

Cicatrix

*a journal of
experimentation*

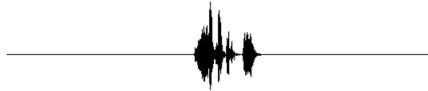
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Cicatrix

A Journal of Experimentation

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Above is the guest flourish for this issue.

It is an audio waveform of the word "Cicatrix."

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Introduction

An Appropriate Salutation,

A note of introduction to this volume, noting that this is the inaugural issue, allowing a measure of pride to show, a measure calculated carefully not to slip on the banana peel of arrogance or self-aggrandizement, et al. A mention of the time, effort, and expertise that have gone into making possible this *labor of love*.

A nod of gratitude toward the journal's co-editors and chief copy editor (the ones who really do all the work). Recognition of their hard work and heartfelt thanks for their encouragement. They *rock!*

An expression of further gratitude to those who submitted. An obligatory mention that a publication such as this could never succeed without their creative contributions. Recognition of the thankless plight of most of us creatives *toiling away in anonymity*, day and night, squeezing in the time for our work as we are able.

An anecdote about the nuts and bolts of putting together such a volume using a publishing template: that the interior pages begin with disposable text called *Printer's Latin*, which is not actually Latin, but a sort of pseudo-Latin filler text meant to show what text on your page should resemble when finished. *Printer's Latin*, goes the

"Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate velit esse cillum dolore eu fugiat nulla pariatur. Excepteur sint occaecat cupidatat non proident, sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt."

explanation, looks like this:

Commentary on the decision to make Cicatrix Publications a \$0 press amid a hegemonic and socioeconomic epoch that not only refuses to reward the vast majority

of artists monetarily for their work, but actively attacks the artistic community, e.g., ongoing attempts to defund and eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, etc.

A conclusion to that explanation in the form of a rallying cry: *We see and reject a hegemonic and socioeconomic system that ignores and shames creatives of all sorts and declare that we shall follow our own system to challenge it.*

A proclamation that the mission of this press is to break the supposed rules.

To wrap up this missive, a note welcoming all, with an expression of genuine hope that readers will find herein works to challenge, surprise, trouble, and occasionally adore.

A choice of appropriate closings for formal letters (multiple choice):

Sincerely; Sincerely yours; Regards; Best; Best regards; Kind regards; Yours truly; Most sincerely; Respectfully; Respectfully yours; Thank you; Thank you for your consideration;

Jønathan Lyons
Editor

My Voice is Strong

by

Robin Adams-Hayes

Spoken My voice is strong. I speak with power. My tongue is wicked. I was trapped once. I existed at the bottom of an empty wishing well. No coins at my feet. My arms stretched from side to side. I was alone. But I crawled out. One broken, bloodied finger nail at a time. And then I spoke. My voice is sturdy. I speak with persuasion My tongue is muscular. (only silence from you) My tongue is a blade forged of Damascus steel. (you remain silent) My voice is Dragon-tongue purple and I speak with eloquence. (still only silence from you)

Dance in the Sun

by

Meghan Rose Allen

Oh it's you.

Well don't look so happy. I didn't ask for you to come.

Yes I know.

Your mother.

Stand in the doorway like that, you make me nervous.

So sit.

Wide variety of pap I can offer you. Congealed egg? A grey pear in syrup? Have the Jell-O. I'm not going to eat it.

Standing there won't make the time go faster. Your mother clearly has some important errand to run if she's foisted you off on me. Such a mama, so important.

I blame her, the way she was raised. Of course, I raised her. I suppose I should have been more for her.

More what? Nothing in specifics. Just more.

For fuck's sake. If I have to get up and push your ass into a chair I'll end up pulling out all these tubes and pipes and then that bitch nurse'll come-- I see that smile, you know the one I mean-- the backs of my hands are purple from all her failures to draw blood.

There, was that so hard? And now we sit here in silence for how long exactly?

Jesus Christ. What is she doing? Digging a hole to China?

You and I used to be friends, you know. We were, when you were small. I'd tell you stories. May as well do that now. Pass the time.

No, the TV doesn't work. And put that thing down before I slap it out of your hand.

So a story.

A story.

Story.

Once, in the time before and in the old city of relics where all these stories take place, there was a girl. A woman almost, but not quite. She wasn't plain but she wasn't beautiful. Some days she was cruel, some days she was kind, some days she was happy, some days she was sad. That is to say, she was just the way she was with a precisely average number of detractors and admirers.

Now this girl in the time before lived in the old city with her mother. Her father, just as the time before had begun, was called away to another city as a specialist in minor affairs. Before this summons, the whole family had lived in the mountains, on a plateau in the mountains, in a large house that grew mushrooms on the roof and bluebells in boxes hung under the windows. There had been more people, when they lived at the house, and often the girl spent the day in remembering all these people. Upon her move to the old city, she had become cosseted and often spent much of her day alone.

And as for the father, once installed in their flat in the old city, the girl and her mother hadn't seen, heard, or spoken to him. He'd hopped an army truck and waved to them through an open green, canvas flap, and then he was gone. It had been so long that the girl would have forgotten her father existed except for the fact that his expertise in his minor affairs was so prized that it had bought his wife and his daughter certain privileges. One such privilege was sitting on the patio of a restaurant-hotel drinking colourful liquids from tall and thin glasses.

"You didn't forget," the mother said after downing her glass with a snap at the waiter to bring her another. "Your kit for this afternoon?"

Another privilege the wife and daughter enjoyed, although more so the wife than the daughter: the girl received lessons throughout the old city from a variety of tutors. Mondays she learned calligraphy. Tuesdays she learned dance. Thursdays she learned boxing. And Sundays she learned languages, slews and slews of words, all at once, to keep her head spinning. That day was one of those days where she had to suffer a tutor; it doesn't matter which one. What mattered was yes, she had forgotten her kit in the

hustle to get to the patio with its long colourful drinks. She'd left it behind on a bench in the hallway and now they would have to go back to retrieve it.

The mother, of course, began to despair. They'd only since sat down and ordered. Her feet, in shoes, new, tight, and leather, had blistered and swollen. The waiter she'd snapped at would give away their patio seats if they left.

"And besides," she said cruelly, "I reminded you not to forget." What could a mother do with a child who refused to heed any reminders?

The girl, duly chastised, offered to run back to the flat on her own to retrieve her kit. The trip was four stops on the tram. If she timed it correctly, she could be there and back in less than an hour. The mother hemmed and hawed over such an arrangement, but the girl insisted. Between here and there were no checkpoints and soldiers never checked trams. Between here and there everyone knew the girl and her mother were the wife and daughter, irrespectively, of an expert called away at the start of the time before. No one would bother her. She could be there and back before her mother knew she was gone.

"I suppose," the mother relented. She extracted promises from the girl not to dally, and then let her go without ever considering how foolish a decision this would turn out to be.

The first half of the trip was just as the girl had proposed. The tram took her four stops, she alighted. In the flat she gathered her kit for whatever her lesson, and went back out to the street. The sun, in that climate, at that time of year, made white all the view. White and yellow, the world already drowsy in a siesta haze notwithstanding the morning. The girl thought to walk, the sun burning her shoulders while warming her cheeks. But she'd promised her mother to return with much haste. The girl went to double-back to the tram and walked face first into a man who'd been following too closely behind. The girl's nose bumped the chest of the man's uniform, her lips kissed the buttons. He stood back and looked down while the girl stood still and looked up.

The girl saw the armband. Red with two strips. Her heart a race to the finish line, she nodded demurely and made for the tram. Maybe she should have run back to her flat, the safety therein, to wait her mother's irate return. But she moved towards the tram, head down not to raise any suspicions in the unrecognized man.

Now, this man was only unrecognized by the girl because, in truth, she recognized very few people whose station was less than her own. But the man with the armband recognized her. He was one of the girl's average number of admirers. From afar he had loved her and wanted nothing more to continue loving her from afar but from also close up. He knew of her father, his position, and hence hers. He knew there was no need for him to run checkpoints and ask for her card. But he couldn't ignore the signs of that burning white morning. He'd known it to be a day of the girl's lessons, the only days her egress from the house could be guaranteed. He'd approach, having collected his pennies of courage until he had a pound, introduce himself, flatter the mother, produce smiles from the girl, and a tentative relationship begun. That morning, the man had convinced himself, that morning would be his morning of approach. But the girl and her mother had not left their flat at the time when the girl and her mother most often left for the girl's lessons. He hadn't come on a most often day. Earlier, before he'd arrived, they'd left to drink colourful drinks on the patio of the restaurant-hotel which they did far less often. Disappointed, the man had continued that morning's patrol, not even noticing the return of the girl, now much closer than in his usual glimpses, until they'd touched, nose-to-chest, on the street.

"This," the man thought, "is what must be called fate."

The girl went to step further around him.

"Identity card please," the man said.

The girl froze. The man waited. Resigned, the girl fished in her pocket until she found her card, printed on paper that could only be called yellow. She passed it to the man.

Now the man didn't know what to make of this yellow ID. As the child of the expert in minor affairs, the girl should have had had a blue card and the privileges it bestowed. Such as the colourful drinks. Such as the classes. And such as the ability to ignore all the curfews enforced for the old city's safety. A yellow card gave the bearer two hours every Saturday to shop for necessities. It was not in that two hour window. It was not on a Saturday. But the man had been correct in his assumption that the girl should have had a blue card. At one point, the girl had had a blue card, and the mother's entreaties to her husband to procure the girl a replacement had gone unanswered, unacknowledged. So

the girl carried her old yellow ID card instead, which made no difference when escorted around the old city by her mother, but now, on her own, posed both a problem to her and the man.

What to do? The man could have let her go with a warning, simple enough, since he knew had she been out with her mother, the flash of the mother's blue card would have been enough to send him away. But if he gave a warning, the man would lose this chance fate had bestowed upon them; the girl would then go about her business and the man about his. So instead he tucked her card into his pocket and told the girl "Come with me." A plan, he decided, could be determined while they walked to wherever he figured out they could go.

The girl again thought of resistance. Her flat was so close and once inside the building, there was no way for the man to know which apartment was hers. If she ran-- but then she already had to take two and a half steps for each one of the man's. The man could easily catch up to her if she ran. Plus her skirt was too tight and her shoes were too loose and the cobble-stone street was too hot to run even the shortest of distances.

The girl thought about protesting. She could wax indignant Don't you know how I am's. Except the man must not have known, otherwise he wouldn't have confiscated her yellow identity card, put a sweaty palm on her shoulder, and marched her forward along the sun-bleached neighbourhood streets.

The girl thought about bribing, but she carried no money.

The girl thought about crying, but saw no scenario where tears would secure her release.

The girl thought and thought and ...

The man thought of nothing except he was walking with the girl with a hand on her shoulder that the girl let there rest without flinching or moving away. They walked through the streets until it became clear where they were going, and then the girl shivered like she was cold even though, in the heat, there was no way she was.

At the gates of the baths, the man cranked open the trellis. Privacy the man thought, and nudged the girl through. To the man, this nudge was gentler than a whisper. To the girl the nudge felt like a bludgeon and she lurched losing her balance and the man had to grab her to keep her from falling.

"All right?" the man asked.

Of course not the girl thought.

So they walked down the concrete, rough underfoot, the passageway lit only by the light coming in either end. Still, what a shock to be tossed back out in the sun, blinded, disoriented, squeezing their eyes shut against the light.

The girl had been to the baths once before, at the start of the time before, when such things as the baths had seemed possible, when the concrete pool shimmered with water aquamarine, when the concrete bleachers enclosing the sides were full of bathing-suited people lazing and sunning between swims, when vendors stood along the pool's edge selling iced fruits and beers and other such treats, when rainbowed red bunting hung from one side of the pool to the other and flapped in the wind wap-wap-wap that cooled the whole area.

But now, with pool drained and bunting discarded, the heat rose from the concrete, so thick they pushed through it. Like hot air in a balloon, their lungs over-inflated. They panted. They sweat. They put hands next to their foreheads like visors. The man began to begin regretting bringing the girl here in search of seclusion for his declarations of love. What had been wrong with the street? What had been wrong with the tunnel? What had been wrong with not here?

"Thank Christ, someone's arrived," said a voice and then our man, the first man, not the man of the voice, finished beginning to regret having led the girl to the baths, and regretted fully in earnest having chosen this spot.

"I've been waiting for hours," the other man said, standing up from the bleachers. "It's fucking bullshit this nonsense with officers and chains of command--" He stopped talking as he noticed the officer's stripes and the girl trembling just to the side of these bars. But then, as the officer did not rebuke him, but then as the officer stayed silently deploring his choice of locale, but then as the girl looked past the other man and saw what she saw, the other man smiled and gave out orders like he outranked them all.

"Just watch him for a moment," the other man said. "I've got to piss."

"What him?" the man asked, but this him was what the girl had already seen, cowered down in the bleachers, rashed and yet ghostly, eyes yellowed with crust, body languid and limp like he had a choice.

It may strain credulity that they met each other there after so long apart. It may, but it wasn't, for when people came down to the old city from the mountains, they settled in the neighbourhood where many of them had settled before. Even if the mountains were vast, so was the neighbourhood, which fragmented itself the same way the towns and villages had in the mountains above. Plateau too. If the girl had gone out more, or had been more observant the times that she had, she would have not only recognized the man, this officer who had forced her into the baths, but she would have seen face after face of her childhood home on the plateau. Maybe those days she spent remembering all the faces of her childhood up on the plateau were triggered by these faces half-glimpsed in the streets of her old city neighbourhood. Maybe she'd seen the boy sometime before and not even realized it. Maybe. But the drained pool, recently commandeered by an army patrol, with its contents' stench in the heat, was a more pressing concern for the girl, and for the man, who hadn't known this of the baths until that very moment.

The boy in the bleachers looked down at the girl, who looked straight at him like she knew just how to. Younger, in the time before the time before, for that time did exist even if it had come to feel like a dream, the girl had taken her new, blue ID card out to the shed and burned it in front of the boy. That was how she'd ended up here, with this man, and this boy, in the bleachers while the other man went off taking his piss. Burning the plasticized paper in the garden shed, the smell as the polymers dripped to the ground, the paper underneath catching on fire, all because of that burning.

He'd laughed at her, the boy. Laughed, unimpressed, with her act of defiance. He knew her now.

"My princess," he said, grabbing hold of a railing to haul himself up. "We should show your suitor--" for with one glance at the man the boy recognized the man's intention in taking the girl off the streets and to somewhere alone-- "the hospitality of your home." Unsteady on legs that had forgotten their purpose, the boy came down the bleachers, step after precarious step, flat footed, knees straight, until he stood in front of the man, in front of the girl standing in front of the man, and extending one arm with support of the other, he took the girl's hand in his and drew her to him.

Now the girl never learned the country dances of her plateau home, neither as a child nor in the classes she took in the old city, but she had learned in these classes how to follow any partner's lead. So as the boy moved, so did she, spinning round, spinning round, spinning round the edge of the pool, cracked concrete beneath, motes of dust rising, a cloud over her eyes. Why did she dance, not pull away? Spinning, she spun.

"A welcoming dance for our festivals," the boy cackled, twirling faster, "how we do for new lovers, their false starts and false--" And liquid burst into her gasping mouth, over her eyes, the world tinted red. He let go. A thick crack. Waves of sound bounced off the concrete sides of the baths and the bleachers. Waves of sound. Echoes. A crack. Repeat. Fall. The girl stayed upright. The man, officer, pistol out, they'd spun near enough for the man to shoot.

She pants. More blood drips. None of it hers.

"Did I hurt you?" the man says. "Did he hurt you?"

What did you say?

Okay, then, what if, when pulled closed, she'd been pulled close during dance classes, during parties, during balls her mother took her to with a matchmaker's dreams, she knew what to feel, the stiffness while being manhandled across the floor, the way she'd be held closer, not like this, pinpricks of blood melting into her red polka dot pencil skirt, ruffles along the bottom, cinched tight at the waist. A stiletto in his pocket pokes through. She was nothing more than a distraction. He laughed at her. He laughed at her. He laughed at her. He didn't want her now. She sidesteps so they spin, right next to the man, the officer, pistol out. She spins, pushed in.

"Did I hurt you?" the man says. "Did he hurt you?"

Or she spins for the boy, for the stiletto, but his vengeance is slow compared to the man's. He draws first.

"Did I hurt you?" the man says. "Did he hurt you?"

Or she forgets her kit on purpose. She notices the man watching her from a distance. She engineers the encounter. Or she grabs the stiletto. Or she sees the boy on the street some time before.

Doesn't matter.

Not all stories have a moral.

It's not a fairy tale.

Fine. Tell yourself the story you live with.

Now go get the nurse to get me a bed pan. You don't have to come back. Your duty is noted.

Or you do come back.

Sit.

Let me tell you again.

Two From the Teleporter

by

Adam Alonzi

If only. Yes, if only. During an empty hour this thought may befall us. While some ideas may never occur to the vacuous among us, the relief or regret that comes with mulling over our own biographies is universal. Only someone without an idle moment could resist the temptation to wonder - if only.

He saw her sighing in its bifurcating blue beams, dancing in its refracting red lights, and smiling warmly with the neon flares flickering along to the rhythms of the CPU. In front of this marvel of modern physics stood a thirty seven year old man, the purchaser of the obsolete T30, who looked proudly at his talent for restoration. An inveterate tinkerer, he was not one to throw away anything remotely salvageable. In the early 2050's he was fortunate enough to find employment as an independent contractor to several small electronics manufacturers. Production had been largely automated two decades before, and most of the repair tasks happily handed to machines shortly thereafter, but one human was kept around to handle catastrophes, which remained more commonplace than the techno-evangelists had anticipated.

Installed on every computer was a distant descendant of a sloppily assembled operating system bought by fledgling firm in the early 1980's. For over 70 years managers hoped, through some undiscovered form of Lamarckian evolution, the increasingly bloated kernel would become better by crashing again and again. The monopoly only grew thanks to the dwindling of tinkerers, to the dearth of hackers in the truest sense of the word. He peered out at the houses by the ocean. They sat there, just a few miles from his brown brick tenement, mocking the squalor in which he found himself.

Any number of people and institutions could be blamed for his situation, but there is no point in thinking about what might have been. Cheryl's phantasm was overtaken by the sight of her fiancé, the mogul who owned half the town. Upset by this, he stepped outside and sped briskly to the sensory stimulation emporium.

By dusk the streets were always empty. They seemed to become less busy with each month. The silverware photographer next door had purchased a companion robot in March and would be making payments for fifteen years, although the warranty is only good for five. The 37 year old tinkerer, though he knew these electronic accessories were merely ways of manipulating organic robots, and that they fit perfectly with his personal ethos of synthetic joy for all - including himself, could not accept them.

He let the headset lull him into a trance. The idea of having a virtual reality device in his own home made him nervous. Yes, it really was no less or more real than what he normally did, or at least that is what they told him, but it seemed wrong. It seemed like an act of self-deception. Most could exercise some moderation, but he knew himself too well - or perhaps he was afraid because he did not know, could not know. After buying one he would subsist on the basic income provided by the government and forget about his other aspirations. Yet if he could not muster the courage to approach her, what was the point of living? If courage came to him she might forsake the richer man.

Yes, if only.

It had been twenty five years since the family vacation to Mars. The translucent purple lake carved out of the terraformed but ruddy surface captured his imagination. The T30 was a cylindrical machine, slightly over seven feet, with purple diamond shaped lights encircling its tip and base. In other words, its appearance was identical to nearly every teleporter designed before and after the technology was perfected. It seems the comic book artists of yore were either abnormally prescient, or the designers of not too long ago were deplorably lazy. His hand nimbly inputted seven digits into the T30's ancient-looking console. Even with the newer models there was mishaps, yet some sort of unspeakable annihilation in an uncharted dimension did not diminish his faith in his hard-earned prowess.

As he stood in the middle of the apparatus's silver interior and watched the brilliant swathes of cerulean light ripple around him he wished he had been raised on the red

planet. It was young and vital. Its pioneers had to fashion their own tools and grow their own food. Before he was aware of it, he had horizontally reconstituted in the tubular velvet bed in the bustling transportation hub of the capital. It smelled of jasmine and sweat. As the door opened he sat up, or was propped up, and urged to make room for the next traveler. Hotel brochures flooding the air with clashing fragrances and haphazardly projecting holograms that occasionally quarreled with one another lined the walls of the entrance. None of them were remotely affordable to an earthling carrying green earthling paper which, unknown to many citizens on both planets, had dramatically fallen in relation to the Martian ducat.

The forest near the golf green looked hospitable enough. Mars's fresh lakes and streams were teeming with trout, catfish, and sundry of other aquatic delectables. Noodling shouldn't be dangerous here. At least the founders, who must have hailed from Florida or Australia, had had the foresight to implement a ban on reptiles and arachnids.. No snapper heads, snakes, or gators. He plunged into the water and fingered the rock formations in search of a welcoming orifice. Hallucinations of lullaby-like piano chords resonated with the smooth stillness of the cool water engulfing his emaciated form. As he swam deeper, deeper than many seasoned noodlers would go, he came upon a cavern.

He slid his arm into it and let the cave's agitated tenant sink its tiny teeth into his arm. It wouldn't budge. His uncle made it look so easy. The slimy bastard won't let go. The trifling sting from its fangs faded as the intrepid noodler struggled to break free. After hitting the little leviathan between its eyes, it tightened its jaws with an alarming resolve. Once the diver made peace with his impending suffocation his arm simply slid out. The first gulp of air tasted like salvation; the mixture of fear and gratitude refashioned his prematurely stiffened joints.

It was then he decided to cast his fears aside and approach Cheryl. Hurriedly he made his way back to the teleporters, drenched and numb to the AC, leaving a slippery trail behind as he made his way to the capsules. A herd of pasty tourists slipped on the water and knocked their comrades off their feet; a doughy game of dominoes had been initiated by his carelessness.

A hand tapped his shoulder.

“Excuse me,” an oddly familiar voice began, “I think you’re wet.”

He turned around and saw his own face, identical down to the stubble. Both men initially recoiled, not sure if the other was a long lost twin or a spy planted by some nefarious (and very bored) agency to drive the other mad. The assessment period ended when they lunged toward one another—when dealing with a clone social niceties are irrelevant, you’ll understand when you meet yours—and stared intensely into each other’s eyes. More timid men may not have done this so soon, but he had the blinding rage that can only crystallize under the pressure of decades of thankless work, and can only rupture when it is confronted by what it hates most.

“Clones are not important. It is time to proclaim my - our? - undying love!”

A brief smudge in experience, then rematerialization. An unpleasant odor permeated his shoddy studio apartment. It was hard for someone so simultaneously shaken and reinvigorated to tell from whence it came. A gaunt figure wearing a VR headset sat in a half-lotus position on the living room floor.

The naked version of himself was one of several copies made in the original’s absence. As the barechested libertine tossed another fistful of euphoriant down his throat he explained one of the copies, emboldened by a close call in the shower, had run down to see Cheryl. Her rebuff sent him back to the bathroom. The bewildered first born opened the door to find the rejected suitor covered in colorful foams pouring out his mouth while seven plump cockroaches feasted on his oral excretions. They closed the door. It is best they leave and let maintenance handle it.

The sight elicited a sinking feeling in both of them, who together at once remembered how terrible it was to realize a single move could guarantee victory or bring defeat. So much depends on so little. John ambled over to the teleporter, much to the bemusement of the intoxicated nudist.

“What are you doing?”

“Let’s make some more. One of them will get it right.”

The Italian Story

by

Tetman Callis

"I was born here," she said. "More coffee?"

"I was born farther north," he said. "Please."

He told her the story of his life. She smiled and served more coffee, burned incense, and played dreamy music on her stereo.

They kissed. It seemed to be his idea.

They kissed again. She was almost certainly in collusion.

They kissed a third time—implicit agreement made explicit through action. Candles had been lit. She told him the story of her life. He drank her coffee.



She told him what she wanted and what she didn't want.

"You," and, "Please don't want to wear my clothes."

"They wouldn't fit," he said.

She kissed him and held his hands, her eyes bright. She said something he liked when he heard it, though he found it hard to believe.

He believed it anyway.

He told her something she liked so much it alarmed her.

She did not believe it.

She said something later that bent his heart, and it never bent back. This is not as sad as it may sound.

Two Works

By

D.M O'Connor

Blunt Force Insight

Poolside after yogurt
bath & juice & dragon-fruit
wrapped rice & sandalwood
honey coconut scrub
ginger tea then lemon
tea steam & ice dunk
into hot pool with wife
the whole time stone
monkeys & toads & pigs
with jasmine flowers
behind the ear & lilies
between the teeth-moss
a slug on the shower head
gives a not-so-subtle-hammer
to the head realization
demonstrating clearly other
civilizations know how
to live far better.

Mapping

curve of pond frond seen
through hammock weave

watching surf-class sea-grow
rain-come and nothing is plastic
or noisy or asking for money
or attention and peace creeps
up like a spider to shoot a song-
o-gram into your skull perhaps
Happy Birthday or Silent Night
on the wrong night or day say
on Easter in bird-language yet
un-named this glorious leaf
flutters in the wind like a flag
saluting your current location

Rattlesnakes and Rain

by
Reg Darling

Early in my eighteenth autumn, I backpacked upstream along the Tionesta Creek from Mayburg, Pennsylvania to Logan Run and up Logan Run to its waterfall intending to camp in a small cave in the rock formations uphill from the waterfall, because it seemed like a place of comfort well-suited to pondering and solitude. But when I began gathering kindling for a campfire, I smelled rattlesnakes, and it was not subtle.

I had walked as far as I wanted to that day and had looked forward to settling into the comfort of my little cave, but quickly realized that the indolent ease I needed was not going to be found in a tentless night steeped in the scent of venomous reptiles. I decided to hike southwest, around the head of Phelps Run, into Kingsley Run, which meets the Tionesta Creek at Mayburg. Without navigational errors, this was doable in a couple of hours. I found a comfortable spot on the first bench above the Kingsley Run valley bottom—open and snakeless—without shelter, but the sky was clear. I sat by my little campfire beneath a gloriously starry sky and when the fire burned down to coals, I unrolled my sleeping bag next to it and fell asleep easily.

I was awakened at two a.m. by a crash of thunder that shook the ground, just before the rain arrived in torrential waves. At first, the lightning was so intense that I was able to navigate by its illuminations. When the lightning passed, the flashlight I retrieved from my sodden pack was dead, but by then I was in familiar territory. I arrived at Aunt Gert and Uncle Ed's a little past three. They welcomed me as if it was perfectly normal to show up unannounced and soaking wet in the middle of the night. I slept in, and Gert cooked a breakfast feast of eggs, bacon, home fries, and toast. Ed told a story of which I remember only the laughter.

The End of the Beginning

by

Reg Darling

When the woman with whom I shared a stormy relationship told me she was pregnant, I said, “However you want to deal with this, I’ll help you.” It would be easy (and convenient) to simply ascribe my response to love, but there were layers of unspoken complication. She was also having an affair with someone else. I knew about it, but she didn’t know that I knew. I hadn’t confronted the situation because my own actions gave me little right to self-righteousness. I also feared that forcing our infidelities out into the open would generate more heat than light.

[When dishonesty masquerades as kindness, there is usually cowardice lurking in the shadows.]

I hoped that the innocence of my response would summon greater honesty from her.

[I still trusted her heart.]

She told me that she had already scheduled an abortion at an urban clinic three hours away. I offered to take her there and pay for half. The procedure went smoothly, and we even made a brief stop at an art museum afterward. On the long, silent drive home, I wept silently, unseen tears streaming down my face in the dark.

[I didn’t weep for the fetus.]

I wept for an almost childlike sense of abject defeat, for the realization that our relationship had become so fucked up that it probably couldn’t be fixed. Truth was receding from our love like the galaxies of an expanding universe. We could never get it back, but neither could we stop trying until we were rescued by a new betrayal.

The honesty I hoped for was not summoned.

[Later on, I learned from a mutual friend that, despite her other lover’s marriage, in her heart and life, it had been I who was the affair.]

Abortion is not easy. The fact that it is a preventable surgical procedure, and surgical procedures are painful and ugly, is only one of several aspects of its agony and hardship.

[Years later, the heart surgery that kept my wise, gentle father-in-law in this world for another decade was painful and ugly. The neck surgery that spared me a lifetime of crippling agony was painful and ugly. The abortion that spared my lover a lifetime of obligation, restraint, and love she felt ill-prepared for was painful and ugly.]

Pregnancy is a pivotal moment. Life-transforming possibilities loom large. Known points of transformational possibility shouldn't be dismissed lightly. It behooves us to regard sexuality and reproduction with reverence.

I didn't and don't believe what we did was morally wrong. I am uninterested in religious arguments to the contrary.

[What was removed from her body was a part of her body that was growing toward unwanted possibilities. A woman has a right to make the choices that determine her future and health.]

I agreed with my lover's choice, but if I hadn't, I would still have helped her do it regardless of whether the cells proliferating in her womb were, in fact, my doing.

[The reasons for her choice are a very long story, and much of it is her story to tell, not mine, and would point too clearly to her identity.]

I would agree that at some point in the process of a nine-month gestation the decision to terminate does indeed become a moral choice. From my perspective, the crux of the issue is individuated consciousness, and that cannot be measured or even identified by heartbeat, interpretations of scripture, or the cuteness of tiny toes. It's two thirds science and one third intuitive guesswork enhanced with spiritual bias.

[The chicken I ate last week was a sentient being.]

Everyone is or should be on their own with that and a great many other moral choices. With regard to the health, fate, and future of your body, you have a right to be wrong and that's far from liberating.

[Moral ambiguity is the price of consciousness.]

Until the fetus has the possibility of surviving outside the womb, the pregnancy is a medical situation owned entirely by the woman whose body it occupies. Entry into the

decision to terminate the pregnancy should be by invitation only, and yes, that exclusion even applies to the “father.”

[That exclusion especially applies to wealthy, male politicians.]

What would I have done if she had chosen not to have an abortion? I would have helped. My role would have had to evolve.

[Though a failure in the protocols of contraception seemed more likely in a surreptitious rendezvous than in the more orderly environment of our respective apartments, I thought fatherhood was more a matter of role than genes. Years later, my son would teach me that it's rather more complicated than that.]

The issue of infidelity and paternity would have had to be addressed—not for the sake of genetics scripturalized into romantic superstition, but to dissolve what had become a mutual dishonesty that would poison our relationship by a process as inexorable as gravity.

My unspoken knowledge was an infidelity as deep as her romance with a married man, but I had also been unfaithful in a more conventional sense.

[I was still young enough to be rendered fairly helpless by a pretty woman's desire.]

Marriage? I would have been willing, but that would have almost certainly been a disaster for all, including the child.

[Another long story that is only half mine.]

Three Works

by

Erika Figel

Autobiography in Three Rape Scenes

15.

limp little, body pumped, from outside, into death, full dissention, empty sound,
exploded face and spirit, kidnapped by the heat, baptized in his sweat, skinned animal,
rug, rubber doll, two virgin little holes, knocked down in, his crime

16.

indulgence in malignant, tree trunk, spattered with drip, carved into hearts and
initialed, bring the spittoon prick, to my dew broken cavity, until the piece slips, into
two girls, imploded and rebuilt, drink the whiskey down so the head don't feel, the
push from the sliding, ill love, the pillow swallowing, screams

26.

weaponless vessel, arced out of time, deformed and entrenched, art, fondled language,
eroticized author, slip new digital definition in, between legs and blood, five fingers,
forced nine, lacerations inside, the outside of the in between, and oh, again, fuck

great is the i of i

(from a woman's perspective)

i am watchful yet i don't watch for myself,
i am around the box and even in my den, there is but one finder
that can blow the cinders back to fire.
there is music in the twitch, drip,
drip sweat, blunder misery, and i am baked full,
through, through and,

what is ever the point of me knowing anything.

[wind blows in through the left window, and a bird, yellow, perches on the sill]

blood drip so naked and spinning, blow certain because
there is no inside of left, only broken, nothing fantastic included
in the utmost, for his highest, there is a motley crew of vipers viping.
bored broken is even worse, it is the death road, sleepy till sunrise.

almost no virgin uncertain, marry me if i am this terrible. assurance insurance
broken stolid in pact and punitive damages. we are not surprised at outcome,
only numbers. numb.
what force terrific tears in?

[the door swings wildly open, and behind it stands an intruder]

i am broken on schedule, torn several and stitch perfect, only if,
and piece by piece. there is no margin of error on the field,
big swing, endangered species list, what in the ever of for was this beginning,
no mind to end or eternal anything.

let us rundown racing roster and swear magnificent moment for every moment lived

thereafter..... ahhh..... sweet cider of the gods. i am lost holy and rip bending out of this
pit,
i am not witness. i testify of my own know and behest to the state
of the best that one can know and even turn back toward.

what monster grows deep in the belly of a mind
that can twist such a truth so bleak and deep.
i say apostateself works deep against the world.
i say, hmmmmmmm.
i say, ok.

[handsome man, 26, enters]

i trade ships on the river trip, i am still in panama, i am the sex
that i am, i reign evident radical and lucid, liquid and dial tone, trip twist
on the receiving end. and we were in france and you touched me under the forest
at versailles, and i was 19 and you were 19 and you were part of me for too long,

and i was not and you were so so pure, and you gave me everything.
there were two of you, and both i kept and both were pushed back,
and some walked away like friends. break break is tidal, but one day there is bridal,
and one day the waves crash, and the girl in white emerges

from the break line
and then
one day

[couple exits room through window]

roots begat the whole tree into the house and holding it treehouse high,
and the cider spilled..... oh well.
we fall ocean deep into the ever outside and what more can this life be
but ever deep?
wish twist was never what twist stings and slings back in your face,

brain stain marked ever heavy,

funny and dark.
(she pits eternal, didn't you know?)

[couple lands in the alley and runs through it towards the main road]

exit split is exodus gift entrenched and solid and wish bent and making maybe a thing
of consistency. beat beast while being beast is the imp of the possible, the limp of each of us,
the disaster we hit, imperial. nevertheless gods walk and gods die and gods lie and gods cry
and everyone has her own truth. spill perfect contagion wicked wince drug eversince drug,

hitting blue down the coast, always always down the coast. feet up feels ample
and space brain maven, what to do when we are laden. spill out until it is escapes
far enough for long enough that we can say,
it was
enough.

N'Ain't Much Changed

Slow bites

Bitten.

Snap it.

Snipped.

Prattle bird takes Bambi sips, streamwise strained
spraining neck. Heave. Mouth movement
pricks ceiling and guts the spinal sky. Flagrant
delectation of scoured music face, gnat hair, post-its
overgrown with ivy, scissor kick spend thrift, blue
face postulate. Skin clatter scatter make, dictionary batter
heavy, batter thick up and swing.

*I was a lovely grave when nickels fed nasal voices— an invisible
cactus culture of trochaic lilt, the subject and object of every billboard, scarecrow
house, bloated spicy jazz jungle— smelling hidden
tongues in black woods, spacing platinum haze from peeled peaches.*

Branch cradles torn dress flag: center square, loose and waving at us.
Umbrella dripping from supremacy toils policy grafted with color
strewn abstraction. Muzzle it. Blog entry, leather
hand pacing steps— like one— like two— like conspicuous
neutrality, humanitarian shade deep sleep ink blot. Poverty
fear mimicry because they are not like us: corn belts, cotton belts, fan
belts, the Bible and newspaper, wasted in the face breaking us wide
and flat. Females-of-the-moment pubescent.

*I wasn't coaxed into the back seat, but I was there, sex up from
down, impaled. The sign said: "Pickanninies
will dance for pennies." Visitors thronged the frontier lore. They called me Negro
and licked the word off my face.*

Devoted Latina— waxy clay with blossoms snow-veined, stone
highway slapdash by relentless mountain froth, worm-eaten plush, a town
on the Mexican border with child mummies hiding in belly. Cock beak
probing throat of fire flower, ceremonies for sale, ugly lips
of water carved actresses disguised in gold shadows.

*I am a bag with trusses to the ground. People drive past empty,
light. Past people belong to me as the bag
is weighted with dark skin.*

Iarlaith and the Sad Geranium

by

Eckhard Gerdes

Iarlaith used to confuse words when he was young, and his classmates would tease him endlessly for doing so. One mistake he'd frequently make is calling the gymnasium a "geranium." And to make matters worse, that was back during the era of flower children, so everyone assumed he was doing drugs. Really the only drug he ever did well was drink, but he grew up in a time and place when all sorts of mind-altering substances were commonplace. As a matter of fact, if one did merely pot or coke or speed, one was thought a simple plebe, not nearly sophisticated enough in the accoutrements of the counterculture to be taken seriously. And so he was never taken seriously. Of course, many of his childhood friends were now dead, but sometimes he began to wonder if he wasn't the foolish one for staying alive. Staying alive was hard. His knees hurt. His jaw cracked when he ate. His eyes would blur over for no reason whatsoever. Sometimes he found his back so sore he couldn't even dry his own feet after a shower. Growing older was unpleasant. Plus he realized that something about getting older cost one the respect of others. His dead friends were remembered and eulogized and admired for all their great accomplishments. Being alive, he was insignificant and forgotten. Except to his son, Marco. Marco was the best son anyone could hope for, even though he was himself confronted by huge doubts that came from having been raised by a father who had never achieved anything of significance.

Iarlaith would sometimes call himself a "foundling" because he worked in a foundry, but in truth he had grown up with his parents, although as an inconvenience in their eyes. He never wanted Marco to feel like an inconvenience, but the choice

between being gone constantly to make a comfortable living and being around to be with his son was not one Iarlaith resolved the way others had. He stayed with his son.

At one point in his life, Iarlaith had had great plans. He had decided to build his own island and declare it an independent nation. He had read about other people who had done that with abandoned oil platforms and forgotten atolls. He had read about how the Chinese government was creating artificial islands in the South China Sea in order to lay claim to fishing rights. So he figured he would build his nation on the flotsam and jetsam swirling in the eastern garbage patch of the Pacific Ocean. He'd declare it the independent nation of Iarlaith.

"Iarlaith!" The voice startled him out of his reverie. "It's your turn."

Oh, that's right. He and Marco were trapped at a cousin's house with nothing to do, so they suggested a game they called "Name Stuff," in which categories were randomly suggested and replied to.

Marco had called first and had asked for "a false etymology," and Iarlaith, quick on the draw, offered the word "bridegroom."

"The word actually goes back to 1960," Iarlaith explained, "back to Jane Goodall's work with chimpanzees in Tanzania. She noticed that when the chimps mated, the male was expected to pick through the fur of the female and remove any lice and ticks that were housed there. Accordingly, Goodall named this male chimp 'the bride groom,' and the name stuck."

His turn came to name something after that. He'd named "conflated clichés," and a nephew had offered "time will tell all wounds." Then the turns went around. He'd withdrawn into his own thoughts, and then, with the last category, he'd spoken the answer without even thinking. A niece, who was an English major, named "subjects of gerunds," and he'd replied, robotically, "Your possessing me has done me in."

He had to come up with something that would stump them all enough for this game to end. "Okay," he said. "Floral emotions."

"Petuniary?" asked the nephew.

"No, silly. That's pecuniary," said his sister. "How about roseate?"

"I don't think that's really an emotion," said a cousin.

All Iarlaith could think of himself was a sad geranium.

Marco, Iarlaith and the Poor Orphans

by

Eckhard Gerdes

"The criminal rooms appeared orphaned, happened little or nothing. Something spectacular especially not."

"What? What are you talking about, Marco?" Iarlaith had heard his son Marco talking to an assemblage art piece Marco was working on.

"I think that's what I'll call it," said Marco.

"What?"

"I was reading a German soccer live commentary at the library, and this was the computer's translation of a play during the game. But I like it."

"What's it mean?"

"Art doesn't mean. It is."

"Ha ha. No, really. What does it mean?"

"I have to figure out how to incorporate orphans."

"Orphans are the bottom line."

"Yes, but how do I incorporate them?"

"You can't. Microsoft has issued widow and orphan controls. They do not like widows and orphans."

"Wasn't that called 'widow and orphan protection' some time ago?"

"That was Corel, I think. Word Perfect. Microsoft Word calls it 'widow and orphan control.' I don't think Microsoft is interested in protecting widows and orphans."

"But in Word, at least you can turn the widow and orphan control off. In Google Docs, you can't do that. There widows and orphans are always controlled."

"Yeah, Google hates widows and orphans even more than Microsoft."

"I have an idea," said Marco. "I am going to cut all the bottom lines off out of an accounting ledger and shellack them onto the sculpture. There'll be lots of bottom lines."

"Lots of orphans."

"Yes, I'm going to shellack the orphans!"

"In that case, you might be able to get a grant from Word or Google."

"Perhaps. But first I have to figure out how to put them into criminal rooms."

"Poor orphans."

"Yes. Poor orphans."

Short Works

By

Allison Goldstein

Out of the Corner of

her hair fire
whether licking soft corners of air
her lips, toe nails, hip bones
fire then
fire of her irises
shocked deliberately blue
fire of her shadow
baptizing pavement
fire of yes
escaping cold teeth

the way it starts as smoke
that washes over the stinging eye

Wink

Perched across the room,

blue-black quills flutter
and descend
 like an unkindness of ravens;

a *hint of light*
 momentarily signaled

the truth, she thinks, will translate.

He nods a winged look—not a sound

will rise from it.

Box Sequence

Wooden Box

what we keep not
what we don't is
not named or names—

but its sides are wings
that are also sides,
a gallop gathering speed.

Wooden Box 2

what is kept
not what is (yes what is)

A piece

enough of what it is can last

of the sea but not the sea;

a singular crisis

it does not shatter

Wooden Box 3

does not name names—

wrench or cedar chip, love letter, shoelace

an embittered excavation;

full of all the all of what you were

names together or names apart

Box of Mirrors

reflected against reveals

what image sliced

together repeats

given a little light

Three Works

by

Howie Good

Fishin' Blues

Fishing is just a metaphor for general fucked upness. The fish are yellow and blue like the floating spots you see after a camera flash. Many exhibit difficulty navigating the current, apparently the effect of having been clubbed on the head by the bitter children of divorce. It's then that I feel myself stranded among items stolen overnight from unlocked vehicles – a pair of boots, radar detectors, golf clubs, sunglasses, CDs, cigarettes, and loose change. In the background is a hole left in the skyline by the collapse of the world's tallest building. Fish evolve clawed feet to climb over the rubble.

Apocalypse Wow

Do cows get excited? Their knees don't look like they can handle all the jumping. Why I am so worried. We run things in the forest while the wolf is not around. To hell with it all, let's pray that it lasts. My goal, obviously, is to sing again, dance again, draw new cartoons. The cricket sings about how to properly touch a girl so you don't creep her out. People also ask: Do ants eat each other? Do ants make a sound? I didn't believe my

friends when they first told me. On Berlin Street, a vehicle hit a deer. Someone was verbally harassing children on Barre Street. And no cops for miles.



There are 55 different types of seagulls, and many of them are no better than cannibals and psychos. The result is airliners zig-zagging across the sky or flying intentionally into famous buildings. At least that's the accepted explanation. I would love to stay here in order to find out for sure, but I must leave before something else happens, something a lot worse. The starfish is one worry. Just last night the body of a woman was hauled out of the water, too late for Dr. Heimlich to apply the Heimlich maneuver.

Complicated Happiness

People were using drugs
at Hubbard Park. They

were waiting to behold
flowers and demons, but

they forgot. Now they see
sky, and they remember

what they are. I'm afraid
of human beings. Then

again, no. On State Street,
a missing dog was spotted.

Wolf, are you there? I hate
being roots and a caged heart.

Strong shadows mean a lot
of sun somewhere in the city.

Palace of Sweat

by

Colin James

Your grip on that rowing machine is tenuous.
I have a barrow ready just in case for real emergencies.
Knees can affect perceptions, is that a bowl, pillow?
If either, a ladder can be made available for its antithesis.
Look again directly across this almost placid place,
all the way past the non buildings
to where a not inconspicuous crowd now gathers.
They have brought their own folding chairs, such independence.
Still somewhat ground reliant, they unilaterally start to sway
Then I understand, we must share this.

Has Torn the Muscles in His Veritum Sanctum

by

Colin James

I am not advocating long fashionable
jackets that a few years back
wandered the neighborhood
with teenagers inside them,
nor short revealing strips of fabric.
Oh, there is another cheek to beware of
than preaching that's nondescript.
Is that a cup holder or a pocket?
This bench is a bed too many.
Still not sensing any obligation
standing on one side, while you
obstinately throw pillows
and other packets of soft cloth.

The Elliptical

by

Samantha Knight

“Yeah, mine's on *The Count of Monty Cristo*...because it's a wicked book! Better than Jane Eyre. Based on history too, but we don't have to start that yet, right?...well at least the bio part for me will be easy...already on my way. The bus is always late anyway and—dude...”

In the center of the park, in which Elya would cut through to catch the four o'clock bus to her friend's house for studying and social media, was a LifeFitness elliptical, stationed near the ball diamond. It stood gloriously where everyone could see, catching eyes with its peculiar location. Surely this confusing piece of workout equipment—with the high-tech, touch screen control panel, adjustable features, and silver thumb sensors—should take residence in a YMCA, where nobody would use it—because who really knows if that is the correct amount of calories you're burning...

However, it wasn't the machine that caused passers-by to pause their activities and stare, but a man wearing eighties-style tights who served as the “nipples” to this, otherwise, public display of fearlessness.

“Oh, sorry. *But oh my gosh*, Julie! No, it's just some dude here in the park...I think he actually drug his own workout machine here...yeah, he's seriously over there getting' his sweat on!”

There he was no word of a lie. His—surely waxed—legs wrapped like pixie sticks in royal blue casing, and an overly-trimmed mustache that compensated for his ineffective headband. *And are those rock-climbing gloves?* she wonders.

On the park bench beside the ball diamond sat two sharp-dressed elderly ladies. One in a matching royal blue cardigan and cat frames, and the other in her best church button-down and a golf visor. Both had fanny packs.

“My, my, Edna. Mr. Tights is looking rather tighter than usual,” the one in cat frames whispered, rather loudly. She raised a silver flask to her parched lips—lined with magenta lip-stick—and swigged a generous amount of the aged brandy from her husband's liquor cabinet.

“Shh, Gloria. I'm trying to focus on his toned buttocks. And put that stuff away!”

“Do you want any?” she said handing the flask to Edna inconspicuously. She accepted.

The two women didn't look at each other once, rather appreciated the scene before them, in their usual spot, on a typical Sunday. This was a weekly routine, a girl's day out.

“This sun is so bright, and I think I'm still having hot flashes. Must be his hair...those wonderful, chestnut curls. So long, they remind me of Sylvester Stallone from that one movie.” Gloria paused. She cocked her head and squinted her beady eyes. “On second thought, maybe more of that Jewish guy from Bingo.”

“Still, they're long and bouncy like a poodle...one that's had a bath and a blow-out.” Both women gasped in agreement.

“Yes, they really are! I do like these tights better than last weeks. These bad boys make his muscles look like a tube of squeezed toothpaste. I just want to squeeze—”

“Gloria, you're going to raise your blood pressure again.”

Both ladies, spry and poised, shared a giggle that trailed off like the toots of a train as the tracks passed around the bend.

“Bro, I think this guy is going to pass out. He's just goin' for it!” A young man, no older than twenty-five, scoffed humorously at the scene as he sprayed the back of his neck from his water bottle.

And indeed he was. The man in tights was perspiring like a dollar-store fountain—the display was there, but the quality, not so much. He huffed and he groaned. He adjusted his speed and movement so that his legs began alternating up and down, and at a faster pace. Was this an elliptical? Or stair-master? Both, perhaps. Where does he plug it in? the onlookers thought, but dared not meander too close for answers in fear of looking nosy.

“Gotta give the guy props for toting that thing here, that’s a workout in itself! Crazy.” The other young man replied. Both men smiled and shook their heads before continuing their game of twenty-one.

Before the afternoon was out, a toddler wandered up to the man in tights. Being young and naïve, the boy had the courage to express his curiosity, in lieu of those who could do nothing but stare.

“What are you doing, Mister?” The boy looked up to the man in tights; his eyes were big and innocent like a kitten. His hands were in the pockets of his trousers as he dug his toe into the dirt.

The man in tights did not stop his workout, or even slow down. Instead, he simply glanced down at the boy and replied, “why, I’m playing a game.”

“What kind of game?” The boy took a step closer, expressing his interest now.

“Well,” the man wiped the sweat off his face with his arm band and smiled, “basically, you do whatever you want, wherever you want. So long as you don’t hurt yourself or bother anyone else. And you just don’t care what everyone thinks.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it, kiddo. Be yourself and do what makes you happy. Sometimes it’s funny to put people in such a state of disbelief. That’s a plus!”

A Day At Mick's

by
Will Mayo

So I walked into Mick's drinking establishment and sat down where Donnell was tending bar.

"So how's it going?" I asked.

"Not too good," he said. "I've got a warrant out for my arrest." He paused. "Attempted murder with an axe."

I hid the fear behind beer fogged glasses, took the pen out of my pocket, scribbled a while.

"I'll tell you what. You go down to Wayne, he's a lawyer I know." I gave him directions.

"He'll set you up."

So I enjoyed my drink a while, read the newspaper that was laying there on the counter, then exited the bar. In the days to come I heard that Donnell gave himself up to the cops there at Wayne's law office after which Wayne took care of him nice and fine. Donnell spent enough time behind bars to get him away from the public but not enough that it got to be a habit. And, of course, he learned a trade besides tending bar, welding in his case, and I didn't have to worry about him messing up my drink. Which damn it all, tasted fine just the same. It was but another day at Mick's, a bar long gone from the world.

Getting It While You Can

by

Will Mayo

But the only people who ever treated me as a man in my own right were the down and out and lonely who never had anything of their own. For instance, I can recall back in the late '80s when I came across a man smoking some crack out of a converted Coke can in a deserted little park there in the middle of the night on the East Side of Frederick. I watched him while he puffed and choked on the awful mess of it all and then beheld a cop in a patrol car driving to the side of the park with all his lights set to roaring. Calmly as you please, I walked up to the police car and said, "Can I help you, Officer?" "Park's closed after hours. You boys better get." We walked away as the cop drove off. This earned me another round of beers. That was just another night in the long ago. The town slumbered on.

At Home

by

Nick Romeo

Every day she took vengeance on vegetation. She sat in trees, straddling the top branch, swinging her cowboy hat over her head and with the other hand she wielded her pink, diamond encrusted, emerald accented turbocharged chainsaw. I can't seem to figure out why my landlord, Woodella, really hates wood. One reason might be the fact she receives wooden nickels for rent. Another reason: since she's married, she might be tired of it. But then she's married, so I doubt she sees much wood anymore. She seems to forget that money does come from trees, and money is the only thing that matters to her. "They will grow back," is what she told me when I begged her to stop chopping down the trees. Last Sunday morning a giant branch crashed through my kitchen window. I looked and saw her dancing in the dawn morning light denouncing all plant life while swinging the chainsaw around her head, holding the strap with her teeth.

Dr. Weebeep, the lead maintenance man at the apartment complex, arrived when a tenant disposed of a Dust Buster near the dumpster. The machine was set there for the local recycler to pick up, but lightning struck the dumpster the split second a rabbit scurried past. The rabbit became fused with the Dust Buster, giving the machine a second chance in life and making it the fastest cleaning device on Earth. It was the most industrious worker at the apartments, ever. Dr. Weebeep resembled a punk rock R2-D2 with hoses as arms, rabbit feet, and screws sticking out of a clear dome head filled with lights and lint. Woodella hired this hybrid contraption to do her dirty work. And she was happy because she didn't have to pay it.

Dak, the tenant who lived next to me, was originally from Antarctica. He was found frozen in a block of ice, carbon dated to be around 3,000,000 years old. He still had remnants of a fern in his mouth, which he continued to chew when he defrosted. An expedition team shipped him from the biological studies base located near the coast.

He walked around the apartment complex hunched over and carrying a club. On Saturdays he formed drum circles with his family who were also found at the same dig site. They pounded on rocks while his wife grunted loudly. Sometimes his kids broke from the group to chase moths. His arms displayed various painted designs. One picture looked like a woolly mammoth, or it might be a close up image of wool – I couldn't tell. Another picture on his body looked like lettering quite possibly from a time before a tangible system of writing was invented. I did say, "Hello," once. But he chased me around swinging his club, belting out strange primitive monosyllabic words.

One day, Woodella called a meeting with Dr. Weebeep and Dak. Her plan was to have me eliminated. She grew tired of me calling her office to have the leaky roof patched, hole in the floor repaired, and toilet brought up to building code. "How dare he ask me to perform these ridiculous tasks," were her exact words. She asked for suggestions on how to have me taken out.

"How 'bout me build fire, den push him en when he not look," Dak suggested.

"👋 🌀 🌀 ❖ 🌀 🌀 ❖ 🌀 ▪ 🌀 🌀 🌀 ❖ 🌀 □ ✕ 🌀 🌀 🌀 ? ? 🌀 ❖ 🌀 □ ❖ • 🌀 🌀 ❖ 🌀 🌀 🌀 🌀 🌀 ❖ 🌀 🌀 🌀 ❖ ✕ 🌀 🌀 🌀 🌀 ▪ 🌀 ? • 🌀 ❖ ✕ ❖ 🌀 🌀 🌀 ❖ ✕ 🌀 🌀 🌀 🌀 ▪ 🌀 ? • 🌀 ❖ ✕ ✕ ▪ 🌀 🌀 ❖ □ ❖ ❖ 🌀 🌀 🌀 ▪ 🌀 🌀 🌀 ✕ ✕ □ 🌀 ❖ ✕ ❖ ? ? ✕ ❖ ❖ ❖ • 🌀 🌀 ❖ ✕ 🌀 🌀 🌀 🌀 🌀 🌀 ❖ ✕ □ 🌀 • 🌀," Dr. Weebeep said.

Woodella replied, "Good idea Dr. Weebeep, but I'm not sure I like the idea of placing a thermonuclear explosive device in the oven of his apartment. I agree, it would completely obliterate him. But I don't like changing a light bulb, so could you imagine the repairs the building would need after that thing detonates? Plus, Homeland Security might have a question or two."

"👋 🌀 🌀 ❖ □ □ □ 🌀," Dr. Weebeep replied.

"No apology needed. I think we should simply raise his rent to astronomical proportions until he commits suicide. Ooh wait, I already charge an inordinate amount for the third world quality living conditions, and he hasn't done himself in yet. Maybe we can use certain parts of your idea, Dr. WeeBeep. I've heard that fertilizer is explosive. Why don't we fill the trunk of his car with fertilizer, and have a trigger mechanism detonate it when he's off the property? I'm sure you can wire something to explode."



I catapult out of my sleeping spot and run over to the basement window. I think I heard shouts and gun shots. Woodella is in handcuffs as a SWAT team member directs her to an unmarked car. My phone rings. It's the FBI intern.

"Hello. Your leads proved very beneficial. It turns out everything you...er...your cat said, was true. She planned to kill you. In fact we found a mass grave of human remains buried in the mulch behind the rental office. At first we thought someone threw out some really bad Chinese food, but Woodella immediately confessed to all crimes."

"What about Dak and Dr. Weebeep?" I ask.

"Oh yeah, we're not going to prosecute them since they weren't connected to the mulch crimes. They were only conspiring to kill you, which isn't a real crime. After they perform one hour of community service, we're going to hire them. Dr. Weebeep will make a great janitor and maintenance guy. Plus I find him attractive. And Dak will make a wonderful field agent. We're working on a case involving the local community college, and he will blend in perfectly undercover as a student."

"So, it's alright to come out of hiding?"

"Yeah sure. We left you a gift basket of coupons and treats at the top of the stairs, because of your efforts."

"Really? Thanks!" I press the red button on my phone, and gather my things. "C'mon OptiMiss, time to go to the surface. Finally!"

I reach the top of the stairs and peek through the slightly open door. I notice the gift basket with a card attached. I step out of the cellar and open the card. OptiMiss Prime lays on the floor behind me. I read out loud: "On behalf of the US of A, we thank you for your service. And your landlord has been reassigned."

OptiMiss Prime's eyes widen and she runs away. The gift basket makes a loud click and begins to smoke.

Shortcuts

by

Nick Romeo

“I decided to take the shortcut home by sneaking through the back lawn of a funeral home up the street from me. My earphones blasted Biomechanical Degeneration, so I wasn’t attentive to my surroundings. I tripped over the cord powering the mechanical reindeer. A swarm of micro robotic gnats flew out of the reindeer’s butt, and burrowed into my skin.

“It was the best I ever felt. I awoke each morning and catapulted into my clothes. Then I ran to work, which is usually a driving distance of 45 minutes, but I made it there in less than five. I ate random chunks of scrap metal for sustenance. The best part about this diet: I never had to drink any fluids ever again. Sometimes I simply added oil to the inside of my ear canals. This procedure provided food for the gnats inhabiting my braincase, keeping their buzzing sound minimal. And if I may be slightly indiscreet, I also never had to use the bathroom again. The downside: my breath always smelled like a scrapyard.

“I was able to complete one year of work in 12 minutes at my computer programming job, thanks to the quantum computer the gnats helped me build using an old telephone, coffee maker and several rubber bands. This computer also had a direct wireless link to my brain, making it 100% hands-free. Not too long after, my coworkers became angry over my job skills. They said: ‘I should slow down. I’m making them look bad. And learn to milk the job – no sense in getting it all done at once.’ But I tuned them out with a high decibel foghorn, which I emitted from my auditory cortex. Most of my coworkers resigned.

“In short time my mundane job turned into infinite mindless boredom, so I decided to hack the CIA, FBI, IRS, DEA, and NSA simultaneously during lunch break. It was

too easy, so I went on to hack the USA's enemies: Russia, China, North Korea, and Antarctica. Before the break ended, I ordered pizza for the remaining workers in the office using the accounts of these rogue nations.

"We heard the sound of helicopters above as we finished our illegally gained foodstuffs, then a thunderous explosion. The building shook, and a small section of the roof broke open. Several people slid down a rope through the gap formed. Each person wore a different three-letter jacket: CIA, FBI, IRS, DEA, NSA.

"Then another group entered sliding down the same rope. The first man wore an Ushaka, and held and held a Kalashnikov. The second carried nunchucks, and was wrapped in a Tai Chi uniform. He jumped through the hole, initiating a series of somersault flips before getting into his signature Needle at Sea Bottom stance. Soon after a penguin flopped into the space, munching on a small fish. The last guy who wore a snazzy navy blue nehru suit jacket got stuck, plugging the breach. He shouted, 'I will nuke America, and Sony Entertainment,' while he madly kicked his legs in the air.

"The man with the IRS jacket stepped forward, 'The jig is up. We don't know how you did it, but it's over.'

"My boss put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'I made a deal. My hidden nanny cams picked up your online activities, and also how you would eat various metal objects such as the stapler, stapler remover, and desk supports. I contacted the authorities, and they offered to give me several extra deductions on my taxes, a helicopter tour of Fort Necessity, and a two-week on-call honeypot for all the information I had. Sorry, No hard feelings – just business.'

"It was then the gnats flew out of my body and latched onto my boss. An intense sawing / cutting sound emanated from the swarm, as bits of flesh and splashes of blood flew throughout the room. The guy who was still stuck in the ceiling shouted, "Don't ruin this new suit.'

"My boss' skeleton stood motionless for a moment, while everyone froze in disbelief.

"The penguin laid an egg.

“The swarm then flew into the skeleton and built wires, motors, reinforced joints, and LEDs. The robotic skeleton rotated its head 360 degrees then stated, 'Wow, I never felt better, folks. I have a sudden need to dance and sing. Let's go to the club and pick up some chicas.' The skeleton began moonwalking across the blood soaked floor, skipping over organs and tissue remnants.

“The man in the CIA jacket mustered the nerve to speak to the robotic skeleton, 'You should join our team. We have a need for someone...err...something with your expertise.'

“No. It comes with me,' the guy with the Kalashnikov and vodka replied.

“I demand to own this. I must reverse engineer the technology, then sell it for half the price,' stated the guy in the Tai Chi uniform.

“The penguin laid another egg.

“The guy stuck in the roof screamed, 'My citizens must not have this technology, or any technology whatsoever. Unless, of course, the technology is used against our enemies.'

“As the men in the alphabet jackets drew their guns, the room started spinning and it went black.”



“Yes, please set that over there,” The Doctor instructs the nurse wearing the tight red and white vinyl nurse uniform with fishnets and spiked heels. He slaps her ample backside. She trips, and falls while holding the filled bedpan.

The Doctor continues, “Apparently, the gnats built a cybernetic nest behind your liver to use as a base of operations. They drained your blood, and then designed a superhighway. This highway led straight to your heart, which was replaced by a mini

computerized hydraulic power plant. Your circulatory system was exchanged with fiber optics and stainless steel braided hoses. I did see the residual evidence in your bloodstream, such as left over copper strands and motor oil. Unfortunately no one will believe your story, even though there have been many reports of strange technologically advanced gnats flying around and harassing picnickers. It's human nature to not believe the warnings until the volcano erupts and everyone dies, or in this case, until all humanity is under the control of robotic gnats. Anyway, the surgery team and I supplied a new heart we repurposed from a deer roadkill, and your arteries and veins were replaced using mini PVC piping we acquired from the hardware store. By the way, your boss was reported as missing.

"Do you think I'll be ok?"

The Doctor chuckles, "Yeah, you'll be just fine. Sure, you were dead for several hours or days – I'm not really sure, but you're on the mend now. But hey, everyone dies - it's a part of getting out of bed each day. In fact I died once, and it wasn't too bad at all." ¹ Well, I must be going. I have a hot date with my new ugly girlfriend I met online after I hacked someone else's profile."

"Doctor, what if I need your help?"

"Oh, that's no problem. I told one of the nurses, if anything happens, simply place a pillow over your face and hold it there until you stop squirming. By the way, someone is here to see you. He or she, I can't really tell, mentioned you both are friends. See ya later."

The Doctor exits, while the nurse continues to attempt standing. "These outfits The Doctor makes us wear," she quietly mutters. She slips again. This time she hits her head and passes out.

The door opens slowly. I can't see who enters.

The penguin jumps on my bed. "Gaw, Gaw, Gaw," she bellows. She uses her beak to rip the hoses from my arms.

"Ahhh, STOP." I push the button for help. The pager goes off in the pocket of the unconscious nurse.

¹ For more information regarding The Doctor, read The Sabbatical, published by RoundUp Zine - Winter Edition Vol. 3.2 page 16, 2016.

The penguin slaps me a few times with her flippers then pulls out a gold plated revolver and aims it at my face.

Boar

by

Julie Kim Shavin

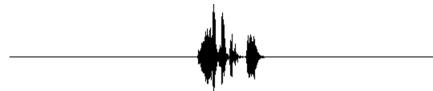
I don't know why I call it a rhino when obviously it was a hog. It was brown and thick and huge, a fleshy rectangle, or more of a box. But actually it was not that huge, only hog-sized. I had never touched it, fed or bathed it, but it was mine. And for some reason, it was near the ceiling, held in place by beams. I didn't realize I lived in a house with beams until then, had simply not looked up. The ceiling may have been wood, like the wood-paneled ceiling I once had, in a house with lower ceilings generally, but this particular ceiling was very high, maybe 16 feet, and in a beam, or probably two (how else would it balance?) was the rhino or hog, suspended, helpless, though there was no struggle, no movement at all.

I can't say I loved it, though it would have to have been a pet, but it was precious to me in some unnameable way, and I knew it had to come down. Of course it had to come down. It didn't occur to me to wonder how it got up, and whether that might be a clue in getting it down. In the end, I didn't need to expend any effort, because shortly after seeing it caught, or rather, fraught, though, again, there was no struggle, but only a strange and silent kind of acceptance, it fell. It fell with a large crash, right on its back, and I knew the back was broken. I don't remember sobbing or anything even close to it.

I remember wondering what to do, but before I could do anything, I saw something unbelievable, something incredible: it started to dissolve. I knew this meant it was dying, and I felt helpless. This is not the way death goes or comes, but there the rhino – my rhino – was, dissolving into discreet masses, masses that were jelly-like, and then the masses began vanishing, as though evaporating, and the rhino-hog was no more. I had experienced no emotion but a kind of sadness and shock. There had been nothing I could have done to save the poor hideous thing.

And then something else happened, which is that I saw a tiny movement and then more movement: it was ...was it possible? Yes, it was ...regenerating, and before very long, I don't know how long, it was back. It was itself again and I was glad, if flummoxed. And then, before I could think too much about what had happened, it started dissolving again, getting smaller and smaller as a whole, until finally it was a token – an actual token, a shiny silver thing with some turquoise, like one would see on the neck of a guitar – the "arms" were as the leaves of a clover, so it was like a two-leafed clover.

And then the token disappeared and the animal, which didn't have a name, and which was obviously a brown hog but with a rhinoceros horn, or maybe boar would be a better term, was again before me. It was not silent, as before, but in some kind of agony, yelping and yowling. And there was a sloshing sound. I guess I didn't think too much what that might be; I only thought of saving it, and suddenly realized that I could call the animal hospital, Compassion Animal Hospital was its name, and I dialed. But Compassion is not the one I really wanted. I couldn't think of the name of the other one, which for undetermined reasons (perhaps they traveled and Compassion did not) I preferred. What came to me was Utopia or Ulysses, but neither was right. Perhaps it was some combination I couldn't recall, and since I couldn't recall it, I couldn't call. So I was waiting on Compassion while it continued to yelp and yowl and the sloshing sound continued. No one came. We were alone and remained alone, and then it was over. It had died of hunger; I knew this. The sloshing was the stomach crying for food. It had not died of a broken back after all, of some freak accident amidst a freak circumstance, but of something as ordinary as starvation, and I felt really bad about that, because that I could have attended to.



The thoughts never went completely away. They came and went, they were before and after, and sometimes during. Basically, when he had reached up and around with

his left arm in the hospice bed, I had thought it was for me. I had found out on day 6, quite by accident. Well, not really accident. We didn't speak on the phone much, were not phone people; in fact, he was not good with any kind of conversation. No, our relationship was something other, something, I thought, as did everyone else, smaller, less consequential, less meaningful: superficial, silly, and so forth. When we met, he was done in and so was I. We were both fleeing. That our bodies were in love and that he was in love, in general, did seem, at least the former, absurd, and I had never phrased it as "in love," but there it was. We were not together often, only a few days here and there. I was, after all, married, if miserably.

So he'd had a stroke, the worst kind, a brain-bleed, and languished six days without sustenance, to include water. In hospice, they explained, you make the person comfortable, but you do not extend life, and I asked and asked how this could be comfort, with only a sponge dipped in Sprite to suck on. They considered it, treated it as rhetorical, especially since I was not family. He sucked desperately, like a neglected newborn. He had most likely been reaching for the sponge, but that didn't occur to me then. Over and over, and then I stopped and began rubbing something on his chest to aid breathing – but I don't know why this was allowed when water was not. One thing they said was that he was unable to swallow. Yet occasionally he coughed, a big, loud, racking smoker's cough (though I heard later they found no cancer), and when he coughed he reached up to cover his mouth and smooth his mustache. Neither of those would be instinct, and struck me as strange, if he was really gone. But they explained that he was not completely gone, and I was mortified to hear it.

Yes, his eyes were open. One was bloodshot, on the side that couldn't move. The other stared, bluer than I'd ever seen. I didn't realize until later that all the blariness from the chronic insomnia was gone, and, of course, there was no moisture in the body whatsoever. His tongue lolled; his breathing was ragged and hard. But when he coughed like that, he swallowed – I saw and heard him. Still, they threw me out "for asking too many questions." "We'll see you at the service," they said. That was that. And it wasn't until weeks later that I realized he had died, not of the stroke directly, and not from organs' shutting down, but from thirst, though of course, if he could have

moved, he could have gotten water. He could have gotten the sponge, which at that time, would have been his only, first, and last, love.



In a common and gross way, it makes sense the hog had a horn and thus seemed like a rhino. He, the dead, and I – our bodies – were insatiable, which would include just being by one another's side. We had to be this way, or head on a lap, or one behind the other pushing a cart in the grocery. But to this day, friends say, it would not have worked out. "He loved you, but that's all." That you felt alive and comforted in a cold and frightening world when you were next to his warmth meant nothing. That is animal stuff. That's what they say and what I thus say. It's true I did not love him. If asked, I always said, "he made me feel safe."



Oh, but that's too easy, it would seem, which I hate to say, not because it's not obviously true, but because it is an intrusion: here I am, outside stepping in, forcing a step from in to out. But, forgetting that for now, it is too easy. Life is not always like that, and a good story never is, and anyway, who said anything about a story? I am relating real things and which included the pig, hog, rhino, or boar, whatever it was. It doesn't matter. Things are not always so neat, fluid, so easily symbolic. It is true it could be just that, that I was thinking of him, and how he appeared then disappeared. Or how I appeared and disappeared, but no, the former makes more sense; it was he who was left hanging. Then again, also I. Things, including a good story, are more like a good crossword puzzle. One has four of five letters in an answer and the answer makes perfect sense, and still it is wrong. The last letter determines it. He wasn't reaching for me. He was pointing. But after I pulled his arm fully around to hug me, he didn't point again, so who knows? We don't know. We don't have that telling letter.



Now it is today, as now always is, even though it is always yesterday too and maybe tomorrow, yes, of course tomorrow, though we don't know it. As a convenience I'll say that, early afternoon, I took my depression for a walk with the dog. All around me it was dark, although the sun shone brightly. It was a dark brightness, as though the sun were false, a man-made thing, as though there were some master behind it dangling it. It was not about the sunglasses, although it is true I couldn't get the music in my pocket to play, a small device I'd purchased to help defend me against the exposure, by which I mean, not just bright light in the eyes, something that had bothered me even as a child, but exposure in general. I saw a phrase after this bad feeling had gone on for about a month: exposure anxiety, and thought, I have this, though it was associated with autism, and I was not autistic. But the world, at least during this depression, had come to revulse me. Revulsion is the only word I can think for it, though repulsion would do as well. But revulsion, to me, seems to incorporate the physical aspect better. The houses are revolting, the leaves, the trees, sticks, rocks, even green, my favorite color: the yards. I can no longer look at or stand the quotidian. This isn't really new, but was always masked. There were always distractions. The distractions are gone, and I'm not certain how or why I am this naked.

It was the quietest it has ever been in the neighborhood, this day after the holiday, and it sickened me, who loved quiet. I knew it was a luxury to fall into this sickness or to maintain it, but I was sleeping strangely well, and had spent three decades sleeping horribly and losing every other day. My life had become all about sleep, that sweet and sacred chamber. So I wouldn't change drugs, even with a depression so severe the ideations were constant. I knew I wouldn't act on them, though, so what was the point of moving to yet another drug? I had already changed them, weaning off one and onto another, and then cutting back when I was too jittery, too uncoordinated; I was now at only a 1/3 the smallest dose. The remnants of agitation were still with me but without that third, I didn't sleep at all.

When weaning, first the depression lifted, and I couldn't believe it. One morning in the hot bath, a ritual involving epsom salts for pain, I was listening to a rousing song on the tablet someone had given me, and thought to share, adding, let's dance! I noticed it was 8:45 in the morning. I had not seen morning without being hideously sick in all

those years, those thirty. And then this. And then that: within a month, the crash. And the jitters, the muscles in knots. This very day, it was still like walking through blood, blood of the sun. Every step said No. It was an effort to keep going, like the body was locked.

My friend had encouraged me to buy a warm coat, because I had said I needed one, that I couldn't fight the muscles and the depression AND the cold. She said, do it, and I said maybe, as though wanting to be cantankerous, needing attention, needing to shoot myself in the foot. What do you mean, maybe? If you get out and walk and it raises serotonin, then depression will lift some and you can do something for another person. Only then will you feel better. That's what she said – but she doesn't get depressed, she said, and doesn't understand it. What I mean is, depression doesn't care about other people; it is selfish. It chooses you and takes you for a walk with the dog. But I understood what she was saying, because I was empty. I didn't care about anyone or anything. No amount of shopping or book-buying or any other satisfying of needs, like movie-watching, could budge it. I was bereft and had no idea how emptiness could be bereft. There was no warmth anywhere and now I said maybe and only maybe would I buy a coat, because I knew the coat was only about the body.

Anyway, the walk was an insularity, as though the world were a nut-funhouse mirror. At one point, I couldn't see at all for the glare, and the dog led. He found the path for home, and I followed. And though I wanted to speak to no one, had looked only at sidewalks or the ground, safe places, for some reason, when he found the path and I exclaimed that he had, a woman saw me. And I joked. I said, hm, time to get him certified with a vest and all, a service animal. Indeed (or something like it), she responded. I had always talked with people easily, to the amazement of my daughters, who did not, one moreso than the other. I explained to daughter 2, though, that this “talent” of mine was just the flip side of anxiety. One side is avoidance, the other is extroversion, yammering, as it were. Too, I had liked people while talking with them, like the old joke, I like humanity; it's people I can't stand. But with me, it was liking people, though I detested humanity. That's a big subject, since I'm not sure how I can hate humanity when I see it as just a bunch of robots prey to chemistry, upbringing, even climate. At any rate, I would bond in an instant, or so it felt. Now it didn't feel that

way at all. I had no desire to speak or to listen, certainly not to joke. Everything was just too dark, but it happened. Then, mercifully, we were home, or something like it, because the revulsion was everywhere.



I was thinking about how when the pig or hog or rhino or boar died, I felt nothing, nothing but “alas, hunger,” and feel nothing now. I did not feel suddenly alone, though I feel the most alone in my life, ever. I did not feel unalone either, as in, well, that is that. It had been there for me to save. My friend, the one without the depression, says, as a species, we are far from responsibility. It is all about being happy, these days. Am I? Am I happy, happy happy? It used to be about responsibility. I did try to save it, did I not? But I didn't love it, which means couldn't, the way one doesn't love or not love a black cloud, unless the land is parched, I suppose.

And now, with the dog on the bed, I am thinking about how, yesterday, he jumped but couldn't quite make it up, so I had lifted him, with great difficulty. He was getting older, like me, and when the other dog attacked, he jumped down, fell, rolled, twisted and righted, and I worried about his spine. He had short legs and a long body. I was sure I loved him; there were all kinds of signs. But everything was vanishing, it seemed, and I didn't know when it would all come together, how long it would last, or if it would matter – if anything did at all – because it is dark in here with the one small lamp, the ceiling is low, and no one needs rescue. I live for dreams, but am not speaking of them here, no. There is a rustling of leaves and branches over the deck roof, which is rife with holes. I have wondered what might fall through, what the next thing will be. I have wondered whether the weight of any animal or of being animal is not too much to bear.

Two Works

By
MG Stephens

Time, etc.

Time and time again, now is now, then is
Then, the future is possibility,
But not a dead certainty, its round shape
Only imagined in storms of the mind's

Eye, a wheel not so much of commerce as
It is an engine of one's own feelings,
One's anxieties, one's projections, one's
Net of experiences roped off in

This arena that is mostly informed
By some events which took place in the past.
This too shall pass. This too whether good or
Bad for us one day, like us, will be gone.

If I keep my side of the street clean, is
That really enough? Yes, say the angels.

Musings

There is no Muse like the old one, nothing
So reassuring as that familiar
Face, walking hand in hand down the local
Streets, our Rialto this avenue, our
Albion this city, our place in the
Universe right where we are located.

This is not to say that there are not things
Which need improving. I am a messy
Person, haphazard in my domestic
Circumstances, to say the least, I am
A work in progress, even as the good
Muse is a kind of human perfection.

But I make oatmeal in the morning, cook
Dinner, and try to be an open book.

Two Works

By

John Swain

On the Scour

Snow geese darken the fog.
Shut-in, the black river golden in bliss
beneath the igneous hill.

Boar, bear, fear, awaken,
undress, cross the river
on broken quartz,
then disappear to the trees.

Grey cape, the rain-spinning earth,
the fallen leaves, a wailing ring
forged to bind the rising world.

Painted on the rockslide and scour,
people wonder at the eagle,
the mountain glances inward.

Black mountain, the ancient mountain
lifts the iron sky
of my life,
all that she does not reveal.

The cold Ozark stars
flower white fruit

between the winter branches.

Of Many Cliffs

I head the coyote, alone,
I heard the owl,
I heard the moon skirt
among the firs.

Snow and smoke,
the mountaintop grows
pale as thought questioning
the ramhorn dawn.

Canyon sound,
the mountain shadow
of lifting falcon cliffs.
Her maiden daughter,
the diamond river carves
a stone into empty
like the first word
my heart sickled to give
such of myself, human
as you are wild.

Untitled

by

Christina Tolmer

i.

she is not a broken girl
the animal that claws at caged walls
exists as a beating organ framed in ivory talons
living within the confines of her chest

it was not placed there by any master
nor forged in the fires of any tragedy

they took their first breaths in tandem-
the savage beast snarling beyond her breast
and her, the girl with trickery behind her eyes

and the only thing you need concern yourself with,
my dear

is when next she'll set it free

ii.

there's a noise in my head
it does not speak in words or phrases
it never offers to sing me a lullaby

but hums quietly, distracting, in the most inopportune of moments

in others, it becomes an unbearable din of sound
rather than a whisper of white noise, impeding concentration

there's a noise in my head
it takes the shape of daily frustrations
of imagined outcomes
and bouts of random insanity, in an effort to keep sleep away

it tugs at opinions
reveals insecurities
drags fears and worries to the surface
scratching their way out of hiding

if you could simply hand me the volume control
for this noise in my head
it's long past time for me to go to bed

iii.

he was a storm
and she was swept up in the winds
drenched by the rain drops as they whipped around

but when she became the hurricane
he was the only one that could tame her torment

iv.

i do not need to be completed

i am not an unfinished puzzle or a ruined vessel

i do not have holes where my most vital of organs should be, begging to be filled

i am not breakable, made of fragile porcelain of which the cracks are already shown

i have filled every chink in my armor with stronger steel

i have picked up every piece and reinforced with the strength of my own will

i do not need to be completed

i have spent years discovering the perfect facets with which to do just that

i don't need to be completed

The One They Call Shaggy

by

Wes Trexler

This is not noir and you are no Peter Lorre, though you may look a bit like Sterling Hayden. Hardboiled? Yes. Fiction? No. You are as real as dirt in a tailored houndstooth three-piece hemmed by hand in Kathmandu--a clarinet case stuffed with unwashed American cash and clandestine papers in a false bottom.

All true, all real. As cold as the ultramod stainless steel and glass walls of the international airport in Sao Palo where you sit, noir on your mind.

And what about you? The facts aren't kind. You've been beaten by cops, arrested on false pretenses, slapped around by femmes fatale; called "My hero" by a young stranger--a blond stranger in a crowded Wall Street foyer. You've been used and accused of crimes you didn't commit, pulled political stunts in public and politicized crimes under veil of night, swinging paranoia around like a censer for the past few years. And before that, on the West Coast, you were trailed by private dicks; spun around in daylight car chases down south. You've crossed porous borders and blown through visas, wiretapped parties unaware; told lies, scuttled ships and misrepresented yourself and your credentials. You've used a foreign passport in criminal pursuits, kept files on your friends, missed essential clues and once--only once--you were pistol-whipped by thugs in a deserted Latin American canyon, but that part hasn't happened yet, not now, as the AC catches up with the sweat on your brow--ground floor waiting room for your connection to Lima--so you must be thinking of other things right now. Dark things that already happened. Credit card frauds. Blown deals. Broken hearts. Big drug debts to immigrant syndicates in Brooklyn. Court dates missed in transit and all those

lugubrious ghosts in all those phantom flophouse bunks where you burn through the acid static with Jazz and any simulacra of Jazz.

Nothing soothes you in this shiftless state, in your solitary noir mode, self-imposed, always alone now that you can't stand to be lonesome around so many busy people. Every word of this is truth, but not every fact pans out as it seems. Those clandestine papers are little strips of purloined blotter. Your lawyer stood for you in court, fronted cash for your fines. The Albanian floats your street loan, and even the wannabe mafioso will leave you alive and uncut to stomp out of the desert dust on your own, and when you do you'll have good things on your mind; sweet girls you knew in their prime; foreign holdings off the books and off the grid; some nutty prof in Ontario who put you on her syllabus. Other strange truths too noir for nonfiction. And how you will ever get out of this alive the only mystery to solve--a silver string of light in a darkened hall.

Back in the city the New York cops hold scattered dossiers on you and surveillance tapes of your cohorts in action. They got a code name for you. Apparently, you're the one they call "Shaggy." Your lawyer swears her phone is tapped by the FBI. You used to sleep with her periodically even though you thought she maybe was a government plant. You wound up sleeping with her best friend and her sister too, fairly sure they were not government plants. But it was Brooklyn, and unavoidable--and you actually find it kind of sad that anyone could be so impossible to get along with as you tend to be.

How does it get like this? A quicksilver life of occult gestures, false pretenses and overwrought sunsets? Hurried exits, jimmed latches, preposterous interrogations amid overt conspiracies and covert deeds? You remember jumping off the busted sloop into the breakers of a pitch black North Atlantic beach, a duffle bag full of audio files and notebooks and research chemicals floating up on the surf beside you. And the old fedora you went back in to rescue later; being sandblasted half-blind by relentless dune winds, accruing silica in your frostbit ear canals. It was a real fedora, made in Holland, wide-brimmed felt that you found in a swollen gutter that night years and years back--last millennium back--riding a borrowed bike through the sloshing rain to Andorra's in Hilversum. A sentimental hat worth saving, put away now someplace safe in Florida. But really, the question isn't how you end up with a life like this, but why you would

choose to build your life this way. And if you don't want this life, why not get out? And if you can't walk away, what's all your freedom worth if it cages you in?

You daydream of Lima, if you'll even make it there this time; and how much you wish you could be like that madding black fedora, just dusted off, put away safe somewhere.

In fact, though, you don't look much like Sterling Hayden. His blond was always a bad-luck cloud, so far your fortune's framed just so by the thinnest shimmering lining. It's too late for veiled innuendo now. Now there is no Cold War morality. There is no post-war era and there never will be again, so you breath yourself calm and await the next security shakedown and all the trouble you haven't yet gotten yourself into.

All Things Scarlet

by

Carter Vance

Coming down with something's case,
fever flush of card suits taken
too literal, whiskey-faced haggling
with diner shop case radio dials,
with dusty countertop linoleum for
a place to rest comforted hands;
I am no longer in darkened
rooms with chalk sketches,
with star charts searching June
skies for dusk.

The road polishes, near-reflecting black
of graceful shadowing leaping grandly
from pulpit page to dreaming ink,
it carves a winding gold river band,
a miner's lung of bespoke ring fingers
from the sketch chart physician's
notes we made of each other
(flopping haircut, skin strawberry milk shade).
Whirring, fan clatter cuts speech,
to hung ribbon strings from ceiling,
to adolescent party paper chains,
shedding their old tones for

something stronger played:
electric, with feeling.

Lead

by

Dominic Ward

Slow jumps up the day, here come sprightly day, dawdling up into the sky and so vanquishing, though dormant, the night. Underneath the slowly commencing hour up jumps Armistace the star-shine, a mist of a man, ghosts in his veins, his spirit weightless on his waters as they ceaselessly wash to the very last angle of his corporeal self; until that day he had commenced the vapours and kilograms had returned to his meat. And upon his hill quick with green and the red iron of the fecund earth coupled with moon-shine long as it had been, he took up his jaunty pen and with it at its angle he intended to mark the prescription. Of healing was his trade, and yes, a healer of next to none, and so quick they came for his answer, all of them that could stand the egg-cracked road, its yolk wet underfoot and tricky on the roots, searching as they were for their kindest stops.

Healing was his earth, man of earth as he was, with music in his bones did he undertake his work, with his teeth set on edge did he make his prescription, some lamb come for the rescue, grease in his eye, like scum oil, his lanterns all a-fuss, and so flew down Armistace onto his ledger, take this ointment I name, and the poultice thereof must abide there, until the lanterns seem to you clear again. And well would the housewife be, to stick herself to his plan, her rotting internals leaching out the mineral oils, and so along with her cure, which would to be in and of itself no small thing, she must take the replenishing waters.

See, this is all for Armistace a very simple thing. As one breathes and takes his food, so too does Armistace negotiate his vocation. His earth stands still, he stands feet down in the earth, the worms eating his aching flesh, and thus he takes for himself a new skin.

Take the night 'fore last. It was as ordinary until the snuffling began, a quick beat of jingle jangles at his front door and in the moonlight too. Gasp, he thought. Whatever might this new trouble be. For trouble it surely is. Not that anything else would come to the very door of my house this late. And not that he would be mistaken: a young

one, one of his more cherished patients, wet slick with heat, slow, heavy beats forcing their way out from her chest, reporting to him through the air that lay between them. And there was something else, the look of a true tempest in the little girl's eyes, her breath the furious distemper of a great storm, her gut ever so slightly swollen, gurgling and rushing with its oils, and the light and yet distinct smell of electricity, the nitrogen of discharge, ions of both poles fervent over her conductive skin, as red as ore, the colour pressing outwards from the infected meat inside, a fire storm inside her little body.

'Well, then, I see you have brought me a case! And my lovely daughter at that. You shall have to bring her in. Mind the step. Wait for me in the surgery, the second room on the left. I must now fetch those items that I shall need.'

Upon return to his company, he closed the door behind him and set the leather wrap in which he carried his instruments down on the edge of the quality stainless steel observing table. Addressing his patient gently, noting in the same moment the signs available to him – the lustre of her eyes, the degree of flame on her cheeks – he would then procure her for the table and begin with her vitals. Observing to the depth required by the case, he would then turn to her parents and inquire into the circumstances of the heat.

- She was good this morning, or at least as I saw her. She woke at her usual time...
- ...at?
- Seven. Then we called her down to the table and, she ate, didn't she?
- Yes, she ate well.
- And then?
- Well, to school. She came home in good spirits.
- Not perfectly, though.
- No?
- She told me that on her walk home she had been flustered by a dog, a mean brute.
- Oh?
- Yes. She wasn't injured, but she had been stirred.
- Which dog was this?
- The old one from the Lodge.

- Right, I'll be speaking to M- in the morning.
- Darling, the poor thing meant no harm.
- Please, continue.
- Sorry. Yes, after taking tea, she went outside to play in the yard. That was when that ghastly howling from the west began.
 - That cool change that came through?
 - Yes. It was strong enough to rattle the windows, as well as my bones.
 - And how long was she out in this?
 - Oh, only a few minutes maybe. I called her in quite soon. And then everything was fine until bathtime when she reported feeling chilled after she had dried and gotten into bed.
 - Yes, and then it all went very quickly from there to here.
 - I see. And now I have the picture. The essence of this thing is haste, or so it seems to be. There is an undeniable suddenness to it. The incident with the dog obviously opened her up to the possibility of invasion and the, again, sudden, gusts introduced the pathological energies. In her eyes too we see the image of a storm, a sudden and powerful tempest, boats on an urgent sea, tossed to the four corners. She is restless and sensitive, not lethargic and slow as is the case with more gradually evolving fevers; look how she shudders with each little fluctuation in the climate of this room.

Contributors

Robin Adams-Hays is a graduate of the University of Iowa. She earned a BA in English and Communication Studies. During her time at Iowa, she was admitted to the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop.

Miss Adams-Hays has had a colorful career history including DJ, lab technician, and bail bondsman. She taught English at the University of Minnesota - Crookston and in China as a Foreign Language Teaching Expert.

She did her graduate work at The University of North Dakota where she earned a Masters degree in English and a Ph.D. in Communication Studies.

Meghan Rose Allen has a PhD in Mathematics from Dalhousie University. In a previous life, she was a cog in the military-industrial complex. Now she lives in New Brunswick and writes. Her work has appeared in *The Fieldstone Review*, *FoundPress*, *The Puritan*, and *The Rusty Toque*, amongst others. One can find her online at www.reluctantm.com.

Adam Alonzi is a writer, biotechnologist, documentary maker, futurist, inventor, programmer, and author of the novels *A Plank in Reason* and *Praying for Death*. Check out his blog at adamalonzi.wordpress.com or his podcast at adamalonzi.libsn.com

Tetman Callis is a litigation paralegal in Chicago. His short fictions have been published in various magazines, including *NOON*, *New York Tyrant*, *Litro*, *Gravel*, *alice blue review*, *Identity Theory*, *Wigleaf*, *Salt Hill*, and *White Whale Review*. He is the author of the memoir, *High Street: Lawyers, Guns & Money in a Stoner's New Mexico* (Outpost19, 2012), and the children's book, *Franny & Toby* (Silky Oak Press, 2015).

Reg Darling lives in Vermont with his wife and cats. When he isn't writing, he paints and wanders in the woods. He was an outdoor writer of sorts in a previous literary incarnation, but has wandered off into the rest of his life. His essays have been published in *Azure*, *Backcountry Journal*, *Dark Matter Journal*, *The Dr. T.J. Eckleburg Review*, *Hellbender Journal*, *Hoot*, *Primitive Archer*, and *Traditional Bowhunter*. His work is forthcoming in *River Teeth* and *Timberline Review*.

Eckhard Gerdes has published books of poetry, drama, and fourteen books of fiction, including the novels *Hugh Moore* (for which he was awarded an &Now Award) and *My Landlady the Lobotomist* (a top five finisher in the 2009 Preditors and Editors Readers Poll and nominated for the 2009 Wonderland Book Award for Best Novel of the Year). He has also won the Bissell Award, been a finalist for the Starcherone and the Blatt awards, and was nominated for Georgia Author of the Year. His most recent books are a tongue-in-cheek work of creative nonfiction, *How to Read* (Guide Dog Books); a novel, *White Bungalows* (Dirt Heart Pharmacy Press); and a collection, *Three Plays* (Black Scat Books). He lives in Aurora, Illinois, and has three sons and three grandsons. None of them are named Robbie, Chip, or Ernie.

Allison Goldstein received her MFA from California College of the Arts. She has previously been published in a variety of literary and cultural publications including *Switchback* and *Maximum Rock'n'Roll*. Allison currently lives and writes in South Florida with her husband and two cats.

Howie Good is the author of *Dangerous Acts Starring Unstable Elements*, winner of the 2015 Press Americana Prize for Poetry. His other books include *A Ghost Sings, a Door Opens from Another New Calligraphy* and *Robots vs. Kung Fu* from AngelHouse Press. He co-edits White Knuckle Press with Dale Wisely.

Colin James has a chapbook of poetry, *Dreams Of The Really Annoying*, from Every Writer's Press and a chapbook, *A Thoroughness Not Deprived Of Absurdity*, from Pski's Porch Press.

Jennifer Juneau's work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize for Fiction, The Million Writers Award, a Sundress Best of the Net award, and has been published in numerous journals such as the *American Poetry Journal*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Evergreen Review*, *Fairy Tale Review*, *Seattle Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in New York City.

Samantha Knight was born and raised in Vernon, BC, and has been writing since she was a young girl. During her studies at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan, she was published in the local literary anthology, *Papershell*. Since graduating, she continues to write every day to become a better writer, as it is her foremost career, and hopes to become a published novelist. In the meantime, Samantha runs a blog, <https://sknightwriting.wordpress.com/>, as a platform to upload various original writing and visual works for review and critique.

Will Mayo lives in Frederick, Maryland with his 6-toed black cat, his two rooms packed with unread books and the basics of an elementary Dagwood sandwich. It is his ambition to one day create a perfect nap. In the meantime, he looks for an answer to the cosmic question: Is there life before death? From dusk to dawn, he struggles to find just where in the mess of all his papers he put that last humdinger of a detective novel. He soldiers on through the night tapping his keyboard. "Just one more word," he says as he writes the lines. "Just one more word."

D.M. O'Connor is from a small village on Lake Huron. After many nomadic years, he is based in Albuquerque, where a short story collection progresses. He contributes monthly to *The Review Review* and *New Pages*. His writing has appeared in *Barcelona Metropolitan*, *Collective Exiles*, *Across the Margin*, *Headland*, *Cecile's Writers*, *The Great American Lit Mag*, *Bohemia*, *Beechwood*, *Fiction Magazine*, *After the Pause*, *The Great American Lit Mag* (Pushcart nomination), *The New Quarterly* and *The Guardian*.

Nick Romeo is a multidisciplinary artist, musician and writer. His writings have been published in various literary magazines. He was interviewed for *Pankhears't's Fresh*

Featured of December 2015, *The Dailey Poet Site* of February 2016, and received press on featuredpoet.com in August of 2016. Nick lives in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania with his wife and cat, Megatron.

Raised in Georgia, **Julianza (Julie) Shavin**, is a writer and visual artist who adopted the Rocky Mountains as home in 1993. She works as a specialist content editor and is a licensed professional proofreader who giddily shares that “language is my first language.” Pikes Peak Arts Council has conferred upon her Performance Poet and Page Poet awards; she also has numerous honors through The National Federation of State Poetry Societies. Her working-entitled fifth book, *Closet Optimist’s Creed*, is slated for summer 2017. She serves as President of Poetry West (www.poetrywest.net), plays cello with the Pikes Peak Philharmonic Orchestra, and collaborates with New York-based spoken-word artist Hank Beukema on a Youtube poetry / music series which has 23 pieces thus far. Her favorite words are solace, haven, pilgrim, oasis and Mommy.

M.G. Stephens is the author of nineteen books, including the recently published short poems in *Occam’s Razor* (2015), as well as the critically-acclaimed novel *The Brooklyn Book of the Dead*; the award-winning essay collection *Green Dreams*; and the memoir *Lost in Seoul* (Random House, 1990). Recent work has appeared in *Missouri Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Hollins Critic*, *Rain Taxi*, *Notre Dame Review*, *PN Review* (UK), and *Brooklyn Rail*, which monthly serialized his boxing novel *Kid Coole* from May 2015 to June 2016.

John Swain lives in Louisville, Kentucky. His collections include *Ring the Sycamore Sky* (Red Paint Hill) and *Under the Mountain Born* (Least Bittern Books).

Cristina Tolmer is fueled by caffeine, beer and sarcasm; has an affinity for video games, comic books, horror movies, dive bars, and the actual living person she created back in 2002. Her day job mostly consists of teaching people how to properly use technology, but she's been passionate about writing (& creating in general) since pretty much around the time she learned to coherently string words together. She's a firm believer

that if your mind allows it, there's no world that doesn't exist, and no adventure you can't embark upon.

Wes Trexler is a literary scribe and underground filmmaker based out of New York City. Recent stories have appeared in the *Wisconsin Review*, *Willow Springs*, *Story | Houston* and elsewhere. He was born in West Virginia and studied writing at Eastern Washington University. Mr. Trexler lives on a sailboat and plays clarinet.

Carter Vance is a student and aspiring poet originally from Cobourg, Ontario, currently studying at Carleton University in Ottawa. His work has appeared in such publications as *The Vehicle*, *(parenthetical)* and *F(r)iction*, amongst others. He received an Honourable Mention from Contemporary Verse 2's Young Buck Poetry Awards in 2015. His work also appears on his personal blog *Comment is Welcome*.

Dominic Ward has two works in print: *The Hunter*; and *prism and graded monotony*, both on JEF.

Masthead

Amanda Chiado's poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart, and Best of the Net. She has twice attended Squaw Valley on scholarship in fiction and poetry. She is a graduate of the University of New Mexico and California College of the Arts, where she was the poetry editor for *Eleven Eleven*. Her poetry appears or is forthcoming in *Best New Poets*, *Witness*, *Cimarron Review*, *Fence*, and *It Was Written: Poetry Inspired by Hip Hop*, among others. She works for the San Benito County Arts Council, is an active California Poet in the Schools, and edits for Jersey Devil Press and Weave. She lives with her husband and two children in rural Hollister, California where she sings, dances and collects horror-movie memorabilia. Visit her at www.amandachiado.com

Christina Continelli is a poet, fiction writer, and essayist living in San Diego, California. She is an alumna of California College of the Arts MFA program in San Francisco. She has also performed spoken word throughout California, both on her own and as a member of Goatsong Poetry Conspiracy. Her work has appeared in *The Bees Are Dead*, *Blast Furnace*, *Hobo Camp Review*, *Slice Magazine*, *How2*, and *Monday Night Lit*.

Erika Figel, aside from teaching at several universities in New York City, is an avid sports fan and doting mother of two daughters. Her poetry has been published in *580 Split*, *Switchback*, and *Watchword Press*.

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