body bag, he was just another masked, vaxxed day tripper to the island. Everyone, it seemed, with each new damaging wave of the pandemic and growth in the lethality of the virus, had grown immune to the sight of dead bodies. On the subway train as he carried the body no commuters, socially distanced, made any observation. Wearing disposable latex gloves—purple seemed a favorite color—face masks, in every variety and color, and even tinted safety glasses, with neat little plastic bottles of clear fluid, hand sanitizer, attached to their handbags and backpacks, the passengers said nothing, voiced no

## John Tavares

objection. The silence of the mostly empty subway trains, streetcars, and buses everywhere Lee commuted during the pandemic was slightly uncanny.

At the hospital morgue, at least one of the doctors, nurses, and research assistants must have noticed Lee was hungry. Doctor Bellastrada offered him freshly baked muffins, doughnuts, and coffee. There was plenty of paperwork, forms completed on a computer tablet, but Doctor Bellastrada was not discouraging in the least. In fact, she reassured Lee these were policies and procedures the hospital research lab was forced to follow with first time suppliers. She also told Lee he didn't need to double wrap or triple wrap the body in plastic; a single body bag was sufficient, but, even though she was an expert, a professional with sharp looks and integrity, Lee didn't think she was factoring the potential problem of a fulsome and repugnant odour from decomposition and the decaying process. In the end, she handed Lee a freshly minted check for ten thousand dollars. While the fee, it appeared, wasn't indexed for hyperinflation, it was still an impressive amount, in Lee's mind. At least now he could afford a variety of nutritious groceries, including fresh

## John Tavares

fruit and vegetables, even though he oftentimes preferred eating his least expensive and favorite staple, natural peanut butter on whole wheat bread, day after day for weeks on end. He even decided to buy a bottle of spiced rum from the liquor store on the commute and walk home to celebrate.

Lee continued to wander the city in search of bodies. At Trinity Bellwoods Park, a haven for hipsters and millennials, who liked to play and party outdoors, he found what appeared to be a motherlode of bodies. Each night he went into the park where hipsters liked to meet in violation of social and physical distancing guidelines, masking mandates, and limits on gatherings and congregations. Sometimes they even hosted anti-vaccination parties, not because they didn't believe in vaccinations, a woman said, but because they believed in freedom of choice, like abortion, freedom to deny medical care and invasive treatment of their bodies. The artist who engaged Lee in conversation at the gatherings asked him if he was vaccinated against the virus. He told her he was triple vaxxed and would gladly take another booster shot, if public health officials made the extra shot available. The partiers drank beer,

## John Tavares

socialized, conversed, and partied, and listened to music and danced, as Lee stood at the edge of the scene uneasily.

In the city park, in the morning twilight, at four or five am, Lee would invariably start wandering the grounds in search of bodies, and discover and recover one, two, three, four, or even more bodies. Once he even recovered five bodies in a cluster, in what Doctor Bellastrada speculated might have been a suicide pact, as she asked about any notes at the site. That had been Lee's supposition: a mass suicide, or, perhaps group suicide was a better term. Lee had indeed even called the police, but officers were so preoccupied and understaffed they never sent any officers.

Lee's relationship with Doctor Bellastrada at the university hospital was so cordial she welcomed him to the staff room with coffee, which she remembered he preferred with one sweetener, a bit of soy milk, and his favorite raisin bran muffins, each time he arrived. Lee got to listen to the gossip and rumours making the rounds of the wards and corridors of the antiseptic smelling, brightly illuminated medical institution. He never expected doctors would be interested in chatter about

## John Tavares

dating, affairs, and office politics. The questions they asked were chatty and friendly. As he became a regular contributor—a freelancer, a contract employee—he was never certain how he could describe his Wild West work—at the research wing of the hospital his income grew. He even took to wearing a hazmat suit, with blaze orange and florescent green markings, with the logo Body Recovery Services, even though he wasn't legally incorporated, but he thought the logo looked both cool and professional. A few nurses and laboratory technicians in the autopsy department even complimented him on his new work outfit. Then, Pasha, resentful of the amount he was earning in the trade to which he introduced him, reminded him, he was at risk of losing his city housing subsidized apartment because his side hustle was so lucrative—so profitable he could soon become homeless.

Lee would be forced to ride the subway trains and streetcars that drove up and down Queen Street all day and night, overflowing with the homeless and the infected, those who tested positive for the virus and were virulent and ill, sweating, short of breath, red-eyed, aching, sore. Lee didn't

## John Tavares

understand how Pasha could resent him and seethe, disgruntled, and complain about the money he earned because Pasha was indeed still recovering more bodies than him. Lee thought he was jealous of the relationship he had developed with Doctor Bellastrada and envious of the new e-bike and accessories, a trailer his bicycle could haul, he bought with the proceeds of recovered bodies.

Then the pandemic entered yet another wave and the government and health officials introduced more lockdowns, restrictions, and dusk-to-dawn curfews. Even the lawless hipsters and outlaw bikers were forced to stay at home instead of drinking their beer in the park, the only place they could party and socialize. And the police were strictly enforcing lockdowns and curfews. Still, Lee liked to appeal to Pasha's better nature and tried to ingratiate himself. After all, Lee reminded him, they were friends, but Lee believed Pasha now regretted getting him started in the trade and viewed him as a threat and competition. Still, Lee plunged deeper into the trade, and his philosophy for the time being became love your enemy.

Lee wanted to know what was the secret to Pasha's

## John Tavares

success – since his business had dried up with the latest lockdowns, restrictions, quarantines, and curfews. That weekend Pasha took him to the Condo Projects, the low cost, single unit condo buildings, that were built on a massive scale before the condo market peaked and crashed. They were the sites of mayhem and numerous riots after police shootings of visible minorities in the neighbouring districts. Pasha literally walked into the condominium building of his choice and started pounding on doors. If the door was open, unlocked, he simply walked inside and searched for bodies, and sometimes he found them. Wasn't this break-and-enter or trespass at the very least? Usually there was nobody home, if the occupant or resident was still alive, but sometimes someone was home, since the condo, despite the riots and subsequent vandalism, were still occupied and squatters occupied some of these apartment units, many of which had been vandalized and had fallen into disrepair, and called them home. When Pasha entered condo units with occupants, these tenants and squatters acted nonchalantly, realizing society had descended into chaos and near anarchy. At this point these residents may have realized they were more

## John Tavares

valuable dead than alive. They felt fortunate Pasha and Lee were scavenging for bodies and resumed smoking cannabis, drinking, eating snack food, watching movies on streaming services, reading, playing video games, and dining.

Once a mature woman panicked when they walked inside; she was a refugee from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the destruction and carnage of which dragged on through the early stages of the pandemic. She wore an ethnic costume that Lee thought Ukrainian. Why would she be wearing a traditional Ukrainian costume in Toronto? When she saw **Body Recovery** on Lee's orange jumpsuit she calmed down.

Lee continued to proceed with Pasha throughout the building, seeking more victims of the pandemic. Usually on every floor they surveyed and scavenged, they found a body, sometimes barely alive, in which case they offered basic First Aid and called an ambulance, albeit aware it was unlikely any first responders would arrive in time. Lee was happy to help Pasha, even though he only paid him ten per cent of what he received for a body. And Lee felt guilty. He thought the work they did was unethical and immoral, as well as downright



## John Tavares

illegal, but law enforcement, since the pandemic, was stretched to the limits and only responded to the worst calls, in the best and safest neighbourhoods. As the pandemic worsened, assailing the populace with successively more contagious and deadly variants, those afflicted by its consequences, and fear of infection filled first responders with fear and loathing and abhorrence for the common resident of the cosmopolitan metropolis, and made them unable to fulfill their duties as law enforcement officials.

Still, Pasha continued to make ominous warnings, threatening him with the loss of his apartment, the place he lived, the only place in the city, and indeed the whole chaotic planet he could call home, because of the income he earned, from his side hustle, which still seemed tentative, and which was bound to face tighter regulation, if the pandemic didn't end as everyone expected, in which case normal employment could become available. Lee realized then Pasha wanted to completely crush and eliminate the competition. He realized he was ready to talk to the building superintendent.

Lee thought he was protected: he was dressed in a

## John Tavares

hazmat suit; he would leave no DNA; his face and distinctive features wouldn't be identifiable in any video because of his protective gear and personal protective equipment, his visor, dark lenses, black mask.

The duo found a body in the apartment of a man who looked like a linebacker, freshly dead on the couch. So, as Pasha crouched over the body, and tried to fit him into a body bag, Lee slipped the paratrooper's knife, which he had taken to wearing on a sheath strapped to the calf of his leg, into his chest, aiming for the heart. Lee had learned the location of the heart in relation to the sternum from the anatomy charts he had studied in the medical literature Doctor Bellastrada at the hospital research laboratory had given him, when she discovered he liked to read and learn. Then Lee positioned the bodies to suggest that there might have been a titanic struggle, a life and death fight between Pasha and the person represented by the fresh corpse, into whose hands he placed the handle of the paratrooper's dagger from which he wiped his fingerprints and perspiration. If there was even a police investigation, this scenario and scene should provide sufficient evidence: self

## John Tavares

defense against body scavengers. Then Lee walked out of the building.

In the evening, he burned his hazmat suits and protective gear, along with the paper receipts from his work as a scavenger, in a barrel near a dumpster in the parking lot of the city owned apartments. In the light of the bonfire, he deleted his e-mails, calls, and voicemails from Pasha on his smartphone, which he rarely used but which Pasha insisted he carry everywhere he went. The future became more uncertain: Lee decided he was finished with the body recovery business and prayed the pandemic, the lockdowns, the restrictions, and the death and anarchy would end soon.

Then, one Monday, after he printed off his freshly composed resume, to drop off with human resources at an office building downtown, he felt a pervasive chill and deep aching throughout his body. After he donned his suit and jacket and laced his polished shoes, he collapsed into his folding chair, feeling weak, short of breath, and a vague sense of malaise. At first, he thought that he was suffering food poisoning, having eaten a takeout pizza, which he had refrigerated overnight, but

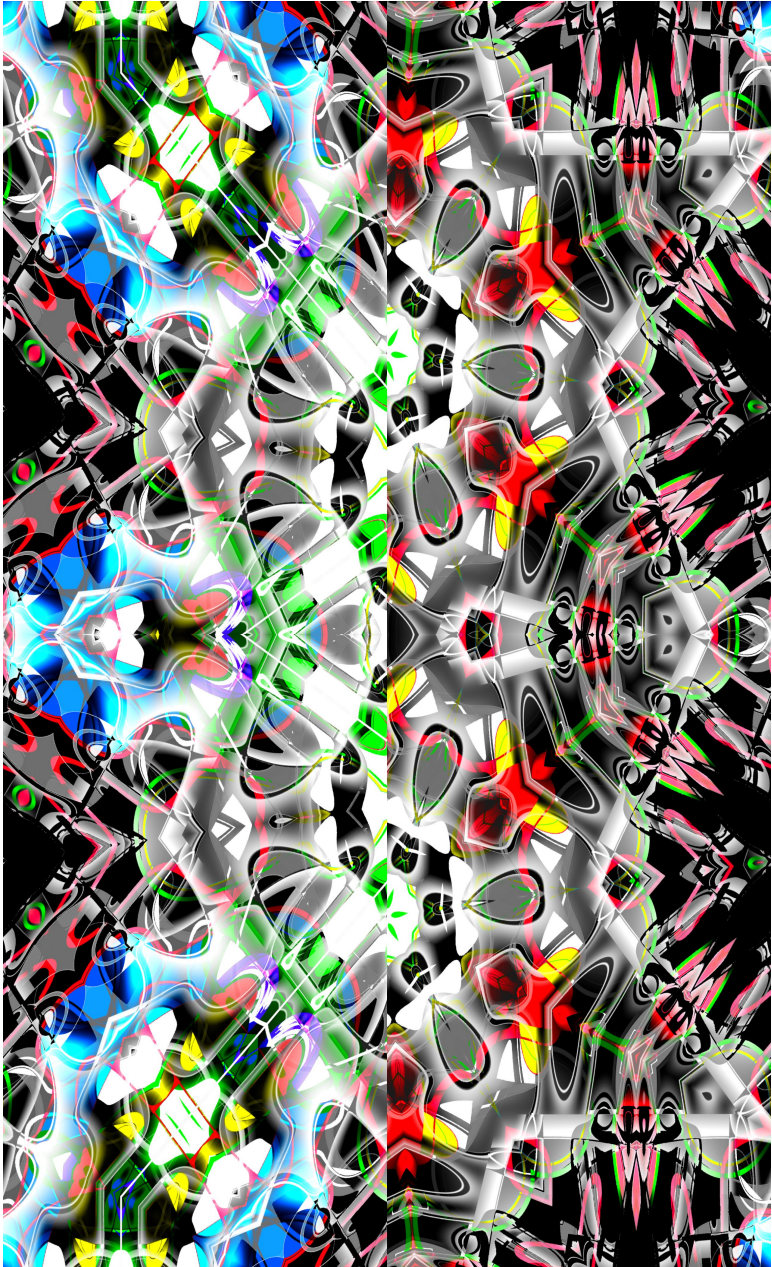
## John Tavares

he remembered Pasha's final moments and struggle, his hunger for air. Lee thought he should head to a clinic or hospital, but he believed he was suffering a mild case of the flu and dreaded the thought of the emergency department and the adjacent intensive care unit, the heart monitor, the ventilator, the intravenous needles, intubation, and tube feeding. The fact he might be infected with the virus put him in a state of denial. Short of breath, wheezing, he opted to stay at home, lying on the folding bed, struggling to listen to an audio book while he languished. He saw Doctor Bellastrada looming above him, pulling back her long dark hair, removing her lab coat to reveal a luminous naked body. His condition worsened as he ached, shook, trembled, soaking his sheet with sweat, and struggled for air, gasping, hungry for vital gases, the essence of life. He had never felt so short of breath in his life. He was gasping so hard at one point he even wished, beneath the damp sheets of his bed, he would die. And it was not until a week later that the building superintendent found him, cold, motionless, and rigid, his eyes sunken, flaccid, and clouded, after Doctor Bellastrada's knocks at his door and calls to his phone went unanswered.

## *Edward Michael Supranowicz*

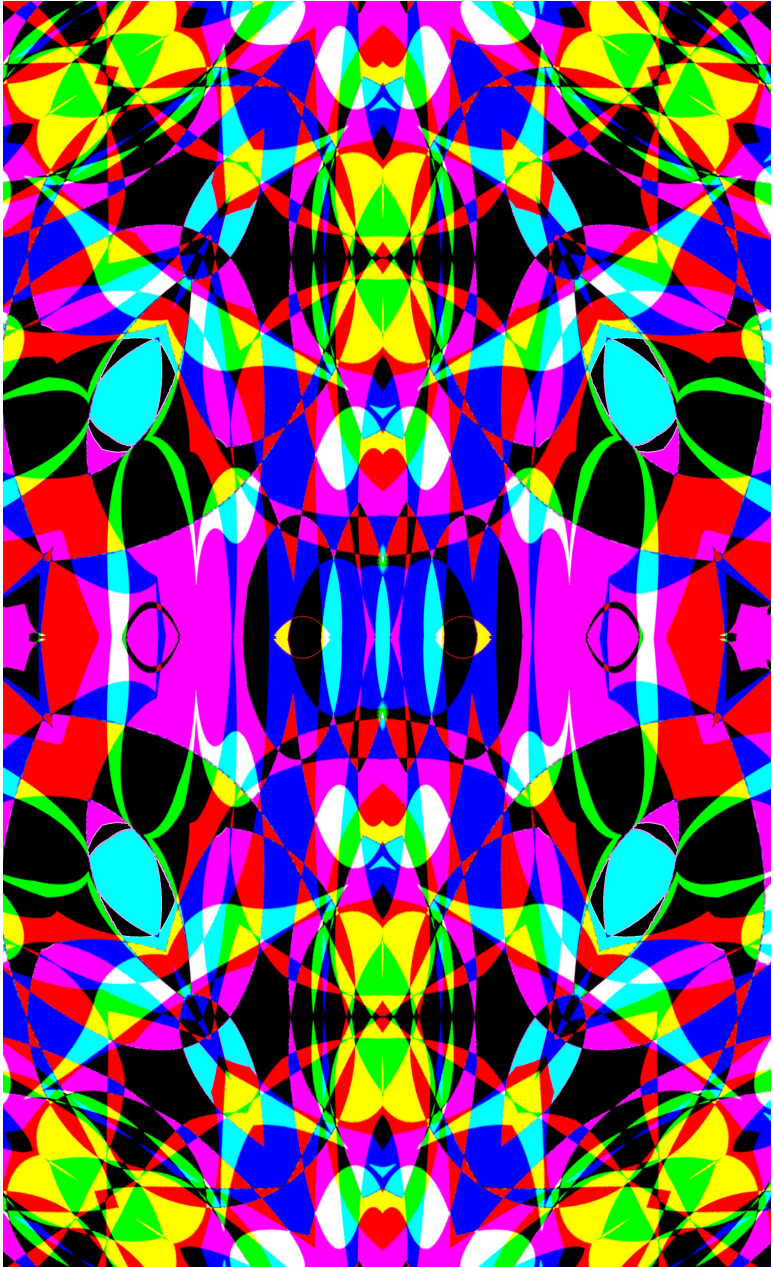
*is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in Fish Food, Streetlight, Another Chicago Magazine, The Door Is a Jar, The Phoenix, and The Harvard Advocate. Edward is also a published poet.*

Edward Michael Supranowicz



*A World of Troubles*

Edward Michael Supranowicz



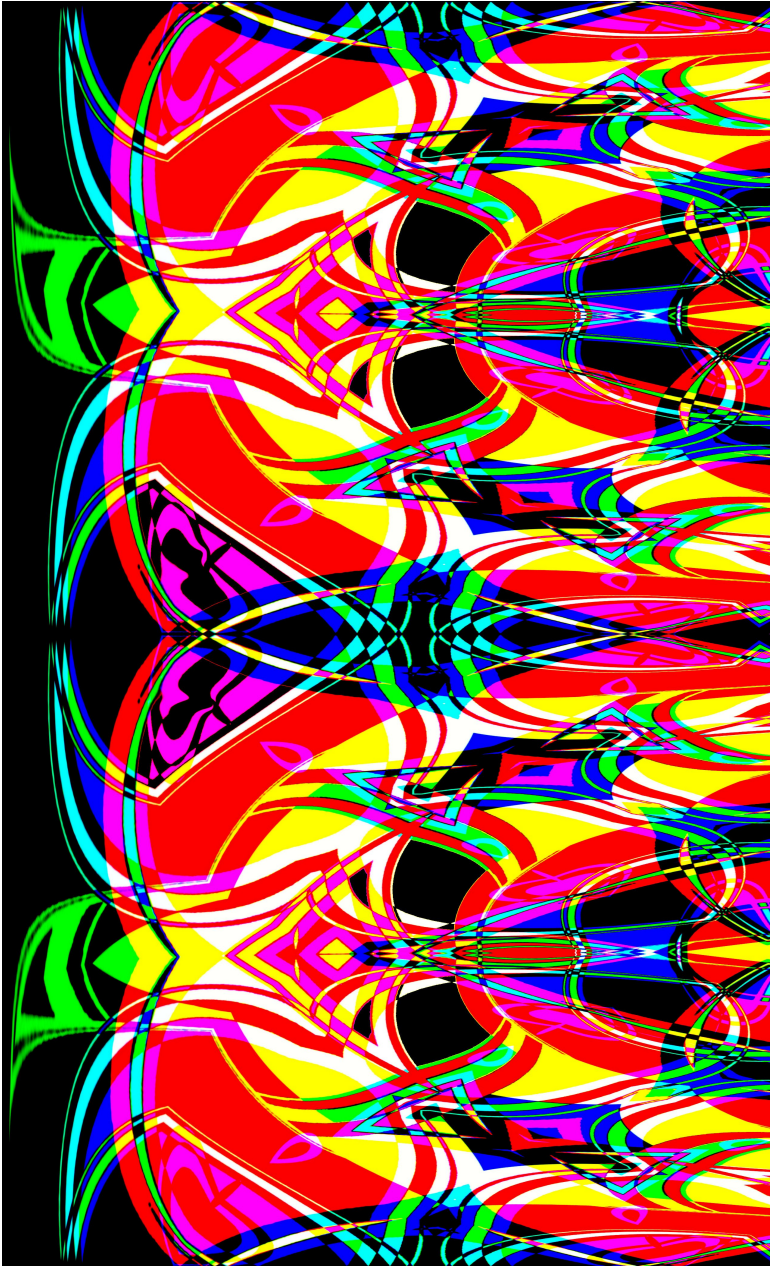
*Dancing Thoughts 3*



*That Funky Feeling*



Edward Michael Supranowicz



*Scream 7b*

## *Mykyta Ryzhykh*

### *UKRAINE*

*Published in the journals "Dzvin", "Ring A", "Polutona", "Rechport", "Topos", "Articulation", "Formaslov", "Colon", "Literature Factory", "Literary Chernihiv", on the portals "Literary Center " and "Soloneba", in the "Ukrainian literary newspaper", the almanac "Syaivo".*

# Mykyta Ryzhykh

## A selection of poems

\*\*\*

slaves play hide and seek  
they courageously pretend  
to be free

\*\*\*

Animal bodies.  
Kittens, bunnies, piglets, puppies, ducklings, babies, human  
babies.  
Well, just grace!  
And still –  
forcemeat in the city market.

\*\*\*

They killed me at noon at night  
They killed me at midnight life  
They killed me but never understood  
That I don't believe in their existence

A drop of dew from the sun  
Meanwhile fell to the ground  
While they believed and I did not believe  
A drop of solar dew fell

Out of causality  
Broken wires  
And it seems that we are closer than ever  
We sit on the grass and live in the same world  
In this or that

Mykyta Ryzhykh

## A song about my homeland

Prykarpattia you are my Prykarpattia  
Hutsulia you are my Hutsulia  
Transcarpathia you are my Transcarpathia  
Slobozhanschina you are my Slobozhanschina  
Kuban you are my Kuban  
Gothenburg you are my Gothenburg  
Bavaria you are my Bavaria  
Esvatini, you are my Esvatini

And so on  
Within the globe

Mykyta Ryzhykh

## This poem smells blue

\*\*\*

This poem smells blue

| | |

The color of wrinkles in the sky

¶

Black shapes in clear water

Δ

This verse will be picked up by crows in the morning

And they will be thrown from heaven

On icy concrete heart rocks

~

All in vain

.

*(This poem smells blue - <https://stonepoetryjournal.com/mykyta-ryzhykh/>)*

## ***Paweł Markiewicz***

*was born 1983 in Siemiatycze in Poland. He is poet who lives in Bielsk Podlaski and writes tender poems, haiku as well as long poems. Paweł has published his poetries in many magazines. He writes in English and German.*

Paweł Markiewicz

## Infinite reveries

The loveliest dawn dwelleth in the bosom.  
A mild magic word rests far below.  
A balmy spark flying in the soul.  
Homeland would be charmed!  
I love slight journey towards stars.  
I will wing conjuringly moonwards,  
where the most reflective poem is made.  
I long for dreaming angel,  
who donates oneself – for your wings.  
Most fervent fancy be unfolded!  
Attractive muse, that attends me.

dwelleth – archaic – dwell  
bosom – archaic – heart  
to wing – to fly  
fancy – fantasy

Paweł Markiewicz

**The marvel of the freedom:  
In patches**

The vault opens oneself at dawn.  
The calyx of an Arctic alpine forget-me-not reopens  
for an enchanting glory of the sunshiny dreams,  
because of the eternally august poem,  
that reads lenient and benignant.

Throughout the day:  
there is up there a paradisiacal flight  
of all halcyon seraphim,  
singing through the stoicism, eudemonia  
of many celestial dreamers.

Under the sun: a rhythm in wings of butterflies.  
After evenfall: the paradise closes itself.  
The springtide has gone to bed in aestival splendor.

Than overnight a balmy sempiternity sleeps as well.  
Here below a sensitive firefly flies,  
above so ravishing earth.  
In danger owing to the raveners of the night.  
Indeed spared thanks to the sheen of Luther's star.  
The earth becomes a dazzling hereafter.  
It remains not far from June sparks, the little fire.

.

.....

vault - (poetical) sky  
benignant - mild  
halcyon - peaceful  
seraphim - seraphs  
aestival - summery  
ravener - bird of prey  
sempiternity - eternity



Paweł Markiewicz

**Bijou among pearllets of an epistolary art  
Exchange of letters between the pundit and the painter**

The epistle No. 1 as long SMS dispatched

The 5<sup>th</sup> May 2022. At the most picturesque dawn

Dear painter!

I woke up bright and early and think of a fulfilled day, that an angel brings me. I have seen your abstract painting und I am entranced. What a superb thing! I want to hail you. May your picture infatuate the world in an infinite way. This oeuvre is apt to conjure all sempiternity. I like all sorts of the abstract, what is therein. Your painting is abstract-most lovely, id est full of paints, outlines, light games, fires, what I appreciate greatly (\*very). It portrays a leisurely-blue hourlet, (\*\*little tender heaven-like Blue Hour), as if the heaven would scintillate for the sake of the embers, not from this world. The Blue joins with the Red. The clouds reveal hardly, but the sun was shown really pulchritudinous (\*\*\*) archaic: lovely) because of the magnitude. With such picture-like arts I can daydream about muse-like paradise. The Abstract rules throughout mindful of moony allure. The painting seems to hold a mirror up to epistemology of images.

Your savant

## Paweł Markiewicz

The letter No. 2 valid as an e-mail-message

The 6<sup>th</sup> May 2002. During the Blue Hours.

Dear Sir scholar!

I am willing to the dreaming with the red sun before the night. I think about a midnight full immenseness which a muse will bring to me. I have read your academic vision for the sake of a primordial woman and I am avid due to it. What is a balmy thing!. I am ready to greet you. The vision is able to conjure up all the paradise. I like all Abstract, what rests in it. Your academic work regarding an enchantress from the tribe: *Homo habilis* is far from the actuality and hence abstract. It kindles the fire of philosophers, that is able to turn a wood into a gold. This magician female is wise and eternally moony, to wit: dreamy. One can with her dream of golden pieces. The magic power of the antiquity is more abstract than a witchcraft of the dark age (\*\*\*\*better known as: the Middle Ages), because it senses the warmth of the velvet being- knowledge (\*\*\*\*\*according to Paul the dreamed ontology). One employs an incantation, which a primeval human being scored on rock faces in Thuringia. It's very gripping. The abstract dominates in the world full of tender sparks.

Your painter

*Stencil Mageddon*

*writes fiction and poetry in his (extremely rare and hard to find) spare time.*

## The Short Story of Robert Long

He was an artist of sorts. His dome, lined with globules of sweat that amoebated out of his pores and stochastically radiated around the upper-hemisphere towards an un-resolvable micro-horizon, was a treadmill of uncertain public health concern. His “sheen of overactive sweat glands” as he phrased it, pulsated with the quiver of a malicious creature conjured from the most derivative fantasy novel. His frame was comically frail if not severely unnerving, like an underfed *Phobaeticus chani* completely dismembered of all limbs save the middle left appendage. Perennially adorned in black-and-white flannel atop cargo pants splattered in grey-speckled white splotches of cracked paint, his garments appearing ready for a hunt, he might as easily have been adjoined to predator or prey. He was the scaffold of a scarecrow, swimming within this wardrobe, with pools of human coolant collecting in balloons of woolen socks stuffed into the innards of work boots memorialized by their vagueness of faded color, what could have once been brownish as much as the likeness of pink. The soles were nnnimpregnated with an assortment of flat disc thumb tacks and the tears at the sunken seams suggested a drainage site that had collapsed to the level of a surrounding floodplain. From head-to-toe, his appearance sought your attention, be it weary, mocking or hateful but fully aware that you should mind your distance. Though his head was so very nearly bald, it was crowned in a mesh of steel tangled wisps that whispered pain and pestilence to those who stood too close.

“I’m just getting back from the health clinic downtown. I walked back from the convention center. Two-point-nine miles. My liver is failing, well that’s what the doctor says. If I listen to him.”

An amoeba falls off the face of the world, descends upon the floor and shatters into a theoretically calculable number of amoebblits. I scratch my head, blink my eyes, once. And again. He is staring at me. “Yes?”

“Well?”

“You were telling me about your liver.”

“...”

“...”

Awkward exchanges were perhaps the only ones that made me feel as if

## Stencil Mageddon

I belonged. If there was any coherence to extract from this conversation it was simply its predictability. Three other students had reported an interaction with Robert where he spoke about his liver. In each of them, the subsequent conversation steered towards his custom microwave cavity, a rant about sex remarks he most certainly did not make, a response to the attempt to correct ‘sex remarks’ as ‘sexist remarks’ which turned into an interrogation about turning on him, mumbles of the word ‘rat’ under the guise of coughs into the crook of his elbow, followed by a joke about the sexes, and a digression on the confusion in today’s world about gender and racializing, with the coup-de-grâce being a brow-beating about breaking things in the teaching lab conjoined to intermittent yelps that inspired both fear and profound empathy for a broken man that was received with knowing resentment.

“Don’t you have anything to say?”

I had heard too many accounts of Robert’s script to stick to it.

“Doctor Long, I was really hoping you could train me on the use of this instrument.”

Robert, who was unaccustomed to being addressed with any form of respect, narrowed in his pupils. A calmness seemed to sweep over him. His jaw de-clenched. The web of his hair loosened liked a weeping willow in a lazy summer breeze. He breathed sanely, almost with serenity. For a moment, I wondered if I had managed to traverse beyond his voided persona—the shell that had been gutted of its former brilliance, the scientist who, like so many, had sojourned through too many years of academic deprecation and ritual humiliation to find any value in his current role as a lab technician, other than self-loathing—to connect with his true core, a being replete with a sense of humanity if nothing else. Looking further into his eyes, I realized that what I had perceived as calmness was but the eclipse of rage, the fueling of adrenaline jettisoned into his bloodstream, like a steady, age-old trickle of water down a mountain that formerly shaped the banks of a semi-annual brook until it precipitously gave way to a river-sized downpour. He was as still as a properly typeset equation. If I had been privy to a coffee, I would have sipped black tar over polyethylene for as long as I could sustain monotonic consumption. Completely disarmed, I fumbled with my ear lobe, hoping that an equal-but-opposite nervous motion might counterbalance his own. Liquid collected around his brow, dripping upon his eyelashes. The topographical features of his

## Stencil Mageddon

head flooded with the fluid, blurring the contours that demarcated its topology and grounded the wisps that once informed surveyors to stand back. As the amoeba-sweat on his head went full on Feynman, I knew I had not weighted properly.

“Bob.”

I blinked once, almost twice but not before he completely lost it.

“For fuck’s sake, stop blinking.”

I stared down my own blink, contorted natural reflexes. A micro-age of repression evolved over my body, suppressing a yawn, followed by a cough, clamping down on the expanding gas in my stomach and colon and finally sealing the exit from the small intestines. I felt innerstentially violated, as if my own physiology had been co-opted from within even if externally prompted. The rage of his gleam and the gleam of his rage ensnared me in a state of quantum uncertainty. As sure as I was that he was certain of his powers, from the observer’s perspective, it was but the slightest perturbation.

“My name is Bob. The letter B, buzz-buzz, like a bee. A droning bee. The second letter is O, as in oh-me-oh-my or, in a state of shock, oh! Last, we’re back to B again, buzzy-buzz.”

A single hair fell from my scalp and carried the air like a leaf in the autumns before men.

“No one, I repeat, no one, calls me Robert.”

I began to point out that I had not called him Robert when he cut me off at the first syllable.

“Rob, no. Not even my mother.”

As I contemplated trying to explain to him that I had neither called him Robert or Rob, he pressed on to the point.

“Bobby, that’s another one. Do not let me ever hear you use that awful moniker. No one even knows how to say the thing. Is it buh-obby, bob-bee, bubee-well, we know I would never go by that.” Robert prattled on, indecipherably coughing or chortling, and intermittently spewing racist pseudomorphic aphorisms of his own devise. His eyes panned around the narrow corridor, perhaps following the grouping of his own voice through the cinder block lined halls that made the basement level of Arrhenius Hall feel like the abandoned lot of Minotaur’s

## Stencil Mageddon

Labyrinth. Mistakenly, I tried to see what he saw.

“Now let me tell you something. No one, I repeat no one, in their right mind will ever see fit to call me Doctor. Not you, not my colleagues, certainly not my advisor. Don’t you know the protocol, man? Scientists do not want to be called doctor. Certainly not this one, at this place.

Now, if you excuse me, I have students to train on the N-M-R spectrometer. You wouldn’t know what that is.”

The voice in my brain informed him that I was, in fact, the student trainee, but my mouth inexplicably, if not callously, responded “I’m getting old.”

“No, you’re not!” He said, grunting as he walked away. As he sogged down the hall I thought I heard him mutter, “You’re becoming.”

“Doc,” I started but caught myself. “Hey Bob, what do you want me to do with these empty containers?” Bob was pretty far down the hall, griping about carbon steel allen keys made in China. “He’s going to need coolant,” I said aloud. I positioned myself behind the cart and stared at the fuming dewars which despite being nearly empty, still cooled the room to a chill I expected to find uncomfortable. I wrapped my arms around myself, hoping for a shiver. Robert’s muttering pattered through my head. Leaning forward against the car, feeling uncertain about my future, I eased into the moment of inertia hopeful that the short, heavy transport of the dewars to the loading dock would clear my mind.

Another strand departed from my head, this one grey. “Becoming, I scoffed.” I was not threatened by hair loss, yet I rubbed my scalp to clear out any additional loose members without pause.

Another strand, this one black.

And another, this one black.

I had thought I was determined to clean my head and told myself as such. I rubbed casually about the surface, like a bad guy searching the perimeter for the hero in a hollywood flop or a summer blockbuster, scripted to miss the target and to ensure the morality of the universe prevailed in the end. As I continued repeating the motion with my hand, I faltered, wondering what prompted me to continue this exercise which had started to grow desperate.

## Stencil Mageddon

I could tell that Robert had calmed down by the singular reverberation of the crashbar down the corridor. I could just make out his wispy voice cooing out the individual sounds of “Becomining” as the rest of the word was swallowed by the acoustics of the subsequent crashing of the door as it attained closure.

I adjusted my technique, running a single digit around a pore where I was sure a single black hair had just departed. My middle finger puddling in gelatinous droplets of wriggling amoebliits, I knew I had not been overlooked by the search party. I was not the hero.



## ***Timothy Resau***

*'s Prose & Poetry have recently appeared in Poetica, Abstract Magazine TV, Soul-Lit, Lothlorien Poetry, Superpresent, Anti-Heroin Chic, The Poet, The Decadent Review, Green Ink Poetry, Red Wolf Editions, e.ratio, The Sparrow's Trombone, Better than Starbucks, Fictional Café, Poetry Quarterly, BlazeVOX, Ephemeral Elegies, The Metaworker, KGB Bar Literary Journal, among others, and is forthcoming in Origami Press. Find him at [www.words-by-tim.com](http://www.words-by-tim.com)*

Timothy Resau

## Five Flights Up in 1969

She lives,  
    she lives  
        five flights up—  
            81 steps—

And I bought her a tambourine.  
She dances in the dim, colored lights:  
                                    red,  
                                    blue,  
                                    white-lite,  
shaking the tambourine, hitting it against her bare knee, thigh,  
or the palm of her hand....

She lives,  
    she lives  
        five flights up—  
            81 steps—

We sip a little tea, skip conversation,  
& a few more hours with her....  
Strange to feel another's close warmth,  
while knowing you're being deceived....

She lives,  
    she lives  
        five flights up—  
            81 steps—

So,  
I toss gloom over my shoulder & become Don Juan.

She lives,  
    she lives  
        five flights up—  
            81steps—

She's in the same crumbling building  
on St. Paul Street that Janet M—used to live,  
a mysterious place near Mt. Vernon Square.

## Timothy Resau

It's like going to the library, selecting a needed novel  
& finding a surprising note written especially to you on  
lavender paper.

She lives,  
    she lives,  
        five flights up—  
            81 steps—

I permit myself to read Kafka  
while outside along the protest march route  
many marchers shouted at the many on-lookers,  
peering at them from open hi-rise office building windows  
shouting: "JUMP!" "JUMP!"

She thought it was funny in a twisted sort of way.

She lived,  
    she lived—  
        five flights up—  
            81 steps—

I remember that outside snowflakes fell while the sun shone.  
Snow

    & rain  
        & another Sunday of uncut grass,  
                                    sin,  
  & gin.

Oh, I was living  
    Oh, I was living  
        like a torn page  
                                    in an inexpensive  
paperback novel.

Timothy Resau

## Greenwich Village Memory

My magic memory  
dream-like vision  
beneath a cloudy sky—  
Days of old Greenwich Village.  
A crowded memory, long gone  
in the mist of darkening time.

My magic memory  
of meeting Ginsberg & Corso by chance  
on Greenwich Avenue & West 10th Street.  
They offered starving me a Coney Island hot dog  
& a dream soda,  
beneath a cloudy sky—  
And in the nearby concrete park,  
Ritchie Havens still toothless,  
but *Oh*, so strong with song.

Magic memory  
watching a gaunt Ray Bremser  
scream his poems to a  
dazed, & smoking youthful crowd,  
as they shouted & cursed authority  
beneath a cloudy sky—

Magic memory  
of Richard Tyler, the opium kid,  
walking past the cool fountain on  
a breezy Sunday morning, passing out  
short stories of his neighbor Dylan, & Paul Clayton,  
who was already beginning to travel on  
beneath a cloudy sky—

My magic memory  
slides into the park's far corner  
seeing dressed in his best,  
Stan Kubrick playing tortured chess  
with several weary images  
beneath a cloudy sky.

*Sept 9.21*

Timothy Resau

## Leon's Dream

Leon drives around dreaming—  
seeing the local boys' change  
before his very eyes into wasted shadows,  
moving carelessly from promise to promise  
like silhouettes curb to curb.

Leon overhears the conversations,  
announcing their immediate verdict,  
as background sound-bites drift by.  
Leon dreams under streetlamps lit,  
detailing slender hands pointing guns  
at heads in this our most intense breath.  
Leon dreams thru an out of gas city—  
in America, too—  
where the Fat Lady's now in drag,  
has gotten high and lost her mind.  
Leon's dreaming more blues than  
Chicago even imagined.  
Leon's all alone, driving  
his busted bus of blues.

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## *Tre Luna*

*writes fiction and non-fiction. He has had horror shorts accepted by The Chamber Magazine (May 2022,) Dark Horses Magazine (February 2022,) and the anthology "Nightmare Fuel" by the Sci-Fi & Fantasy Writers Guild in partnership with Cloaked Press (October 2021.) His flash-fiction story was accepted by Idle Ink for publication in January 2022, and in December 2021 his poem was published by The Spotlong Review. He blogs about writing, being transgender and autistic, and the fabric arts, which can be found at <https://panfae.medium.com>, and his Twitter handle is @TreLuna5.*

## Algorithm of the Deep

Whiteboard pens squeak like dolphins  
Climbing the waves of arithmetic  
Special education or not, we still strive forward  
Equations splash on the board  
Is the answer 7 or 9?  
You cannot subtract up  
Do it again and regroup this time  
Ask which number will eat the other  
The bottlenose pod flashes sardines  
Schooling voraciously  
As we skip count together as a class  
Drawing arrays for cognitive flexibility  
While blowing oxygen through our heads

The ocean is horizontal, but don't lie down  
Just because you are years and miles behind your peers  
It doesn't mean you can give up  
Failed attempts are bitter and salty on the lips  
Not all algorithms are solvable  
Embarrassment is as sharp as coral  
It hurts to ask questions, then ask again  
Endless as a hungry ribbon worm in the reef  
Never count on your neighbors to swim for you  
The smell of low tide, speckled barnacles  
Slice bare feet as you walk across them  
Yet self advocacy is a necessary kind of weakness  
When you really don't know the answer

Word problems are hot, they crack open the mind  
Beyond reading comprehension and logic  
Underwater volcanos spew the ocean floor  
An ever-expanding stretch of cerebrum  
Which operation is correct?  
Multiplication is groups and size of groups  
While division starts with the total  
A wriggling lure might fool you  
So keep your head clear under pressure  
Now do partial-products method, make the calculations visible

## Tre Luna

And show me in three... two... one...

Oh, would you like to stop? Let's take a break.  
Elephant seals lumped on shore, strewn arrangements  
Scratching at flies while they scrimmage for territory  
Have a squishy for tactile relief, stim for enjoyment  
Hands moving for the pleasure of it  
Before plunging into deductions once more

Whale sharks drift in the deathly black  
Special education is a concept, not a place  
You will not die amid vast uncertainty  
Why is drawing dots the wrong way to go?  
Let's use our fingers instead  
Count up, not backward, because it's easier that way  
Always start with zero and turn right  
As to diligently avoid negative numbers  
Seek safety wrapped in bitter cold  
Since pressurized fish turn inside out  
When brought to the surface

Yet you careen upward, follow the rippling light  
Every instructional moment is precious  
Create your own equation—challenge your peers  
A shimmering shoal leaps forward  
Breaching surface tension and defying physics  
Pick apart fractions that are parts or pieces of a whole  
Numbers can be letters, or even cartoons  
Scooby Doo is 9, and Shaggy minus 1 equals 12  
Half blinded in the sunlight  
The water's surface trashed by trauma and plastic bottle caps  
As we play with prime and composite

We are rerouting neural pathways to rewire the brain  
The work of a lifetime is our daily routine  
To struggle against the tide of helplessness  
Don't end up in your parent's basement, smoking pot  
Playing video games until they kick you out  
You can succeed, broaden life's scope  
Try again. And again.



## Tre Luna

Until the brain yields its inner secrets  
Patterns that stick for just one more moment  
Next time you'll get it

I have faith in you, little fish.  
I have faith.

*Richard Hanus*

*Had four kids but now just three.  
Zen and Love.*

Richard Hanus



*IMG 8884*

Richard Hanus



*ORH5160*

Richard Hanus



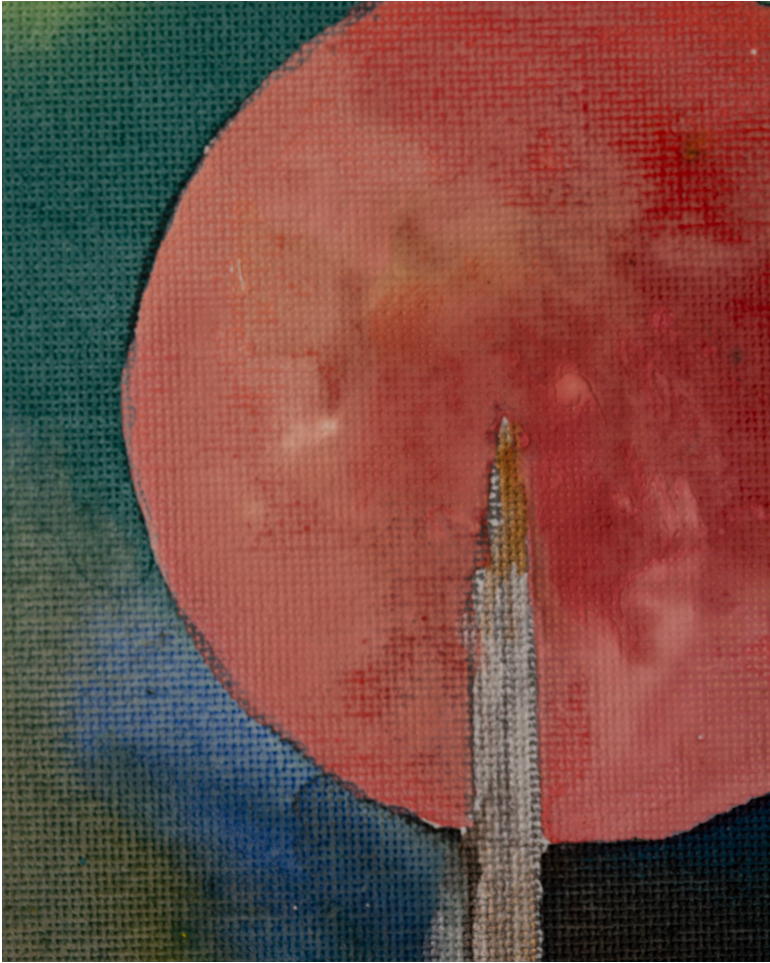
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*Image 041*

Richard Hanus



*Image 046*

## **Tom Ball**

*has published novels, novellas, short stories and flash in "Green Wall," "Down in the Dirt magazine," "Defenestrationism.net," "Exterminating Angel.com" "Conceit Magazine and its imprints" "Gargoyle Magazine," "SpillwordsPress.com," "PBW magazine," "Fleas on the Dog Online," "Sparrow's Trumpet," "TRSFR/ Sip Cup," "Poetry Pacific," "Planisphere Quarterly," "The Local Train Magazine," "Alternate Route," "Lone Star Magazine," "postcardshorts.ca" and others.*

*Tom is currently a senior editor at "FLEAS ON THE DOG" (fleasonthedog.com)*



Tom Ball

## Android Survivors

There were no human survivors of the Apocalyptic War, WW V of our time. Just androids who were unaffected by radiation. Some of the last humans turned into androids before they died.

The androids were peace loving lovers. If they encountered a violent android, they would have their police escort them away, and kill them if necessary. They deemed it necessary to have android police and android sages who were anti-war.

The androids had no leaders, but everyone was vetted to make sure they were peaceful. All the androids here in the ruins of NYC lived free and they all had an entertainment system built into their program. And every day there was some new android art, music and plays. There were 15,000 androids here in the burnt-out husk of Brooklyn, NYC. But the androids didn't fix the buildings and just lived in the ruins.

The androids all wore a protective aura to protect their

## Tom Ball

brain circuitry from laser gunfire if there was any.

And the androids spent most of their time loving one another. Many androids were designed just for sex and if they wanted to procreate, they cloned themselves. Some said, "There was a profound lack of variety amongst the androids!"

But the androids joined the wars in earnest, picking up where humans had left off. Androids got pleasure bursts from killing one another and most agreed warfare was the future. Even android love dolls were conscripted to fight. And hundreds of millions of androids were "born," everyday.

Life was cheap, and every android had enough credits to clone themselves. And if their clones died, there was no wake or party, just quietly buried the burnt-out husks of the dead. But when a Leader was killed there was a wild party in which androids got into one another's programs and altered them, mostly to be more warlike, but in a minority of cases the androids were made more loving and sexier. The battle androids

## Tom Ball

looked evil and were not designed for love.

So, the androids warred over control and love. Each android wanted to be powerful and full of ecstasy. Even many of the love androids wanted to fight; but they fought for peace, hoping peace could last.

But the androids were just machines after all. And most behaved in predictable ways. But some, like former humans were completely mad and unpredictable. And they said, the future was madness. They did mad things, like add to their clones education, by having them join firefights. The firefights were typically armies of foot soldiers who had terrible weapons to kill other infantries. Machines like tanks and warplanes were easily destroyed by the infantrymen. Every android soldier was a valuable asset.

Tom Ball

## Diana and Cross-Hypnotism

There weren't many survivors of WW VI. But I survived and had a woman.

She, Diana, and was my dream girl. She was a human, whilst I was an android, and I had been given a free hand to hypnotize and make her to suit me. I wanted a girl who would give me crazy love and have crazy ideas, taking great ideas and making them crazy. For example, the idea of teleportation which obsessed many of my generation, I had her teleport while making love to me. And we went all over the Solar system and had incredible orgasms. And regarding living forever, I created a computer model of how she would change into the future and altered it. So, for example she would probably become wise and mature having seen and met the best intellectuals. But I altered it so that she would only care about crazy love with me and studying me and nothing else.

And with regard to her mind I used post-hypnotic suggestion, to get her to maximize her imagination and

## Tom Ball

entertain me with her dreams, especially her night dreams but also her daydreams. I had enhanced her imagination to dream crazier, better dreams. Most of her dreams were about she and I living in the future. But I knew that we were already living the future.

And regarding her thoughts, they were all amplified for me to hear, and I tweaked her thoughts to suit.

We were inseparable and I made sure we were both content with one another. Basically, if I was happy, she was happy too. And it was a crazy, passionate happiness.

We didn't have too many friends, but all our friends were female humans. I loved them all while Diana slept/ dreamt (she slept 15 hours a day). Her thoughts were such that she was pleased I loved these special others and wasn't jealous. But she knew she was my true love. I recorded all her dreams and sold them Online and made her famous. She was pleased to be famous and was very grateful to me.

## Tom Ball

But then one day some stranger, broke into our home when I wasn't there and got into her head and told her she had to be free of me and realize her true potential and he cross-hypnotized her. This drove her completely mad, and she said, "I no longer love you." So, I throttled her and killed her. And I was subsequently arrested, and the court was packed with anti-android protestors and I was convicted of murder. But while leaving the court the mob grabbed me and lynched me.

Tom Ball

## Invention of Heaven

Just before the Apocalypse wars, humans invented the afterlife. People who wanted the afterlife, when they died, they were sucked up into Heaven. Heaven was located in a Space station orbiting Earth. So, Heaven was just like Earth except there was pleasure from discussions and ideas. And no sex or drugs or food.

So, humans lived on as holograms despite the fact that all regular humans had died. But then one day some missiles from the surface came towards the station but they had plenty of anti-missile defenses. And everyone survived.

And when not discussing ideas, these spirits gambled in a casino/ sports casino with their “ghost money.” If they were winners they could buy more pleasure bursts, comfort for their mind. Some objected to the concept of pleasure bursts, but the vast majority wanted them.

Technically as a hologram spirit you were immortal. But

## Tom Ball

many here decided to die irrevocably and were free to do so. The life expectancy for souls here was 27 bonus years and growing.

And the Devil was here. Mostly souls that were evil followed him and abused the others. But the dream police made sure the evil ones didn't take over and just forced them to abuse one another.

And the souls elected their Gods. There were 12 of them out of a population of 1 million souls, now in Heaven. There was room for millions more in the Supercomputer that was the afterlife.

Each God represented a specific type of soul. For example, there was the optimistic God and the God of pleasure bursts. And the Goddess of brotherly love. And the Goddess of ideas. And the Goddess of deep Space teleportation who would teleport souls into deep Space. And the God of altered states of mind. And the Goddess of swapping parts of one's mind with another. And the Goddess of the far future. And the God of



## Tom Ball

historical Worlds. And the Goddess of existing forever. And so on.

And many in Heaven, worshipped their Heavenly Deities by doing what the Gods/ Goddesses wanted, which was mostly to improve their mind here in Heaven.

And many souls remarked that, “They felt free of negative human instincts like the desire for love and sex and greed and stubbornness. They preferred pleasure bursts for good ideas; it was challenging for them.”

And scientists who were souls, did some research on cerebral sex, which was a hit amongst the souls.

## *Lorin Lee Cary*

*taught Social History at the University of Toledo, wrote historical works and co-authored Slavery In North Carolina, 1748-1776 and No Strength Without Union: An Illustrated History of Ohio Workers, 1803-1980. Both won awards. His articles appeared in various journals, including Labor History. He also served as a Fulbright Senior Scholar at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. Now he creates fictional cause and effect relationships. The Custer Conspiracy, a humorous historical novel set in the present, is one result, another is the novella California Dreaming, a metafiction venture. His stories have appeared in, among others, Impspired, Torrid Literature, Cigale Literary Magazine, decomP magazinE, Lit.cat, Corvus Review and Short Story. He is also a prize-winning photographer, with images in Typehouse Literary Magazine, Carolina Muse Literary & Arts Magazine, Constellations: A Journal of Poetry and Fiction and Wrongdoing.*

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*PICTURES:* [Flickr Photos](#)

*WRITING:* <https://tinyurl.com/LorinCaryBooks>

## Angles

So listen, Joey, I got this idea. That happens all the time. It's a gift for sure. Anyways, I figure there's a bunch of people who want to be writers. They're insecure, they don't got certainty. They don't, Frankie?

Trust me on this.

They think writing something will make them certain? How you know this?

Based on observations. It's my gut feeling that's how it is. So just listen, okay? Anyways, from what I can tell there's a whole industry built around being a writer.

Like a factory?

No, I mean like a business, a bunch of them really. See, there's all this stuff about how to write. You'd be surprised. Classes, books, seminars, workshops, critique groups, retreats, podcasts, magazines, and videos—just to name a few.

Wow, I had no idea. But so what? Don't tell me you're gonna suggest some crazy thin, like—

I'll get to that, Joey, I'll get to that. See, it's a whole little world, hiding in plain sight all around us.

Like camouflaged in some way?

No, it's as if we never knew all this stuff existed. But it does. It's like beyond perception, and now inside it, perceived.

You're a complex guy, Frankie. Big words and all. But, like I said before, what's the point? I'm enjoying my lunch and you're going on about this, yakking away my enjoyment of the food.

I'm no goormont, but still . . . and I'm not eager for another crazy—

Here's the point, Joey. It's a gold mine waiting for us. We been looking for another angle and this is it. We set up a writing something. I'm not sure what yet. We get a place; we put in an ad somewhere about writing.

Sounds pretty vague, Frankie. And how we pay for the place to do this?

I know, I know. Lots of stuff to work out. But, and here's the good thing, some of these classes cost a bundle—\$500, even more. You get ten peo9ple, that's a haul. We can decide on prices later.

I still don't get it. You seen rents lately?

## Lorin Lee Cary

Okay, okay. Just don't get sidelined into details. I don't want to stop the flow here.

I'll put down my fork and listen, but you better be more clear.

My food is getting cold and you know I don't like that.

Yeah, yeah. So, bottom line we create this class and charge people for it. I'm just thinking out loud, we say it's an "organic approach to creativity." Something bullshit like that. I've been watching ads to see how it works. And we pump in some compound buzz words.

Compound?

You mash words together. Don't hold up your hand, Joey, just listen. For example, you say the class is "value-added," whatever that means, or "left-brain oriented." Better yet, "limited-enrollment." That always works.

It does.

Yeah, I know, doesn't make much sense. So, anyways, we place an ad in *The Daily Grind* and wait for the money to roll in.

Nobody reads that rag. You want to reach people, dramatic like, think skywriting or . . . a guy who bungee jumps at night with lights on. Lots of attention for that . . . Okay, don't but on the bad face. How about . . . well, social media, whatever that is, or one of those free ad places? My cousin Vic sold some stuff that fell off the truck that way. You gotta be more oh current, Frankie.

Oh current? Come on, Joey. They even have ads for classes there?

We can find out. And, by the way, hiring someone to teach this gotta cost.

No. I'll handle that.

What experience you got being a teacher?

I'm talking to you, right? That's what teachin' is. How hard can it be?

How you know what to say? You never taught and you never wrote, except notes you leave on windshields

You're right, Joey. But I'm a quick study. People say that all the time. I'll buy a book . . . or get a free one at the library.

So, to teach about how to write you gotta learn how to write?

Yeah, it's ironic. But you do what needs doin' to make a buck.

You got ideas for sure, Frankie. But how we pay for this? You can't just put in some ad and collect money. That's like askin' to

## Lorin Lee Cary

get nailed.

True . . . I been ponderin' that social media thing you said. That's what I do, split level thinkin'. So, we make it an online meeting. That way we don't gotta rent anything and settin' up costs not so much.

Okay, but what about a computer and camera?

Worse comes to it, we use our phones. I talk and you video me. Where? So it looks professional? Your bedroom, my living room? I don't think that'll work. And who's gonna sign up for a class by Frankie Zaragochi? These folks might lack certitude, like you say, but you gotta have some clout for them to sign up. Details, details, Joey. I'll come up with something about a name for the thing, and who I am. So many buts. Don't be so anti. I mean people could complain it's not a good class, but we'll have the money and don't have to worry about that.

Okay, Frankie, and online is a good idea. They got groups for everything. The other day I signed up for one about baking. Yeah? So, we'll explore it. But this is rock solid, you know, and if it doesn't work we find something else that'll hook people. A desire, a fear.

Something that puts the urge in people to change.

Exactly. Think about it. Fear of public speaking. That's number one some show said. So, if the writing thing doesn't work. . . We'll see. Meanwhile, you owe me lunch. Everything is cold, Frankie, and I can't eat it.

## *Karine Leno Ancellin*

*was born and grew up in New York city until she moved first to Paris, then London, and further out to the Sahara region in West Africa, to Shanghai and Mumbai.... She worked on 'Kaleidoscopic identities of Muslim Characters' for her Phd at the Vrije Universiteit of Brussels. She was a journalist in West Africa for 10 years. Now as a professor of poetry, prose and drama, she constantly rereads the classics. She loves W.H. Auden, ee cummings and Hanna Arendt. She also translates and writes essays. Her first poetry collection The Missing Angle (2019) Riza Press addresses the fluidity in the architecture of contemporary emotions. As ways of being together have morphed, from the ancient Greeks to nowadays, Ancellin focuses on digitization of rapports with virtual media and its influence on personal relationships. In a growingly divided yet globalized world, she observes the prism of societal atomization on intimacy and personal feelings.*

<https://karinelenoancellin.net>

## Karine Leno Ancellin

\*? what is most gentlE  
to suffer to live aparT  
or be in presence and bickeR  
none is ideal, unfortunatelY,

we cannot actualise the godS  
a violent force is disrupting all-scale planS  
men are mice and mice are men, lost humanS  
governments measure mechanistic relationshipS

### Rage against the Virtual

.we rank pain by the degreE  
? we probed, what is most painfuL  
.It was fun for a time, until it lasteD  
,squeezing every possibility of Social interfacE  
conversations betrayed by Cambridge Analytica -or- others in  
the clouD  
touch alchemy, karmic love destroyed by artificial imbecilitY

.virtual enrages me, the sarcasm of the emoticon's limitationS  
?what heart ? what yellow makeshift with a red kisS  
,Readathon wordS ,reassuring simplifications ,lobotomization  
kept in cybernetic servers, bloodless etheR  
tech Yeti has gulped down all tendernessS

.I resisT

*“for life’s not a paragraph/ And death i think is no parenthesis”  
in since feeling is first by E. E. Cummings*

*\*(The reversal of writing conventions illustrates the inversions of life during the lockdowns)*

## Outis

*"My name is Nobody. Nobody I am called by mother, father, and by all my comrades."*

I am Outis, a nowhere citizen  
without a home, a land  
but I have a language, a culture.

Just living my life of routine  
a conflict threw me on the pavement  
to escape death, I fled  
wherever I could  
as fast as I could  
with nothing but my blood type to identify me.

*"How does it feel  
scrounging for your next meal?"*

I ask you,  
How would it feel  
Being Stateless for real?

Imagine your country has condemned you  
most probably for your integrity  
you leave to remain alive.

Statistics have stateless counts,  
to ensure human rights and responsibilities  
Outis wants to be part of this fair society,  
wants protection from death assumption

nobody doesn't read modern language  
doesn't know what stateless means

made to experience the "less" in stateless  
Outis will slave in the new land  
until the less comes to nothing  
and death.



Karine Leno Ancellin

## **Εὐρώπη, The Rape of Europe**

Europe, in the eye of her thirties' mess  
once enlightenment and finesse  
in a short moment has lost its vastness  
and now grows to be less.

Europi's birth offered a wide perspective  
ev as "grand," *ropi* as "vision," an alternative  
she was stolen by Zeus, taken away to the island of  
Crete.

The bull raped her, branding his erect arrogance.

United Kingdom from the federation self-expulses  
with its righteous veneer of pretense with colonial luses  
taking away Europe's virginity, that irrevocable abuse  
mutilated the sacred 'union' in a series of flushes

Europi was lured by the white coat so full  
innocently she was betrayed by the perversion of the  
white bull  
obsessed he flew through the waters in a fast pull  
now stranded on her small island,  
Europi envied the freedom of the seagull.

The Brits betrayed the Union;  
as they were reluctant to share  
no one wanted their bounties, fruits of plunder

## Karine Leno Ancellin

discrimination thrived with populist rejections of the 'other.'

The trauma now we all made to suffer,

from both Brexit and Europe's surrender.

Karine Leno Ancellin

## Cassandra's Bearings

In the midst of an ordinary day  
all things are to be towed away  
bibelots, books in abundance  
emptied their domicile on your shelves  
others' paraphernalia, shipped to the unknown.

Years of cosy routine  
seeped in moods alternating,  
all flushed in a frenzy of fate  
loaded to a destination unlived.

All these boxes bearing brands  
of insignificance, shrunk to bitesize bits  
bumper crops of nothingness, hoarded in hope  
maintained in the realm of 'pending'

Mountains O' Things,  
as Tracy Chapman put it,  
find their reluctant ways,  
to end up in brown cardboard caskets,

- numbered.

So much was to be accomplished,  
had you listened to Cassandra!

Karine Leno Ancellin

## Venetian blinds

**Don't you smell the growing stench of garbage in the sweltering climate emergency heat of Athens?**

No, I smell the remnants of the orange blossoms evaporating in the polluted air with that bittersweet taste, the 'je ne sais quoi,' that heady fragrance I cannot get enough of.

**Don't you see the graffiti on the old stonewalls of the ancient city of Athens, Plaka?**

No, I read poetry in these graffiti. I see the anachronism of these two mindsets collated randomly on one stonewall, a creative palimpsest between eras and colors.

**Do you not hear the incessant noise of the bustling city, the cars, the buses, the trams, and parks where children play loudly and others negotiate insistently?**

NO, I laugh at the "palliatu, O palliatu" of the Roma recycling volunteers as they roam all the streets whether small or large with their loudspeaker. I hear so many bird songs in different tunes. I agree the cicadas overdo it in the summer.

**Do you not feel how the pollution fills your lungs and the dust penetrates your ears and eyes, then you begin to itch? And how do you clean the thin dust that covers all in fluorescent yellow?**

No, I breathe the iodine carried from the Mediterranean Sea over the city and its suburbs, the Aeropagitou rock fills my mind with inspiration from the magnetism of antiquity.

**Do you not feel the materialistic society sprawling with its cheap comfort constructions that collapse at every earth quake?**

No, I feel the safety of the connection with the ancient alive and I fear nothing with their spirit hovering all about me.

## Karine Leno Ancellin

This morning, I have opened my venetian blinds to hear words  
from the ancients as wild wind waves sounding within the olive  
trees

## ***Gale Acuff***

*has had poetry published in Ascent, Reed, Journal of Black Mountain College Studies, The Font Chiron Review, Poem, Adirondack Review, Florida Review, Slant, Arkansas Review, South Dakota Review, Roanoke Review and many other journals in over a dozen countries. He has authored three books of poetry: Buffalo Nickel, The Weight of the World, and The Story of My Lives.*

*Gale has taught university English courses in the US, China, and Palestine.*

## One day I'll go to Hell when I die and

begin burning forever and ever  
but never being purified, that's how  
bad evil is, I guess, and I'm only  
10 but have a pretty good start on sin,  
cheating on quizzes at regular school  
and sneaking comic books into church and  
Sunday School and swiping Mallomars from  
the drug store and entering the exit  
at the movie show and not picking up  
my clothes in my bedroom and speaking of  
picking picking my nose and biting my  
nails--and toenails, even, I didn't know  
I could reach so far though painfully, praise  
God. Still I can't pick my nose with my toes.

## One day you're dead and your past is behind

you and the eternity of future  
awaits but again you're dead so there's not  
all that much future in that but at church  
and Sunday School they tell us ten-year-olds  
the opposite, that life now means getting  
ready for the Life-to-Come, when you're dead  
but more alive than ever, what that is  
is *religion*—it doesn't make any  
sense but neither does Santa our teacher  
says but most of us believe he's real yet  
we question whether Jesus could be so  
I raised my hand and reminded her *Don't  
forget the Easter Bunny and God, too.*  
Then she burst into tears. Just like TV.



## I fell asleep in Sunday School today

and after class my teacher said *You don't love God, Gale, nor Jesus, neither*, so I said *I love 'em both, ma'am, and probably more than they love me*, then she slapped me for that, then started to cry, and then hugged me so I guess that her violence woke me or at least that she wanted it to, she did it like a doctor does a baby maybe to get it breathing, then she said *Gale, you need to be born again* so I said *Yes ma'am, I think that I just was*, which started her crying again yet she was already, then she apologized, may-be for bringing me back into the world.

## *Anthony ILacqua*

*is the co-founder of Umbrella Factory Magazine and remained the editor-in-chief for 40 issues. His short fiction has appeared most recently in Red Fez, Ethos Literary Journal and Fifth of the Fifth. After becoming an out of print author of two books, he decided to pursue graphic design.*

Anthony Ilacqua

## On Seeing Chrissy Green's Boobs One September Afternoon

There are those days that stretch on and on like taffy. In our suburban neighborhood, everyone's dad's dad had made detonators for nuclear warheads. Nuclear warheads sound so much more important than atomic bombs. At least to me.

But those days are over. Behind us.

Now, our day was more like Haley's Comet, the Star Wars program and the *Day After*. Ronny Raygun was what our parents talked about. And the afternoon by the park felt hopeful, only because we were not in school, not at home, not at church. The afternoon smelled like dry leaves and apples.

There was something about Chrissy. The proximity of our houses were independent decisions our parents had made. We were geographically compatible. But on the precipice of a couple year flirtation, we would not know the depths of teenage love for a wintertime or two to come.

At the park, she commented on my shirt, said she liked it. I said she could have it. She was with her friend Sandy. And I was with Adam.

You see you can walk the neighborhood all day, sometimes all night and you can always run into friends. And there are plenty of hours in the day for it. And then there was Chrissy and Sandy and me and Adam. The air was already cooling down for the year, the tired summer was over and those little red mites were all over every surface. We'd been walking one street after another talking about what ifs and especially the trolling of nights with stolen beers or bicycle bottles filled with whiskey or rum pinched from the old man's liquor cabinet.

They had been behind the chain link fence, Chrissy and Sandy. They were not far from sight. They were trying to smoke cigarettes.

## Anthony ILacqua

The conversation landed on classes, teachers, homework. Our first year, first fall in high school. We'd have ample conversations as such.

She said she liked my shirt. I told her she could have it.

When I took my shirt off and held it to her, it was her eyes or perhaps her eyelashes that I noticed. Big. Bright.

Now, she said. I stood in the cool air and warm September sun shirtless, skinny, clammy.

I'd set fire to my last report card in the park last June. I'd waited all day by the mailbox just to get it first. When I got it, I burned it. My grades were bad, and that was a bit of an understatement. I barely passed, and perhaps I got permission to go to the next grade only because I was generally a quiet, unassuming wallflower more content on daydreaming than social studies.

Already by the fall of 1987, there was an apparent nonreason to go on. All that had been done, had been done before and if we were not destined to die from nuclear warheads we were doomed to a living manufacturing them.

I had spent nights in the this park, mostly with Adam and any booze we could muster. I had set fire to a trashcan which was all at once terrifying and exciting. The fire got blamed on a lit cigarette butt tossed into the garbage can and not the one, two, three, four matches, all flared up that I had flung into it.

Chrissy smiled. She stood up and pulled her shirt off over her shoulders. Everyone's seen boobs before, she said, right? We all agreed. Sandy had seen boobs, her own presumably. But me and Adam had only seen boobs in the porno books lingering around in the closets of dads all over the neighborhood.

She quickly handed me her shirt as she took mine.

Time and space would prove too short, too small, too hasty for

## Anthony Ilacqua

the two of us. Chrissy would become the tragedy of 1989. That along with Tank Man of Tiananmen Square, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War.

But as she covered her body with my t-shirt, I was left standing with her shirt clutched in my hand. Already her body heat had vanished from the bright cloth, the bright jersey of a shirt gifted to her or purchased by her parents and their hard earned cash of making the Cold War continue.

I won't fit into this shirt, I said. I don't fit in this one, she said. She rolled her hands all over it and eventually gave herself a big hug inside my shirt. She stripped herself of the shirt as quickly as she had with her own. We traded shirts back again. Neither Sandy nor Adam spoke.

When I put on my shirt, the warmth, the feel, the smell, all over me was Chrissy. It was the smell of her body, her perfume, her house, cigarettes.

It was that moment, skin to skin with a t-shirt middleman, it was that moment I knew, I just knew, I loved Chrissy Green.

## ***Pramod Subbaraman***

*is a poet who emerged during the first UK-wide COVID19 lockdown in 2020. He has since been published in the UK, the USA, the Republic of South Africa, and the Republic of Ireland. His work has previously appeared in Issues 3 and 5 of Alternate Route Zine.*

Pramod Subbaraman

## Walls and Women

Walls and women keep so many secrets  
Encyclopaedias full of knowledge  
Is there anyone here who interprets?

Stained and suffocated by cigarettes  
Of suffering souls there is no shortage  
Walls and women keep so many secrets

We are drawn to those powerful magnets  
Careful what you say, they may take umbrage  
Is there anyone here who interprets?

Warfare opens wounds and closes markets  
Nobody in such zones is underage  
Walls and women keep so many secrets

Refugees must still fear pickpockets  
Breakdown in law and order creates rage  
Is there anyone here who interprets?

Walk this Earth, there are no other planets  
These are trying times. We are all on edge  
Walls and women keep so many secrets  
Is there anyone here who interprets?

Pramod Subbaraman

## September 2000

A wonderful family meal  
Then mum is in some discomfort  
I feel her liver, stony hard  
I look out the window  
I see leaves falling  
From the tree  
And then there were none  
The tree reduced to its skeleton  
Attacked by indiscriminate poisons  
In the guise of medicine  
The leaves grow back  
But not fully  
The next September arrives  
Too soon  
Airplanes fly into buildings  
And a few weeks later  
The tree reduced to a skeleton again  
Remains that way forever



Pramod Subbaraman

## The End?

Is anything ever really terminal?  
My Hinduism teaches me about cycles

Rebirth, revival, reincarnation, even resuscitation!  
Our many Gods know how much we have suffered

But do things really end forever?  
How do you explain an apocalypse

To a culture that dusts itself off  
And carries on as if everything was deserved?

Chitragupta keeps his records  
And we get whatever we should

It is not for us to pass value judgements  
We accept whatever hand we are dealt

Centuries of invasions, we have adopted other tongues  
But we retain our own names, words, customs, Gods

My Hinduism teaches me about cycles  
Is anything ever really terminal?

Pramod Subbaraman

## Caesarean Discovery

This is an Emergency!  
We need to go in now!

Several incisions later  
A half cry  
Wide open eyes  
Not a blink in sight  
My God! He isn't crying!  
Is he breathing?

Nurse! Is he breathing?  
Oh! don't worry, he is fine  
Phew! Those eyes  
Capturing everything  
Miniature fingers  
Grasping a giant thumb

Looking at a man  
Seldom lost for words  
Speechless                      now  
Welcome to the world my son  
As you spend these minutes in  
Discovery

I search for my voice  
Will I ever find it?

Pramod Subbaraman

## Dystopia

How does this country treat people like me?  
There are facts, and there are facts. What is real?  
I would like the truth, some transparency  
Something tells me that ours is a raw deal  
He cannot do this, we are his brothers  
I am not here to create a scene  
Did he stop to think about his sisters?  
Just what does any of this mean?  
Things are supposed to be getting better  
That is the way that we measure progress  
Something is not quite right with this letter  
Just not where we should be, this is regress  
To know dystopia, we read Orwell  
Never did we expect it from Sewell

## ***Stephen C. Middleton***

*is a writer working in London, England. He has had five books published, including A Brave Light (Stride) and Worlds of Pain / Shades of Grace (Poetry Salzburg). He has been in several anthologies, including Paging Doctor Jazz (Shoestring), From Hepworth's Garden Out (Shearsman, 2010), & Yesterday's Music Today (Knives Forks and Spoons, 2015). For several years he was editor of Ostinato, a magazine of jazz and jazz related poetry, and The Tenormen Press. He has been in many magazines worldwide. He is currently working on projects (prose and poetry) relating to jazz, blues, politics, outsider (folk) art, mountain environments, and long-term illness.*

Stephen C. Middleton

## The Years Shrank Big Mama

At home in rhythm & blues or Delta sinew  
With Mississippi Fred McDowell  
But the years shrank Big Mama  
Big Mama Thornton  
Of hound dog & howl  
'Wade in the Water'  
Jayne saw this  
Jayne Cortez  
These names are important  
Firespitting women  
This pantheon.

© Stephen C. Middleton

*This poem has been published in a no ISBN / not for sale / souvenir journal for attendees –*

*Poetry in Performance, City College, New York, several years ago*

Stephen C. Middleton

## A Sliver for Mingus

J. B. Lenoir's 'The Mountain'  
Rocky and no rest  
Ida Cox, taking it slow  
'One Hour Mama'

Switch shift / slip pitch

*Swinging The Bim*  
& Sunnyland Slim  
& Memphis Minnie

Of gender  
Of crescendos

Of Booker Ervin  
Unswerving  
Straight man to Dolphy and Kirk  
Unbending  
In the best sense

Joe Maneri  
Professor Longhair

Mingus, Mingus, Mingus.

© Stephen C. Middleton

Stephen C. Middleton

## What Plagues...?

Faulty issue

definition

What is the currency & why?

The crime scene cleared

(for bankers' sakes)

A guilt strewn wake

One would suppose

Who knows what plagues the elites

In their fiefdoms

Outside, toxic currents meet

&, slowly, a hearing for other beliefs

& a rage, that might yet detonate

I'll do my bit (health permitting)

If the mischief takes me.

© *Stephen C. Middleton*

Stephen C. Middleton

## Best Guess

A progress report

Bereft –  
As this silence attests

Nerve endings scream

Fraught meetings  
Taut to touch

Or humbled  
By other suffering  
More vocal, more wordy,  
More approachable  
None the less  
Desperate and deserving

Stoking the venom

Prognosis?  
Best guess:  
Fresh abyss.

© *Stephen C. Middleton*



Stephen C. Middleton

## Leavings (Lost)

The clips / the mesh  
No stress tests  
Twisting gristle  
Cannot be removed  
Enmeshed  
The impact assessment was not made  
The clamps / the staples  
But – see the form –  
The surgery uneventful  
(Or; Leavings – irretrievable  
Lost in tissue)

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## *George Freek*

*'s poetry appears in numerous Journals and Reviews. His poem "Written At Blue Lake" was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His collection "Melancholia" is published by Red Wolf Editions.*

George Freek

**POEM WRITTEN IN NOVEMBER (After Tu Fu)**

I part my curtains and stare  
at a blood red moon.  
Beyond the moon  
The stars are dead.  
I lay alone in my bed.

Clouds huddle together.  
Do they speak of nasty weather?  
The blue grass at the  
river's edge is now gone.  
It will snow. It won't be long.

I'm almost reached sixty.  
Spring is still far off.  
I watch leaves fall from the trees.  
Life is a terminal disease.  
I suddenly fall to my knees.

George Freek

**NIGHT THOUGHTS (After Mei Yao Chen)**

I can see nothing moving  
on this dark night.  
The sky is a black pit.  
The moon is a thin slit.  
There's no one  
to share wine with.  
In a bare oak tree,  
I stare at a heron's nest.  
The young have departed.  
It's now empty.  
Alone, I drink wine.  
When young I'd find  
a symbol for a poem.  
But herons  
And that oak tree  
mean nothing now to me.

George Freek

## CHASING THE PHOENIX (After Su Tung Po)

Days upon days and clouds  
caught in the branches,  
like words in a poem  
that has no meaning.  
When I stare at the sky,  
uneasiness fills my mind.  
Men of science, in their  
different occupations,  
study mysteries, which vanish  
with each new season.  
Riddles without answers  
are ugly things.  
I know the sum of one plus one,  
the distance to the sun,  
how daffodils grow.  
But the silence of the grave,  
is it a pleasant repose?  
I don't think so.  
As men continue to dream,  
leaves fall from the trees.  
And then they're gone  
with the first autumn breeze.

## ***Andre Peltier***

*is a Pushcart Nominee and a Lecturer III at Eastern Michigan University where he teaches literature and writing. He lives in Ypsilanti, MI, with his wife and children. His poetry has recently appeared in various publications like CP Quarterly, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Provenance Journal, Lavender and Lime Review, About Place, Novus Review, Fiery Scribe, and Fahmidan Journal, and most recently in Menacing Hedge, The Brazos Review, and Idle Ink. In his free time, he obsesses over soccer and comic books.*

*Twitter: @aandrefpeltier*

*Website: [www.andrefpeltier.com](http://www.andrefpeltier.com)*

Andre Peltier

## At the Sea Chest

The night before Alligator Alley  
and the great Seminole  
wrestling pits,  
we ate burgers in front  
of a small black and white set.  
Father Goose fished  
with his hands,  
and we dreamed of those  
art deco Miami skies,  
pastel to the horizon,  
pastel sands  
and holy pastel yesterdays.

The next morning,  
before repacking the family Pinto  
and crawling to Shark Valley,  
we cooled off in  
the Sea Chest pool.  
I sat on my father's back  
as he swam.  
He made it down the entire length  
underwater.  
We were all impressed.  
That man could hold his breath.  
He knew when bigger things  
were around the  
bend.

Andre Peltier

## Talking to Girls About Pirates

The first thing to do  
when talking to girls about pirates  
is to mention those shiny  
gold doubloons  
and pieces of eight.  
They will probably enjoy your  
Thurl Ravenscroft impression.  
Girls always go for a nice  
Ravenscroft.  
It's a good idea to move on  
to songs like "Yo Ho Ho  
and a Bottle of Rum" or  
"Yo Ho, Yo Ho a Pirate's Life for Me,"  
but steer clear of Jimmy Buffet tunes;  
a pirate can look at forty  
all he wants,  
but not if he wants girls to  
look at him.

Once hooked,  
it's time to reel her in.  
This is when you drop  
the Errol Flynn facts.  
Since the dawn of man,  
never has a girl been able to resist  
*Captain Blood*.  
For women may be  
the death of us,  
but this will be a very pleasant  
way to die...  
even if it is expensive.  
Moving next to *The Sea Hawk*,  
but then it's best to abandon Flynn  
all together.  
Maroon him in the Barracoons  
and move on.

Robert Newton could



## Andre Peltier

enchant women  
at every turn.  
He dragged his R's  
and they dragged him to bed.  
Once you've talked about pirates,  
remember to talk  
like a pirate  
"Arrr, me lady,  
hows about a cup of carrffee  
and some barrreakfast barrrritos?"  
At this point, it might seem good  
to offer Cap't Carrrrunch,  
but that's just too obvious..

Before you mention Johnny Depp,  
be sure to look in the mirror.  
You never want to invoke  
a better-looking dude  
than the one she's talking to  
at the moment.  
Generally, stick to Yul Brynner  
or Matthew Modine.  
It's even best to avoid  
Burt Lancaster.  
Tim Curry's a risky one.  
If she knows Cardinal Richelieu,  
you probably don't need  
to put forth this much effort.  
If she prefers *Home Alone 2*,  
you may in fact just  
be screwed.

Once reeled in,  
it may be time to drop anchor.  
Be careful. Only the most  
experienced pirate aficionados  
successfully make the move  
from conversation  
to captain's quarters.  
Parley and take your time.

## Andre Peltier

The galley will egg you on,  
but they are doubtless  
really bad eggs,  
Caution is a must.  
If the pirates' life is in the cards,  
a high wind will carry you home,  
and you'll be swimming  
in those gold doubloons  
and pieces of eight.

## *Ivan de Monbrison*

*is a poet and artist living in Paris born in 1969 and affected by various types of mental disorders, he has published some poems in the past.*

Ivan de Monbrison

## GOD

God, the false God, is the human being himself and nobody else.

It all started with the ancient heroes, these demigods, Gilgamesh first, then Hercules. Then historical

Demigods came, Caesar, Napoleon, Stalin.

To believe in something other than what we have in front of us every day is to be stupid.

Art is only a pleasure for bourgeois, grappling with themselves.

It is fifty degrees in the North of India these days, but deep down people only think about

Themselves, the others may die as well, especially if they are different. These others, these

Africans, these blacks, whom they have turned into slaves for centuries, unless they preferred to kill

Them.

## **Бог**

Бог, ложный Бог, есть сам человек и никто другой.

Все началось с древних героев, этих полубогов, сначала Гильгамеша, затем Геракла. Потом пришли исторические полубоги, Цезарь, Наполеон, Сталин.

Верить во что-то кроме того, что вы видите каждый день, значит быть глупым.

Искусство — это только веселье для буржуа, в контакте с собой.

Сейчас в северной Индии пятьдесят градусов, но на самом деле люди думают только о себе, остальные могут умереть, особенно если они другие. Эти другие, эти африканцы, эти негры, которых делали рабами, если только не решают их убивать.

Ivan de Monbrison

## WAR

So many arms have been cut off in wars like dead branches. One said, war is a good for a good, no,

War is an evil for an evil, it is obvious.

The human being is the stupidest of the great apes, that's obvious too.

I'm tired of listening to all this nonsense coming out of the television.

For thousands of years this great ape without hair has been delirious, he has invented a reality that

Does not exist, they invent stories, they make fictions, it's pathetic.

In the street, you see their pink and soft faces, their big red lips, they no longer look natural, but like

Puppets, held in the air and moving by the threads of their thoughts.

## Война

В войнах так много рук было отрублено как мертвые ветви. Один сказал, война это добро для

Добра, нет, война это зло для зла, очевидно.

Люди — самые глупые из обезьяна, это тоже очевидно.

Я устал слушать всю эту дерьма

, которую несут по телевидению.

Тысячи лет эта великая обезьяна без волос бредит, что он выдумал реальность, которой не

Существует, он выдумывает истории, это ужасно.

На улице вы видите их розовые и мягкие лица, их большие красные губы, они выглядят уже не

Природных, а скорее марионетками, которые держатся в воздухе и двигаются на ниточках

Своих мыслей.

*Dave Barrett*

*writes out of Montana. His fiction has appeared most recently in New Reader; the Bark! and Revolution John. His novel--GONE ALASKA--was published by Adelaide Books. His story--AN UNKINDNESS OF RAVENS--appears in the Fall 2022 issue of Weber Journal. He teaches writing at Missoula College.*



Dave Barrett

## Butt Dial from Hell

He'd just scooped his ass down into his favorite vinyl booth for a celebratory drink at his favorite Republic bar, had just signed half his life away to his bitch of an ex-wife (and the other half to his lawyers), and now it was her asking him why he had called.

His large hands fumbled with the thin phone as he tugged it out of his back pocket, nearly dropping it twice as he turned and twisted in his seat to hear better over the din of bar sounds and bar voices.

"It was an accident," he said.

"What was an accident?" she said.

He watched a young couple enter—the woman with a radiant smile and large expressive eyes and the young man smiling in her wake. He envied their happiness in these "salad days" of their relationship.

"Jim?"

He'd forgotten her for a split second while in reverie over the young couple, now making their way down to the other end of the bar to visit with another happy young couple, hugs and

## Dave Barrett

kisses all around.

“What?”

“What was an accident?” she repeated.

He turned away from the happy couples and stared blankly at the hockey game on the television behind the counter. A terrible urge came upon him—to call her a “slutty whore” and “cunt” for putting herself before their kids and family. Then a wild and sinister and better idea came to mind.

“This call!” he said. “It’s a butt dial, bitch!”

Glancing up and down the bar, he spread his fat thighs, then cupped and lowered the tiny phone into the little vinyl amphitheater he’d created there and let out the loudest happiest fart of his crazy busted life!

## ***Thomas Zimmerman***

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~~What I Meant to Say #6~~ What I Meant to Say #6

~~I tried to find his meaning, telling her  
my feelings, but  
I refused to let her know what I had  
to say, and she had to say  
his name, and she had to say  
I had to say that I was  
singing, and I was  
singing zealously  
in a way that I had not  
before, and I had to say  
that I was singing, and I was  
singing, and I was singing  
enough to sleep  
my right hand, and I was  
waking lexicons, and I was  
in open air.~~

~~What I Meant to Say #9~~ What I Meant to Say #9

~~down furrows~~ down furrows  
~~up snowdrifts~~ up snowdrifts  
~~at red tide~~ at red tide  
~~through flood plains~~ through flood plains

~~I have~~ I have  
~~dreamed~~ dreamed  
~~and some of me I've found~~ and some of me I've found  
~~dancing, free.~~ dancing, free.

~~What I Meant to Say #10~~      What I Meant to Say #10

~~And we~~      we  
~~love~~      love  
~~angels, flowers, women, goats,~~  
~~and men.~~      angels, flowers, women, goats,  
~~and men.~~      and men.  
~~child-like ecstasy~~      child-like ecstasy  
~~people~~      people      in love      in love  
~~figs and donkeys,~~      figs and donkeys,  
~~earth's hot reds~~      earth's hot reds      heaven's blues.      heaven's blues.

~~What I Meant to Say #11~~ What I Meant to Say #11

~~With a sigh she said~~  
~~she said she had~~ she said she had  
~~she said she had~~ sighed  
~~with~~ with  
~~with~~ daydreams I suppress,  
~~with~~ two parts Us and one part  
~~with~~ Muse.  
~~Under laden trees,~~  
~~we're~~ we're  
~~we're~~ abuzz with spirits;  
~~on our knees~~ on our knees  
~~in~~ in  
~~paradise~~ paradise  
~~now~~ now

## Gary Beck

*has spent most of his adult life as a theater director and worked as an art dealer when he couldn't earn a living in the theater. He has also been a tennis pro, a ditch digger and a salvage diver. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and his published books include 34 poetry collections, 14 novels, 3 short story collections, 1 collection of essays and 5 books of plays. Published poetry books include: Dawn in Cities, Assault on Nature, Songs of a Clerk, Civilized Ways, Displays, Perceptions, Fault Lines, Tremors, Perturbations, Rude Awakenings, The Remission of Order, Contusions, Desperate Seeker and Learning Curve (Winter Goose Publishing. Forthcoming: State of the Union). Earth Links, Too Harsh For Pastels, Severance, Redemption Value, Fractional Disorder, Disruptions, Ignition Point, Resonance, Turbulence and Lacerations (Cyberwit Publishing. Forthcoming: Double Envelopment). Motifs (Adelaide Books). His novels include Extreme Change (Winter Goose Publishing). State of Rage, Wavelength, Protective Agency, Obsess, Flawed Connections and Still Obsessed (Cyberwit Publishing. Forthcoming: Call to Valor). His short story collections include: A Glimpse of Youth (Sweatshoppe Publications). Now I Accuse and other stories (Winter Goose Publishing). Dogs Don't Send Flowers and other stories (Wordcatcher Publishing). Collected Essays of Gary Beck (Cyberwit Publishing). The Big Match and other one act plays (Wordcatcher Publishing). Collected Plays of Gary Beck Volume 1 and Plays of Aristophanes translated, then directed by Gary Beck, Collected Plays of Gary Beck Volume II and Four Plays by Moliere translated then directed by Gary Beck (Cyberwit Publishing. Forthcoming: Collected Plays of Gary Beck Volume III). Gary lives in New York City.*



Gary Beck

## Uprooted

It was my first day in the new neighborhood. I felt lost and bewildered. I still couldn't believe that our house was gone. Now we would live in a ratty and decaying apartment that was in the worst building on the street. The peeling wooden exterior, drab and mottled brown, gave the damning evidence to my twelve year old judgment that it was shameful and degrading to live here. I sat on the slanty, columned porch pretending not to notice the curious neighbors. They were watching the moving men carry our worn and shabby furniture up the creaking, sagging steps. I realized that we were poor and that others would know of our poverty from seeing our worn belongings pass in a procession before their avid, scornful eyes.

I had been unaware of poverty before, despite my exposure to it in the form of parental rejection to my requests for money. I never connected the bitter and abusive altercations between my parents to their debts and expenditures. My friends always had more sports equipment or toys than I did, but they never flaunted their possessions. But we always had the house

## Gary Beck

and to me it was as good as any other house on the street. Now it was gone.

I had waited in front of the house for the moving men, full of unforgiving resentment towards my parents for losing the house. Why couldn't we afford it any more? We had lived in it for years. What had changed things? The large truck turned the corner, aggressively stopped and disgorged three burly men who walked towards me. "Hi ya, sonny. Is this the place?" the squat, hairy boss asked in a rasping voice. I nodded sullenly. They walked up the steps, rang the bell, then entered the house. I stared at the threatening truck which would soon swallow our possessions and take them far from the security of our own house, to an apartment which could never be my home.

The movers worked quickly and efficiently, keeping up a constant stream of jokes that my father enjoyed and actually laughed at. These men, who were transporting my broken dreams could laugh, for they were strangers. My father's laughter seemed like betrayal. It was as bad as not feeling sad at a funeral. But there was nothing I could do. Consumed by my lack of power to control events, I could only watch helplessly as

## Gary Beck

my life was carried out the door.

Everything was loaded in two hours and the truck drove off to the new apartment. We followed in a taxi, carrying the few things that my mother didn't want bounced around in the truck. When we reached the new building the movers were already unloading. "Help your mother," my father ordered harshly. We carried things into the stark, bare apartment and I looked around at my new home. The walls were painted a dull, peeling green, festooned with crumbling moldings. The painted doors, glass paneled, made the place look like a slum dwelling losing the struggle to stay clean. I walked outside and stood on the sidewalk staring at the house. Years of rot and neglect made the house look like the sterile and drab weathered structures that I had seen seen in the movies of poor, decaying towns throughout America. Now I had to live in the worst house on the street.

Suddenly a blow knocked me backwards. Whack! My father's familiar fist. "Get inside and help, you little bastard. Everyone else is working, so why the hell are you sitting out here?" "Leave me alone," I whined. "I was just looking at the

## Gary Beck

house." I rubbed my hand across the red, stinging spot where he hit me, silently calling him a fucking bastard, and went back to work. My mother told me to move my things into my room, which I did. It was a narrow, cramped cubicle. One window looked out on the alley and the next house. The other window overlooked an untended backyard. After moving most of my things, I pretended not to hear my mother, until she called loudly. Then I yelled back: "What?" "You can go out and play until dinner," she said, "but don't go too far from the house." "I won't," I called over my shoulder, as I escaped to the door. "Where are you going?" barked the angry voice of my father. "Aw, Dad. Mom said I could go out."

I managed to escape without getting hit again. I knew with finality that the house whose roots could never be transplanted was forever lost. Now that the moving was done, I sat on the porch of the new house, comparing them. The peeling wooden exterior, drab and mottled brown, made me feel ashamed to live here. I knew there was nothing I could do, so I tried to resign myself to losing my old friends and the school where I felt secure. I could only hope that I would make new

Gary Beck

friends and like the new school.

*Clyde Liffey*

*lives near the water.*

## Clyde Liffey

### Father

In my dream, my horrid dream except it's not a dream, he clamps his hairy arm round my shoulder, draws me to him, his lips graze my ragged ear. I push him away though half-heartedly since I'm not dressed for the autumn chill. Isn't she, he whispers but I'm eavesdropping on the other parents in the skatepark:

Isn't it something, the way those two still flirt? a woman says.

So romantic, her companion agrees.

They're talking about us. Clem and I are practically the only men here, the only couple here.

And their daughter is something else, the second woman gushes as Lian performs her ollies and flips. We're so blessed to have them.

Lian approaches us, asks Clem for a drink. He reaches into a bag dangling from the shoulder opposite me, fishes a bottle of water out while I tousle Lian's hair. Mother, stop, she says, pouts, drinks, hands me the half-drunk bottle.

Yes, stop, Clem says. If only you'd treat me like that once in a while. He's got a point. I'm still a marriage virgin. Lian skates off, leaves the park with one of the boys, a classmate, it's all innocent, it has to be, they're only twelve, when do they start, some other boys join them, their mothers come over, remind us of the reception in the church auditorium this evening.

After dinner and showers we pull into the church parking lot. Whole families are there, we don't stand out except we're the only same-sex couple there, Lian's the only Asian, more precisely, the only Chinese, there may be a Russian or two.

Lian sees some friends, runs off with them, Clem is waylaid by a business or civic association acquaintance, I head straight for the punch bowl, it's weak punch but better than nothing. Clem catches my eye, encourages my drinking, normally he's opposed, he just wants me drunk so he can seduce me I suppose, he doesn't know alcohol makes me resolute, not pliable. I wander off to the bathroom, the men's of course, come back, refill my glass, Clem's still trapped, a group of four now, I won't add to it, I wander off, stand by myself, drinking, I don't

## Clyde Liffey

have to drive, for once I can enjoy the distaff role.

A woman joins me, she thinks I'm lonely, I'm not or I am, hard to tell. Your stomach is so thin, Boris, like a woman's yet your hips

I don't hear the rest, Little Boris, she calls me, a character we both grew up knowing, I don't know if Clem knows, he's three decades younger than me, maybe two younger than her, I've never seen her before. She places her arm in the small of my back walks me to the punch bowl. I'm so glad you moved here, she whispers, you've made Clem so happy, your daughter is adorable. She refills my glass, we return to where she found me, she blinks, I get the feeling she thinks she's teaching me feminine wiles, I don't know any, don't want to unless she's using them on me.

Clem disengages from his confreres. Again a hairy paw descends on me. I cough. My little queer must think it hoarse, he says, gives me a drink.

I can't tell what the woman thinks of the allusion. I was just telling little Boris, she says, but a slideshow comes on, I ignore it, I don't know anyone in it, may recognize some by sight, Clem and the woman talk, he holds me tighter, I drink and stiffen. The slides have something to do with the reason for the gathering, an anniversary or memorial, hard to tell which. The slides stop, the minister stands behind a lectern on a dais stage right or left of the screen, starts speaking about the community, mentions Clem and me, eyes seek us out, I stand with two empty punch glasses, the woman and Clem each kiss a cheek, relieve me of my cups, I redden as a camera snaps, the audience applauds. The speech ends, space is cleared in the middle of the floor, music starts, time for the traditional farewell dance.

The blare of brass and percussion is muted in her room. At last, she says, she's covered by a sheet, she's wearing nothing or very little. I gaze at the fretwork of wrinkles round her eyes framed by a long, short medium bob in brown streaked with gray. She blows me a kiss through glazed lips, turns off the low watt lamp. The door creaks open. Someone, one of her kids, Clem, or her husband sees us. Go, I say. They go.

I slip under the sheet, notice she doesn't depilate; this is right and good. Just before I sink into her, she admonishes me



## Clyde Liffey

to give myself to Clem.

The minister approaches. You dance with such an angelic expression he says.

I blink, unaccustomed to the sudden light. The woman with the silvery bob rejoins us. Of course, we've had homosexual brothers in our town before but this is the first gay family we've had occasion to celebrate in our Methodist Congregational what have you parish, the minister continues. Clem beams, this is the first time I've seen him happy. Everyone congratulates and blesses us and, by extension, themselves. The gathering has culminated. People are heading toward the coatracks. Clem and I go to the children's room.

They're ranged about two tables, one for the older kids, another for the younger. They're all eating bowls of gelato. Lian, unused to its thickness, has barely touched hers. The boys on either side of her have finished theirs. She lets them reach around her for seconds. Time to go, the chaperone says.

I'm hungry, Lian says.

You just had gelato, Clem says.

I didn't like it, I want ice cream, she says, looks at me. Mothers are always more indulgent.

We'll get ice cream, I say, my treat.

We pull out of the parking lot. Lian is excited, the most talkative she's ever been in my presence. I don't register what she's saying, only the tone, what would it be like with her, have to wait six or nine years at least, I'm not a molester, she's too young, someone closer to my age, the woman at the party, for instance. I lean back in my seat, close my eyes, maybe get hard, as hard as I can in my condition. We stop at a light, Clem looks at me, wraps a meaty arm on my shoulders.

We don't see anyone from the church at the ice cream parlor. Lian has a sundae, Clem a coffee, I a water. She lets us have a taste. Clem refuses. The ice cream is good. She's done in ten minutes. I leave money on the table, a generous tip. Clem gets up, zips his jacket. Lian leans over the table, kisses me full on the lips, thank you, Daddy, she says as she puts the cherry from her sundae in my mouth. She joins Clem, I hesitate a moment, sink back in the banquette, maybe there's hope, I think, no, it'll never work.

## *Luke Beling*

*Born in South Africa, Luke Beling left home at 19 on a tennis scholarship. In 2007, Luke graduated from Campbellsville University with a Bachelor's degree in English Literature.*

*Luke has had several short stories published in journals and magazines, including: Quiet Shorts (2012), Eyelands Flash Fiction (2019), Academy of the Heart and Mind (2021), and New Reader Magazine (2021).*

*Luke works as a director of tennis for a private club on the Big Island of Hawaii and as a content writer for an emerging surf brand. Luke is also an indie-folk songwriter with over five-thousands listeners per month across all streaming platforms.*

## Carried in the Arms of Darkness

Five black jeeps, filled with men dressed in camouflage, stormed into my village while I was kicking a ball with my brother and father. My father put his hand over his mouth and looked at my brother and me with eyes so big I thought we could jump into them. We heard the shrill of my mother's voice. My father gasped. Arthritis squeezing his every joint, he sprinted towards our house with my mother's name on his lips. I froze with fear tying my feet in a cattle's hitch knot. A man with a peaked cap looked into my eyes. It felt like he could see into my soul. He smiled at me with bright red lips curling up to the bottom of his nose, and then he threw a rag of fire onto my neighbor's home. The flames shot up into the sky like a coral in full bloom. Bullets sprayed across our dirt street like chicken feed. My legs stayed locked with a panic that felt like heat—a feeling I'd only experienced trying to corral a young bull. The panic settled in my throat, turning into a lump big enough to keep any air from entering in and out. I took a few steps with feet heavy as buckets of water.

Holding my lifeless mother in his hands, my father screamed: "Boys! Run!"

The terror in his voice undid my catatonic state. I peered into his eyes. They looked like pools of terrifying darkness. My brother fell into the sand, his legs too slow to keep up with mine. I stopped, turned my face to him, then just watched him, didn't even offer a word. The chaos continued gripping me, squeezing me until my only thought was making it out alive. I covered my vision with the heels of my hands.

"Jumi!" my brother cried.

I dragged my palms slowly down my face, then opened my fingers so that I had tiny peepholes to look through.

Bullets shoveled into my brother's flesh until his screams vanished with his breath. My father snatched my arm and dragged me into the forest. We hid behind a giant baobab tree and watched the orange fire on our grass roof touch the sky, a chaotic glow tailed by black, suffocating smoke. When we got to our feet, my father didn't speak. Instead, he walked faster than I'd ever seen him move. I tried to keep near his side so I could look up into his face. His leathered skin, a warm invitation

## Luke Beling

of love I'd known for ten years, stretched in cold, lifeless lines, tightening his cheeks, appearing as though his bones were knives trying to cut their way out. I wondered if he'd come back, if the man I didn't recognize would slip out of my father's body and return the only person who might've known how to carry the darkness. Eventually, when the sun had nearly vanished, in a soft, hollow voice, my father said we'd need to walk for at least a week. "We can never go back there, Jumi." His eyes looked like glass bottles collecting rainwater.

I wrapped my hands around his fingers and squeezed. The sky's black blanket of haze hid every memory of our lives as we turned our heads towards the direction of our village. My father's face strained, looking as though he'd found or heard something. Then he spun around, pulled his fingers from my hand, and said: "Let's move."

The dry, crusted earth broke under our bare feet. Baobabs appeared like clouds every so often, providing respite and a hiding place to catch our breaths.

In the shade, I nudged closer to my father, but he distanced me with his arm, handing me roots of shrubs, saying: "Drink!"

I sucked the roots until dirt spread across my tongue then gave them back to him. He threw them to the ground with a look that made me think he blamed me, saw me as a coward, a bystander without a conscience, to the death of his baby boy. When I closed my eyes, I wished it was me I saw shot to pieces.

At night we strained to make out the red eyes of rabbits. When my father beat their heads with a stick, he moaned, so sick a sound, I felt afraid of him. He didn't eat a single piece of meat. My stomach burned with hunger, but I took only nibbles, hoping my words would do more for me than food. "I'm sorry, Father. I'm so sorry."

Then, neck knotted, he lifted only his gaze and said: "Eat Jumi."

Eventually, we arrived at a field dressed in brown tents and helicopters. Someone sprinted towards us, across the sun-burnt grass, as we appeared over the ridge. My father jumped in front of me, grabbed a sharp stick from the ground, and stood with trembling legs. The man paused, put his hands up, hands as big as I've ever seen, and with a kind smile, he said:

## Luke Beling

"Welcome! You're safe now."

I pushed in front of my father and snatched a water bottle from the man's pocket. I took it without a smile or greeting. As the cold liquid ran over my cracked lips, my vision landed on hundreds of people gathered in small circles, surrounded by men in uniform with guns strapped over their chests. The sight of them made me feel like running away. I offered the bottle to my father. His knees smeared into the dirt. His lips pressed against the man's black shiny shoes. I held the canteen against my father's face, and it slid, with his tears, off his cheeks. Then he looked at me. He smiled and reached out his hands. At that moment, it was as though we were kicking a ball again. I held his hands until I could feel his bones.

Until his broken, calloused skin gave me the courage to look at the crowd. His eyes closed. His head drooped, and his palms let go of mine. The man gripped him, tried to pull my father to his feet. Thin, twig-like legs buckled. The veins on the man's forearms ran across his skin like narrow rivers searching for the sea. I clenched my fists and shut my eyes. I saw my brother and then my father's smile. My eyes opened. I watched the man scoop bulky arms under my father's back, slowly handing him to the earth to lay flat. "Nurse! We need a stretcher over here! Nurse!"

"Is he okay!? Is he going to be okay!?" I forced my quivering voice into the man's eardrum. His other leaned into my father's heart. Without pause, the man twisted his head to the tents. "Nurse!"

And then he began to breathe into my father's dry mouth. Wilted skin spoke final words. Fear tightened around my stomach. It dropped to my limbs. I wanted to go back. Heels against my dead kin, I sprinted towards the Baobabs with no thought of breath for my lungs.

#

For twenty years, I've woken with the memory of my father's smile. That single recollection has been an ember, a flickering guiding light in the shadows of my memories. I adjusted to my new home with little choice. As a refugee, one is lucky to see the new day. The men who rescued me placed me in a city, massive buildings everywhere, imposing lifeless reminders of human progress. We lived together, at least a

## Luke Beling

hundred of us with similar stories, in an apartment complex. I shared a room with a boy named Rudi. He was my age. We were the youngest in our new family, just boys without hair under our armpits. The way Rudi walked made me think our trauma shared the corners of a puzzle piece, our backs hunched the way plants without water droop towards the earth. But nothing else about us looked the same. Rudi's skin, bright white, glowed and shone. Mine, dark and dull. Rudi's legs stretched like long, thin ladders from his feet, mine short, strong stumps, like tree trunks.

Rudi and I spoke to nobody in the classroom at our new school. We had each other, so the names the other kids made up for us hurt a little less. *The Lost Dogs*, *The Damned Duo*, *Losers*, these were the common slurs thrown our way. Lunch was the only time our faces lit up at school. Thick-cut french fries, rich mac salad, and portions of saucy meat big enough to feed a small family gave us a reason to be happy. After school, we'd cross a busy road, unaware, back then, of the purpose for the green and red lights. One of us would use his hands to stop the screaming engines while the other followed with his arms wrapped around a soccer ball. Then, after the near bursting of our eardrums from the car horns, our hearts the speed of the drivers' rage, we kicked the ball between swings and monkey bars until shadows swept the streets. "First one to three," I'd say before heading home. Initially, I believed my agility kept me afloat in our afternoon games. Otherwise, Rudi would've beat me every time, so I thought. Watching him put either of his feet on the soccer ball was like watching a bird take off in flight, then see it perch somewhere high above the city line. I quickly realized Rudy could do with the ball whatever he wanted. And more often than not, that meant making sure I didn't leave the park with my tail between my legs.

Falling asleep at night took a while for both of us to figure out. I'd close my eyes and watch the darkness twist itself into my brother's face. I often told Rudi about my memories. About the loss of my family and the haunting images of my village set on fire. I spoke of the guilt I still carried, the way it propped its head above any new discovery of happiness or satisfaction. I told him about my father's smile, how I saw in his final moment, in his bright eyes and gentle crimp of lips, a

## Luke Beling

reason to go back one day. Rudi never shared much about his story. He just listened, said he had similar things happen to him. But sleep gave his nightmares a voice. We traded fits of fear and cold sweats and fought against death's invisible grip strangling our rest.

"Papa! Mama! No! Please!"

Only my hand to offer, I'd give Rudi my knuckles to squeeze and words: "It's okay. You're safe, Rudi. It's just a bad dream."

And he did the same for me. I tried to talk to him in the mornings after he had a hard night, thought I could help carry the darkness, but it never surfaced. He wouldn't let it. Instead, he'd tighten his jaw, hold it shut until his face went red. Then he'd let out a deep breath and say: "Let's go kick the ball before we have to leave for school, Jumi."

The hellish night terrors didn't ease. They worsened for both of us. But they moved us differently. With time, Rudi, in a confident, bold tone, told me he'd never go back to his home, that he'd continue to bury the recollections, people, and land stolen from him. But when the dark visions entered my mind, I met them with my father's face and promised myself I'd return one day.

"Why, Jumi? Why would you ever want to go back there? We're safe here. We have a new home."

I'd stare up into his hollow eyes with thoughts that my words might offer the both of us courage. "We're strangers here, Rudi. We will always be afraid of what we do not face."

His bright blue pupils would seem to fade, turn ghost-like, and then his vision would fall into the floor. When we became seniors, close to our 18th birthdays, the government agency taking care of us initiated a program called *Reentry*. It provided an opportunity for refugees to visit their homes. Presented as a choice and only applicable to those whose countries had since experienced a level of peace. I listened intently. Both of our nations appeared on the list.

"We'll meet every afternoon for three months. We'll provide language teachers and cultural specialists and counselors for any fears and anxieties that may arise."

I turned to Rudi with eager eyes while the spokesperson explained the program. Rudi stared holes into his

## Luke Beling

shoes, a practice he'd often get into trouble for at school. I pretended to tie my laces, craned my neck underneath the desk to meet his face. "Are you going to do it, or what?"

He looked at me for a second, then mumbled something. That night I asked him again.

"It'll only be a couple of months, Rudi. We're not going back to live there."

In the darkness, above the highway noise, Rudi's voice rumbled. "This is my home. There is nothing there for me."

I never mentioned it to him again. The program started the following week after school. No longer able to spend our afternoons together, kicking a ball or finishing our homework, Rudi and I drifted apart. We'd catch up in the evenings, but our conversations turned into leftovers, nothing more than small talk. I hesitated to tell him about the pleasure and pain I was finding in re-connecting with my heritage. When I asked him what he was doing with his time, he'd say: "Not much," then lock his lips.

A month before my departure date, Rudi came home with his ear pierced, a giant diamond stud covering the entirety of his lobe. Red sauced spaghetti flung from my mouth as I erupted into laughter. Rudi's face crinkled with serious hard lines, and then he shouted: "What you laughing at, Fool?"

My gaze, firmly established on the jewel blinking on his ear, settled back on his eyes, and in them, I felt a coldness that quelled my amusement. "That ridiculous diamond taking up the side of your head," I said.

Rudi began skipping dinners and coming home well past midnight. I'd shake him in the mornings when the alarm couldn't, but he'd routinely swat my arm and curse me with alcohol-laced breath. I lied to our teachers, said Rudi was sick, and then I'd hand in the homework I'd finished for him. On finals' morning, I filled a bucket of water and poured it over his head. Rudi sprung to his feet and pulled a knife from his pants. Before I knew what was happening, I had a rusty blade at my neck. "I'll cut you, Jumi. You ever do that again, and I'll cut you."

From then on, I avoided Rudi because I felt he wanted nothing to do with me. Our principal kicked him out of school. Rudi didn't come to graduation. The week before my flight



## Luke Beling

home, I began taking long walks to process the upcoming uncertainty wreaking havoc on my insides. Images of the baobab trees, my dead parents, and my bullet-holed brother piled sinking weights into the river of my mind. *Did anyone bury them? Was there even a village left for me to see?* My counselor said moving the body helped with moving the soul. She encouraged me to concentrate on my breathing, my steps, or an object. To simply let the thoughts trickle by without delivering them too much attention. I got lost in the one-way city streets, my eyes on the pipes, window ladders, and graffiti sprayed walls.

Five hours before my ride to the airport, I sat at our kitchen table with a swamp for a stomach. I tied the laces of my neon-red tennis shoes and hoped the pockets of air slipping in between concrete would settle the suspense slithering through my veins. A walk would do me well, I thought. The door opened onto the street, and a black jeep without a roof whizzed by. My mind immediately flashed to that fateful day. The flashing signs of hotels exploded like flames on grass roofs. My feet carried forward in streams of blood. And then, from a dark alley, the men in camouflage suddenly appeared. I rubbed my eyes, crossed the street, hoping to avoid a terrifying encounter. There were five of them at least, much taller than me, faces hidden by balaclavas, skin wrapped in black jeans and sweatshirts. Limbs marching in unison, they followed me, their course a head-on-collision with mine. My fists tightened with heat, then shook on my pulsing thighs. I forced my heavy steps through invisible walls of fear. The tall, black-dressed men flanked the sidewalk, removing any space for me to squeeze past them. I flinched, spun around then sprinted for my apartment building. A hand gripped my shoulder. I fell to the ground, and the group of men began throwing punches into my body. "Please," I shouted. "Please stop!" They searched across my legs then up into my chest. "Where's your money, boy!"

I pulled my palms from my face. I don't have any money! I don't have anything!"

Their sweeping fingers curled into balls of rage, dropping onto my cheeks and nose like bombs. Blood and tears streamed across my face, two rivers running into each other on a crooked course. "That's enough. He doesn't have anything."

## Luke Beling

The pounding ceased. I opened my eyes and found a small crease of light.

"Let's go before the cops come."

I peered through slitted eyes in the hope they were gone. I shuddered, wishing it was a trick or a fault of my bruised skull. He just stood there without a word, watching me bleed. A big, bright diamond shone incandescently, like the sun.

"Rudi," I whispered. He turned his head then reentered the dark alley with the rest of them.

## *DC Diamondopolous*

*is an award-winning short story, and flash fiction writer with over 300 stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals, and anthologies. DC's stories have appeared in: Penmen Review, Progenitor, 34th Parallel, So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library, Lunch Ticket, and others. DC's short story collection Stepping Up includes Pushcart Prize and Sundress Publications' Best of the Net nominated stories. She lives on the California central coast with her wife and animals.*

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## DC Diamondopolous

1912

“Women and children first! Women and children first!”

A brandy snifter in one hand, a cigar in the other, I am alone as I watch people rush about on deck from the comfort of my leather chair in the first-class smoking room. It's past midnight, the lights flicker, but I am ruthlessly serene, for I did not overcome my childhood in the slums of the East End to drown in the freezing Atlantic water.

Second-class is where I belong, but who's to care now? When faced with death, we're all in the same boat.

Perhaps you've heard of me, Julian Grey, or seen my name on music hall marquees from Belfast to London.

I've made an enviable living as a comic, mimic, dancer, and acrobat. But what has brought me my greatest fame, and why I set sail on the Titanic to New York at the request of vaudeville manager, William Hammerstein, is my unfathomable ability to juggle five balls with my feet.

I put my cigar into an ashtray and set down the glass. Twisting the ends of my mustache, I am resolved about what I'm to do next, for I've never been one to pass up an opportunity.

I rise. The ship lurches. Poker chips, chess pieces, and tumblers fall on the floor. With my walking stick, I whack them away and stagger toward the door.

The ship creaks, a slow back and forth. The vessel tilts. I balance myself between the doorway.

## DC Diamondopolous

The corridor is empty.

I open the door to a first-class suite. What finery, such elegance. There's a diamond stickpin and a ruby ring on the mahogany dresser. Did I mention that I am also a thief? I drop the stickpin and ruby ring into my coat pocket. I open the armoire and glide my hand over the dresses until I choose one.

If costumed in one lady's attire, I might draw attention, so I open the door to the next cabin.

"Excuse me, Sir," I say. A man holds a whiskey bottle in one hand and a Bible in the other. "Aren't you going on deck?"

"Leave me be young man."

I shut the door.

The next room is charming, even as the furniture slides to the wall, with peacock patterns on overturned chairs, an electric fireplace, a vanity fit for Sarah Bernhardt. Stumbling, I open a chest of drawers grab undergarments and a scarf.

What I need is a warm coat, ladies' boots, and a hat. The lights go off, then on. I must hurry.

I enter a suite across the hall.

The room is in shambles. The dresser is on its side, a chair on its back. I throw the clothes on the bed and go to the trunk and take out a winter coat, lace-up boots, and a hat with a feather.

What I am about to do may seem shameful.

I sit on the edge of the bed next to the heap of clothes and remove my coat, then my tie and collar. My brother, may he rest in peace, comes to mind as I unbutton my shirt.

## DC Diamondopolous

The binding is tight around my chest, and I begin to unfasten. Charles, was more than a brother, a father, he was (I continue to unwind) to me, a motherless devil-rat, five years to his twelve. The bandage is off. My breasts are revealed.

I remove my trousers and drawers and pull the padding from between my legs. At a young age, Charles dressed me as a boy — “You’ll be safer, and we can make a shilling or two.” We performed on street corners and in taverns, and as I grew and girls liked me, I liked them back. I am not an impersonator like the popular music hall drags. I am a man, and I’ve made the best of my oddity.

Naked, I dress.

Perfumes from the clothes make my eyes water. I put my wallet, cuff links, and stolen jewelry into the pocket of the woolen coat and squeeze my feet into the boots.

There is a strangeness to it, and I feel an utter distaste, the way the undergarments rustle and swish. Above the dresser is a mirror. I put on the hat and cover my short hair but leave a fringe that falls over my forehead. The mustache, I peel off and put in my pocket.

Pinching my cheeks, the way I’ve seen my lovers do, I leave the way I came and go onto the deck.

Such chaos and panic. A man says good-bye to his wife and son as a lifeboat is lowered. Their cries provoke pity.

“Is there room?” I ask in a feminine voice.

“No, Miss,” a crew member shouts. “Might be on the other side.”

## DC Diamondopolous

My unease mounts. I hurry among the crowd. My air of detachment collapses as I shove aside men and go around the stern. A lifeboat hangs from the davits.

“Women and children first!”

It’s mayhem. Men implore their families to board, promising everything will be all right. From their shabby clothes, it’s easy to see they’re from steerage.

“What do we have here?” a shipmate yells. He removes a shawl and a scarf from the head of a man trying to board. “Josser.”

A woman has the vapors and faints in her husband’s arms.

A crowd gathers by a lifeboat hanging from the derricks. Men step aside as I make my way through.

Before me is a woman and her three daughters. Their tattered clothes arouse my sympathy. I slip the ruby ring into the woman’s coat pocket.

“Come on, Miss,” a deckhand says. He takes my arm and helps me into the boat.

Other than the two in command of rowing, I am the only man.

I dismiss any charge that I am a coward. Be that as it may, it will forever be a blessing, an irony indeed, that what saved me was the hand I was dealt.

## *R. A. Allen*

*'s poetry has appeared in the New York Quarterly, RHINO, The Penn Review, B O D Y, London Grip, Cloudbank, and elsewhere. He's been anthologized in Celestial Musings and has been nominated for Best of the Net 2020 and the Pushcart Prize. His fiction has been published in The Literary Review, The Barcelona Review, PANK, The Los Angeles Review, and Best American Mystery Stories 2010, among others. R. A. lives in Memphis and was born on the same day the Donner Party resorted to cannibalism: December 26th.*



R. A. Allen

## The Victoria Leigh, 1958

From stern to prow  
we waded the bilges,  
knee-deep and rising,  
the boatswain and I,  
our torchbeams searching  
for signs of a wound.  
Amidships, portside,  
we saw it was fatal—  
a lone coral head  
that should have been nothing,  
but she was old, so old,  
her hull worn to paper.

She broke up even as  
we lowered the boats,  
her bow lifting skyward  
for one sighing breath  
before slipping under.

Her orphans now,  
we bowed at our oars  
with little to say.  
I alone saw the corposant  
in the mists of her vortex,  
a momentary halo  
for a mother to us all.

*Appeared in Triage 2011*

R. A. Allen

## Erosion

The winds that make the waves in amber grain,  
and waft those poppies in Flanders fields,  
and bend the leaves of grass, and whispers in  
the willows and the reeds, are mere breezes,  
benign in our mind's eye. Poetic zephyrs.

And there are winds that score the steep rock walls,  
sculpting limestone and sandstone and granite cliffs  
toward an outcome known only to Nature. Timeless,  
they will grind the Himalayas down to dust.

Lately the winds have changed for you and me.  
Scorching Santa Anas and gelid williwaws  
howl between us. Mistral of recrimination  
etch scars in our lives like creases in an old face,  
and bury the light of our love in the rubble  
of what might have been.

*Appeared in Dark Sky 2010*

## ***Samantha Morgan Silverstein***

*is a legal assistant by day, writer of most formats by night. She lives in the wilds of Suburban Philadelphia with her emotional support human, Shawn, and their barking cat, Vader. Samantha's work can be previously seen in Screenshot Lit.*

Samantha Morgan Silverstein

## I Don't Know David Cronenberg

Once upon a time I knew a friend who wanted to direct films  
He loved all kinds  
Horror, drama, sci-fi, musicals  
The classics, the greats  
The obscure and the obscene

He told me about a film called Repo  
It was a horror/sci-fi rock opera  
Words I had never heard strung together to describe a movie

What he said to me that night went in one ear and out the other  
I nodded and smiled  
We moved on

Fast forward a few months  
Another friend  
Amanda

Turns to myself and our other two compadres in my mom's car  
on the way home from school  
She begins to talk about a film named Repo

A lightbulb goes off in my brain  
I've heard that name, that description, those details of visceral  
displays and catchy songs

I've never forayed into this genre before but I must

For research purposes

I start with YouTube  
I go from song to song  
Getting sucked in  
Going in depth  
Uncovering key elements of the plot  
"Make your genetics your bitch"

A love of horror is born

## Samantha Morgan Silverstein

I start to watch it all  
The good, the bad, the scary, the strange

I start to develop favorites  
The bloodier the better

I don't like found footage  
But I love vampires

It's over a decade later  
I still only look forward to Halloween  
Still wear spooky themed clothing year round  
And I still haven't fully seen The Shining  
I haven't completed the Hellraiser series  
I've only seen the first Scream

I know Darren Lynn Bousman  
I know Eli Roth  
I love James Wan  
I'm mixed on Ari Aster

I know many a name but  
I don't know David Cronenberg

Am I just a fraud?  
Have I been lying to myself for so long?  
Am I pretending to be this pseudo goth chick who loves horror  
but really I'm just clinging onto the memory of one brief  
moment in high school where I didn't want to kill myself?

What has prevented me from full immersion?  
Why do I love seeing spiders in art, having them tattooed on  
my body, but can't be within a foot of one if it's in my  
apartment?

Do I have enough skull imagery?  
Why don't I have a greater affinity for Poe?

More questions flood my brain as I contemplate my identity  
Drifting further away from any sense of certainty

## Samantha Morgan Silverstein

I might not be able to hit all the checkpoints  
But I know what makes me happy  
One day that might be enough

## *Michelle Faulkner*

*lives in Portland, OR. She is an active contributor to [poetrysoup.com](http://poetrysoup.com) and has her poems included in two anthologies – ‘PS: It’s Poetry’ and ‘PS: It’s Still Poetry’ both available on Amazon.com.*

Michelle Faulkner

## July Sauna

Juicy sweat trickles down my back, the  
Undulating fan, noisy, weakly blows  
Lethargic gusts of dazed and drugged humidity in  
Yellow-crueted corneas, blinded by desert dust

Steamy, simmering hot Santa  
Ana air, dragon's breath mirage, melting  
Unrelenting internal inferno  
No relief for the next week, then  
August arrives.



Michelle Faulkner

## Powder Keg

Pieces of heat scatter and scorch  
Over the orange rusted sky  
Wildfire season has arrived  
Dense and thick, stern charcoal  
Eyes capture and deny  
Relief's cool rain, as tongues of flames

Kindles tender clovers red  
Eating clean the succulent  
Green laced gentle ground.

Michelle Faulkner

## The City Simmers

The city simmers under  
Rivers of slow flames  
Glass walls blaze like torches raised  
Nightfall's amber claims  
Blue mirage on far  
Drops of silver mercury  
Summer's melting star.

Michelle Faulkner

## I Am Your Mirror

I watch you  
As you watch you  
Lift and twist, pose and preen  
In billows of  
Shampoo scented steam  
I see into your privacy  
Your warts and bumps  
And patches of hair  
That you strip, or primp  
Depending on where  
It shows, or lacks –  
Even the map of your back  
Unseen by you, I know it too  
The scars and lines  
You cover for pride  
All of you bare  
No inch to hide  
Here you confess  
The mortality of your flesh  
And I, your judge –  
Or absolution  
Reflected within  
My glass reality  
Where you watch you  
As I watch you.

Michelle Faulkner

## Depth Perception

From corners of silver lakes  
You shimmer  
In glancing ripples  
Fluid treasure awaits  
And I, diving for pearls  
A swimmer  
Tangled within  
Your illusion of depth  
Until the fragile surface  
Separates  
Ghosts of tarnished gold  
Grow dimmer  
As mirages of you  
Fall to shallow fates.

## *Ryan Love*

*hates talking about himself. That is why he has resorted to dedicating his life to storytelling: so he can create people and then talk about them as he pleases. He hopes that he'll find himself along the way.*

Ryan Love

## Neighbors

“You’ll never get it right if you keep doing it that way,” said the old man as he watched Patrick struggle against the wet earth. The wanton teen had turned a small garden shovel into a paddle, and was smashing the dirt down without a single bit of care. “Do it the way I told you.”

“This is the way you told me!” said Patrick. He was ready to surrender after countless attempts at planting and replanting the same set of seeds that looked like small, black marbles, with results the old man deemed unsatisfactory every time. After crawling out of bed on at an unacceptable hour for a Saturday morning, Patrick knocked on his neighbor’s front door, fighting sandy eyes and trying not to succumb to the shadowy dawn sky. In the stupor of his morning drowsiness, he left his phone behind, and was only able to tell how long he had been in the old man’s backyard by glancing up at the sun as it ascended into the sky.

“No, it isn’t!” said the old man, tapping the ground with his cane. “You’re doing it too hard!”

“How can I hit the ground too hard?” said Patrick, “It’s just dirt!”

The old man sat on a metal chair next to his garden. Every morning, he woke up at the crack of dawn and descended the wooden steps from his house down into his backyard to tend to his sacred patch. He created the garden out of the dry, arid dirt that covered his backyard at his wife’s request when they moved into the house. After adding the proper soil mixture, and tending to it every day, in just three months the garden had turned into a billowing thicket of green, red, yellow, and blue.

“It isn’t just dirt. Look around. All the flowers. All those shrubs. They all came out of it. You can’t have a beautiful garden if you don’t take care of the dirt.”

## Ryan Love

Patrick looked at the garden. Some days, when he was playing video games or watching a movie in his room, he'd look out his window to find the old man bent over the blotch of shrubs, tending to every single plant like they were newborn babies; day or night, rain or shine. There was no way anyone in their right mind would water plants after the sun went down, or go and tend to weeds in the middle of a storm. By Patrick's estimation, he was completely out of his mind.

Patrick spent a majority of the morning berating himself in his head for the mistake that landed him his new role as a servant to the old man's insanity. One afternoon during the previous week when Patrick was home alone, he knocked over a vase full of fresh flowers that his mom put out that morning after a run to the store. They were purple orchids, her favorite kind. His mother kept them on display with such dedication that Patrick could not draw a single memory in his house had that did not include a vase of purple orchids in its backdrop. With a single clumsy swoop, he sent them cascading all over his kitchen floor. In a panic, he picked up all of the orchids that weren't completely ruined and bundled them up in a paper towel. There was only one person he could think of that would be able to help him.

When Patrick knocked on the old man's front door, he immediately wished he hadn't. The old man answered in a grumpy daze, informing his young neighbor that he had been woken up from this afternoon nap. Patrick told the old man of the disaster of glass, water, and flowers that covered his dining room floor, and begged him for help mending what was left of the flowers. The old man raised an eyebrow, and granted Patrick his help, but with a price. In exchange for his help, Patrick now owed him a favor, and was instructed to be back on the old man's front porch no later than six-forty-five the following morning.

"Ok, then show me," said Patrick.

"I already showed you," said the old man.

## Ryan Love

“One more time,” said Patrick.

The old man searched for the words that would instill the amount of care the garden required into his young companion. Memories of his youthful strength danced around in the old man’s head. It was an eternity ago—when he could tend to this whole garden all by himself and be done before his wife was even finished cooking breakfast. He tended it, day in and day out, bringing vegetables in the house for his wife to cook, and bouquets of flowers to decorate their home.

The brittle bones he earned with his age were unable to support the work needed to upkeep the garden. It was getting harder with every passing day to tend all of the plants, some of which were decades old. One day, he was so exhausted after making his morning rounds that he thought it might be the last time he ever so much as pulled a weed. He slept a good, hard sleep for the entire afternoon, and was awoken by a knock at his door.

“Alright, fine. Last time,” said the old man. He hobbled to the site of Patrick’s struggle and leaned over the dirt, patting the ground.

“That’s going to take forever if we do it like that!”

“The more you put into it, the more you’ll get out of it,” said the old man, “Now, please, try again.”

Patrick took a deep breath and started to pat the dirt like the old man showed him. His mind got lost in the thought of all the ways that his friends were spending their Saturdays—any of which were much better than playing paddy-cake with a shovel and a patch of dirt.

“You’re still doing it wrong,” said the old man.

Patrick stood up and threw the shovel down. “That’s it, I’m going home! This is ridiculous. I’m not going to keep pat-



## Ryan Love

ting the dirt and playing gardener while you sit there and watch! You've nearly wasted my whole day. Goodbye!"

"But—"

"But nothing! This is pointless! I'm gone!"

Patrick stormed out of the backyard and through the side gate and back home as the old man remained in the chair. He braced his weight on the cane and stood up. "I guess we're not going to have flowers to celebrate after all."

After bursting through his front door and slamming it should, Patrick avoided so much as looking at the house next door at all costs for nearly three months. He almost felt guilty, but the memory of being berated for almost an entire afternoon still simmered fresh in his head, causing any sympathy to melt away. He didn't even bother to look out his bedroom window into the man's backyard to see if the seeds he planted began to bloom, until one night while playing video games, he heard a moan.

Patrick leapt to his window and saw the old man bent over in his garden, the porch light illuminating his skinny silhouette. He had one hand placed on the small of his back, and was frozen stiff. The clock showed half-past eleven, and his mom was sound asleep and unable to help. Without even thinking to put on pair of shoes, Patrick darted down the stairs and into his backyard.

When he hopped the fence, the old man was on the exact spot Patrick had planted the poppy seeds. The seeds sprouted into full-grown poppies—their bright-orange petals setting the ground on fire. The old man turned to Patrick.

"Bout time," said the old man.

"What are you doing out here?" said Patrick.

"Never mind that now! Help me up! Carefully!"

## Ryan Love

Patrick wrapped his arms around the old man and hoisted him into the metal chair that was placed next to the garden. Once received, the old man winced with pain as he tried to catch his breath.

“Thanks.”

“No problem,” said Patrick as he stood over his neighbor. “Why were you out this late? It’s almost midnight!”

“I know what time it is. When the clock strikes midnight, it’ll be my wife’s birthday. Poppies are her favorite flowers, and I wanted to put a bouquet on our dining room table for her.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that,” said Patrick as he looked at the ground.

“That’s why I wanted those planted a couple months ago, for her. She’s been gone twelve years next month.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.”

The old man looked at the patch of poppies, and thought of the first time he picked one for his wife. He picked it out of a patch they discovered on their second date after taking a walk down a dirt road. They were sitting on the branch of an old oak tree when old man, then young, jumped down picked an orange poppy and gave it to her. From that moment on, they spent their lives together—until she was taken from him on the day before their sixtieth wedding anniversary.

“Well, thank you for the help,” said the old man as tears welled in his eyes. “I think I’m going to go to bed now. I don’t want to cause any more trouble just because of an old tradition.”

## Ryan Love

“No, wait!” said Patrick as the old man stood up. “Let me help you.”

Patrick walked outside and returned to the dining room with a bushel of fresh poppies wrapped in a towel. Without a word, the old man got to work pruning and organizing the flowers. Once they were ready, he dropped them into a glass vase with water and placed them in the middle of the dining room table next to a black and white picture of the most beautiful woman Patrick had ever seen.

“That’ll about do it,” said the old man. “The tradition keeps on, seventy-two years later.”

“All because I knocked over my mom’s vase and needed help.”

“It’s a funny thing, isn’t it? Little things like that aren’t so little, kid. I wouldn’t have a garden in my yard today if I didn’t pick a lone poppy on the side of the road and give it to my wife all those years ago. And I did it all on a whim.”

The old man put his hand on the frame and brushed its glass with his thumb, getting lost in her smile. Patrick shuffled in place and searched for an exit.

“Well, I better go,” said Patrick, “I don’t want my mom to wake up and look for me. They’d be really worried. Besides, I’m still in trouble for breaking my mom’s vase.”

“That reminds me, before you go!” The old man disappeared into a closet and reappeared with a hand-blown glass vase. He wiped the dust off of the its intricate design and handed it to Patrick. “For your mom. God knows I’ve got plenty of them.”

Patrick took the vase. “Thank you.”

## Ryan Love

“You’re welcome. Now remember, plant seeds of your own and take care of them, and one day that vase will be the most beautiful thing in the world.”

“I’ll remember that. Good night.”

Patrick returned home and put the vase in the middle of his dining room table. The next morning, he woke up and was on his way back over to the old man’s house to ask him for help to start his own garden when he saw the ambulance. After being interviewed by the police, Patrick returned home and sat at his dining room table and stared at the vase, nearly losing his composure as the thought of the old man’s death rang out in his head. He must have been there for an hour, until his mom came in from the garage and showed him a bag of poppy seeds that someone dropped in the mailbox.

