



Bitterzoet Magazine

*Volume 12
November 2015*



Note from the Editors:

We are all building our own versions of the Taj Mahal, to people we used to love that we don't remember anymore.

We write to remember.

We read to remember.

We created this magazine so we don't forget her name.

Always for you, dear
reader,

Pattie and Wes

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Cycles
A. M. Clark

he eats an orange
every night
before going
to bed

early morning
fades into
the stagnant
ache of summer
he waits

the pitted reflection
of the kitchen window
parts like skin
along the edge
of his knife

Conversations in Santa Cruz
A. M. Clark

we talk in
half-hearted courtesies
it's hard to mention
the sun as
it settles
like a child into
the bruised
line of the horizon

our voices carrying
with the sound
of the ocean's
constant turning



THE GHOST WAS GROPING FOR HIS HEAD

Rob Hill

The first time I saw the ghost was when I got up in the middle of the night to fetch an orange from the kitchen and found him on hands and knees in the hallway at the top of the stairs. We had only been living in the house for a little over a week and at first I wasn't sure what I was looking at. I thought perhaps my mum had left a bag of laundry in the hall and I considered it quite careless of her. Someone wandering around at night in search of an orange could easily trip and fall down the stairs and break her neck. But then I noticed whatever it was moving and my heart lodged in my throat. Was it a creature of some kind? It was too bulky to be a dog. I then realized I could see the wall behind it, like it was a reflection in a window. And the reason it looked so strange, and so hard to identify, was because it lacked a head.

My parents thought I had gone kooky when I told them about it in the morning. They both accused me of walking in my sleep. And getting them to agree on anything is no mean feat. But I'm not an especially imaginative person and knew what I had seen. I am pretty resourceful though, and that afternoon I biked down to the public library in town to look up the history of our house. Without hesitation the librarian pointed me in the direction of a set of dusty books in a far corner. The house, it turns out, had been owned by a sea captain who one day, in an apparent fit of despair after his wife had succumbed to one of those glamorous-sounding 19th-century diseases, had plunged from the attic window. However he had neglected to aim properly and had been rather gruesomely decapitated by the iron fence that surrounded the property. The poor ghost, I thought, crawling around on his hands and knees all over the house groping for his head. I really felt sorry for him. I resolved that the next time I saw him I would help him look for it.

After leaving the library I rode my bicycle out to the cemetery where he was buried. His was a modest tombstone, steeple-shaped, at the top of a peaceful hill. Beside it was a stone fountain, leaves floating in amber water. A wedge of blue sea was visible in the distance beyond a grassy ridge. Not a bad view for a sea captain. Second only to being

buried at sea, I supposed.

I wondered if the ghost would accept a substitute head. There was a puppet store in town and it was possible I could find a wooden puppet head of roughly the right proportions. Finally I decided against this. If I lost my head I wouldn't want it replaced with a wooden one. I wondered how easily a head could be reattached. There was some glue above my father's workbench and I thought that might be of use, should the head ever be located. Having your head glued on did not strike me as ideal. Wouldn't it be difficult to turn your neck? You'd be forced to face forward at all times. But maybe that would be better than nothing. If it were me who was missing my head I guess I wouldn't be choosy. It must be unbearable to lack a head, to be deprived of nearly all your senses.

Several nights passed before I saw the ghost again. He was in the kitchen searching through the vegetable drawer of the refrigerator. He appeared to grow momentarily excited when he found something round and vaguely head-shaped, but it turned out only to be a cabbage. He tried to fasten the cabbage onto his neck but it didn't fit properly and he simply looked ridiculous.

The next morning I went up to the roof and out onto the widow's walk, where I looked out at the sea—the foamy waves, the whoosh of breakers against the craggy rocks. Birds landed on the crooked weather vane above my head. This was where his wife must have stood watching the horizon for his ship to return, wondering if each voyage was the one from which he would never return. Off battling pirates and sea monsters, scurvy and mutiny. And yet she was the one who stayed home and perished first. How sad. Then it occurred to me that maybe his wife couldn't recognize him in the afterlife without his head. If my mum came in without her head I don't think I could recognize her either. Maybe by her clothing. She has a rather distinctive yellow dressing gown which I might recognize. His wife might recognize his captain's hat, but he no longer has a head on which to wear it. And he needs the eyes in his head in order to find his wife so they can live happily ever after. This was simply intolerable. I couldn't stand to have him wandering

headless around our house for all these years. I can't bear to see anyone miserable. Even a dead person. Especially a dead person. It was entirely unfair.

Maybe the head rolled into the cellar, I speculated. That seemed like a good place to look. Armed with a flashlight I went down the creaky wooden steps, gripping the handrail tightly. I had the distinct impression the cellar was hungry and would be reluctant to give me up. But playing the beam across the dank space all I found were empty mousetraps and some broken bottles in a corner. Nothing that in any way resembled a sea captain's head. There wasn't anywhere where it could be hid.

As I turned to go I heard the clink of bottles. I spun around. A ghost shaped like an old butter churn in a tangled wig gripped the captain's head, fingers in its mouth and nostrils. With a heave the ghost sent it rumbling across the floor towards a triangular formation of old bottles which he must have set up while my back was turned. He was using the poor captain's head as a bowling ball. The head rolled with a noticeable wobble and struck only two of the bottles, knocking them over.

"Can I have that?" I asked, pointed at the head which lay facing up in the corner.

"No!" snapped the ghost in a highpitched whine. "It's mine. I found it!"

"But look how it wobbles. It's not a very good bowling ball, with all those protrusions and things."

"That's true," he admitted. "And sometimes it sneezes itself into the gutter."

"I have something I think you'd find more pleasing. Will you trade with me?"

He considered. "Okay, but only if it's better."

I rushed upstairs and returned moments later with the cabbage from the refrigerator.

"It's cold," he complained.

"Yes, but it'll warm up. Look how smooth it is. And it's soft so you can poke holes in for your fingers if you'd like."

The ghost was convinced. He let me pick up the captain's head. I dusted it off. Tendons and icky things dangled from the severed neck which made me a little ill to look at. I took the head upstairs to the dining room where the sea captain was searching through my mum's credenza, running his hands puzzled over a punchbowl. I tapped him on the shoulder.

"Here you go, mister. I found your head for you."

The captain took the head in his hands and, with a twist, screwed it back into place. It fit perfectly. He looked at me and gave a kind smile. Then he melted away.

I never bothered to tell my parents. They would just tell me to stop eating snacks before bedtime. But I know this was not something I dreamed up. Like I said, I'm not especially imaginative. But sometimes when I'm playing in the yard and I glance up, and when the light is just right, I catch a faint glimpse of the captain and his wife holding hands on the widow's walk, gazing out to sea.

And I don't know about you but I find that pretty goddamn endearing.



For Laura
Jenelle D'Alessandro

After a historic but awkward comet landing, the robot probe Philae is now stable and sending pictures -- but there are concerns about its battery life. -BBC (11/13/14)

On the night when you were
born on the bedroom floor,

Philae's journey had just delivered
ten years to the hurtling comet;

your daddy cut the cord while
a wall of seven paramedics assembled

in split seconds of silence; sister
slept in a blanket of quiet nearby.

I had oddly just Instagrammed a wall
of golden skulls from a cellar bar in San Diego

when the doula called to announce
your arrival. News outlets were reporting

an awkward robot's comet landing: *Philae*
was pressed up against a hard wall of some kind.

Who would imagine how your mommy had
pressed palms and face to the hardwood

wall of the bedroom floor, the hour
you arrived? I wondered aloud as we

toasted from the table, in the shadow
of those gilded faces: the dust that we are.

Philae, close as Philia: I want to know -
could a comet
contain a memory?

saudades
Jenelle D' Alessandro

armchairs receive us like a
brute force attack of
colloquial gestures: eliciting homesickness for Lisbon,
dragging out the inevitable
elastic strictures of half-planned dialogues
(forgive us of all our erasures)
galvanizing some astuteness along the way
heroines and heroes sniff out the same fears
irrigating aspect and agency as
jackals creeping around the wounded in this city
kaleidoscope cobblestone for a 64-bit viewfinder
leveling out all playing fields: now fallopian look like
matterhorn on mother's old apron;
niceties spread out like handkerchiefs over
orators in ancient Rome, all of your statements
pewter edges dug into the travertine
questioning the bones in history –
redacting the assumptions of our youth.
sullied from years of exhaustion we
trace the cost, since rumor has it the
uberman is always hungry, double portioning
vicissitudes in every hometown:
writing the president letters meant for Santa Claus as
xenophobes push to bear all borders.
you stop to say *the watermelon rinds season summer so well*
zealous to let the low tide in Estoril roll over the sugar.

Dial Tone
Amanda Rose

our mother named you after a lighthouse keeper from a book she read
once and i always wondered when she told me that if she thought you
would be her salvation because it certainly seemed that way with how
she spent those hours secluded in her room talking to you on the phone
while i grew up and angry with the world.

when i was six you made me a tugboat with a heavy chain on it and
painted it the brightest, ugliest neon yellow because it was the only
waterproof paint we had around the house which didn't particularly
matter because i was in love with it like i was sort of in love with you
and i took it everywhere with me - even into the kiddie pool and the bath
until the paint chipped and faded and the chain grew rusty and i grew
up and found other things to play with that weren't quite so broken.

when i was eight they put me into the hospital and cut half of my side
open - a scar so long the doctor told me to tell people i'd been in a knife
fight and laughed when i tried to kick him during a reflex test but i
digress - and took out bits and pieces of me and shut the whole thing up
again so that later i lay there in a hospital room for exactly one week
with a shamrock on the windowsill and a foil balloon and a drawing of a
lighthouse that you had made for me posted on the wall and i looked at it
every day and imagined the waves crashing against the shore and never
once realized that you were the lighthouse and were watching over me
through it.

when i was sixteen i went mad. there isn't much to say about that, but
one day you called me and you promised to save me if i could manage
to keep myself together enough to attend school or at least hold down a
job and all i could think of as i lay there in the dark and listened to the
incessant whirring of the cicadas was "are there lighthouses in connecticut?"

when i was eighteen the last words we shared were stubborn and angry
after you shouted at me in front of our mother and put me to shame for

my behavior and all i could do was think as you drove me home to my friend's house in your black pickup truck through the cold december night - think how you didn't understand and you never would because you had left me a lighthouse drawing on a hospital wall when i was eight and joined the navy and never came back to me again and now we barely knew each other and you couldn't understand what meant to be abandoned to him when she had barely enough energy to keep herself together with bread on the table.

you drove off that night and we didn't speak for five months because i was too stubborn to pick up the phone and call you first to say sorry, sorry for real and then getting ready for work one day a voicemail with our mother's voice told me that you had died.

when i was eighteen we buried you in the southern sun under hard red soil in a casket covered by an american flag after strangers in formal uniforms carried you in and saluted and left again and our mother was left holding the flag like a baby in her arms - that triangle seemed so small and now it sits in a glass box with a portrait of you above it. a flag for a child seems like a poor exchange but that's not something i thought about then because i didn't think of anything at the time and i continued to not think for a full year and then i went mad again but that is a different story for another time because this is a story about lighthouses.

at no particular age or time your tombstone was put into place and of course there was a lighthouse on it and now it stands watch over that patch of dirt where you existed for a day in a closed box with no light to shine your way and i think about your belief in god and existence and wonder if when you lost control of your motorcycle on that ramp if a light shone down from some heavenly rampart and an angel told you "not that way, there are rocks" and showed you how to sail home safely. not that i believe in that sort of hokey but you did and that's what was important.

when i was twenty-six i climbed two-hundred steps to the top of a lighthouse and stood on the walk and stared at the waves and looked for you in the clouds but you weren't anywhere to be seen.

i turned twenty-eight day after last and ten years ago you died and ten years ago you were ten years older than i was then and now i am as old as you were then and it doesn't hurt quite as much you know? but now i find myself wondering what sort of conversations we could have had and how many nieces and nephews i could have laid claim to after you married that girl you were just waiting to ask - and really all i wanted to say was that i never got to say it before but i'm sorry and i miss you, can you call me back as soon as possible?

In Fiction

Robert T. Krantz

Sunday in Autumn
the moment belongs to death
in an ordering pose
the inaccessible rooms of elderly men,
the frozen homeless,
caretakers and tourists passing by.
you alone are holy
the small girl in red-checkered pants keeps no secrets,
conceals nothing
it takes you longer to arrive here,
like thunder
to my lightning
here again in the hard rain
acrobatic thought
my blood pools around my feet as I die standing,
"concordia," you say, "shhhh"
finger points to nose
"walk with God."
my Jonah, my Job,
my Isaac,
bound & burning.
I didn't even have to try--
flint gave way to spark
gave way to flame
you pen your name in strange calligraphy
black ink spills Rorschach
spells Sara,
spells Mary.
Sunlight passes through the window
forming a shadow cross on the carpet
you lie down and spread your arms wide

Silk Scarf in the Beak of an Eagle Passing Over a Mountain

Robert T. Krantz

Brown barn swallows nested behind the microwave this spring
now chirp radioactive, their young fall to the ground,
unformed.
a slider turtle cuts through my lawn, swamp seeking, I suppose.
we snip clear nylon cords at your ankles, wrists
hold hands in a Gordian knot,
the tangled touch notwithstanding.
my blue herringbone work-shirt—the one for interviews and funerals--
hangs on the coat rack in the living room,
your sign is unknown, orphan,
I envy that grey slate and unscripted dawn,
in the evening, I describe your hips to a stranger,
though we've never met knew their shape by touch
and swivel.

Personal Ad
Janice Worthen

Rules, like horizons,
mislead you.
You don't always have to tie the knot
just so.
You are free
and you are lovely,
even with your teeth tucked in.
Free to

jump off my horizon
without rope or note.
If you bounce, you bounce back
into pretense, a thrill but no climax.

Dear, cast no reflection.
Dangle (not).
Be not limp (useless).

Be my tiny predator.

Observe
my herd of words
resting on a hillside,
weary from a day's pronunciation.
How tender they smell.
How their syllables sizzle.

They wait for you.
They can't help themselves.
They love to be mouthed.

Let the seams come loose (no one's watching).
Let the form unfold (no one sees).

Listen to the panting as the teeth sink deep.
Your heart has become a red-lipped beast.

Ride that beast all the way to the sun.

Bring me back the ashes.

Writing in Glass
Janice Worthen

Being young is taking
any hand that opens,
running forward
when the light says, "Don't walk."

Growing old is knowing
the way a hand opens
reveals an inclination to take
if given the chance,

that a raised eyebrow
precedes a raised fist.

I sat at a table in the dark for hours
willing myself to ask for a glass of water,
but the waves closed over me,
and the fish turned their heads.

They say
silence is golden,
family/God is love.

But words
cut corners,
shake the walls.
They toppled the roof
of my childhood.

I hid in closets,
under beds,
inside playground equipment,
but the sky loomed overhead,

heavy on my small body.

For a while the sky turned green,
cats flew on angel wings,
and insects played chess on the porch.

I became used
to the strangeness
of the familiar.

My true form
came back as déjà vu.
I walked into the real
as others walk into dreams—
through a veil,
things fuzzy
then exactly what I expected.

I learned truth again
as one learns a foreign language.
Correct conjugation
of human actions: control, controlled, controlling.
List of terms: friend, enemy, frenemy.
Fluency of use: sometimes "how are you" means "I hate what you make me."

We form packs by crippling each other
and call this devotion.

We sit the child at the table
and make her hate her thirst.

This we call education.

I was pliant, so I was complicit.

I was the stranger's voice in my head

whispering

*I must not speak
for fear of echo.*



Things Said in Passing
Janice Worthen

we send messages
in the birds
but they hatch
without mouths

some time ago
we must have forgotten
how to solve this

everything feels the same
and I regret that faces
change us

I open the door
but as I pass through
you're already leaving

a carousel of settings
asphalt to woodland

impossible distances
achieved by turning

we've met these trees
over and over
and still haven't learned
to appreciate shade

and the birds beakless
still struggle to sing
you blind them
so they won't have to watch
the sun rise



Landscapes

Lori Grawley

Animals carry within them some dream,
a landscape where they seem best to belong.

Diana Starr Cooper

i. Lawns

This is my heart, this land, barren
as a finished book. Barren
except for strange plants
that scratch your skin
or smell like rain.

24 I would plant the whole yard
with creosote, let the grass wither
and return to clay, but you,
you are trees,
dark firs casting thin shadows
across our bodies
wrapped in expensive green.

ii. Driving Home through Rain

The buffalo grass rasps
on its dry stalks. The mesquite
has lost its leaves and stands black,
shrugging off the wind that rattles
the empty nest in its branches.
The leaves of the creosote, yellow
and small as jaundiced children
whisper to the sky:
rain, rain, rain.

Even the yucca
green and dangerous,

withers. Its rotting pods
heavy with black seeds small as tears,
shake loose in the wind and leave bare
the bleached stalk straining
against gray sky.

[stanza break]

Soon rain will come
wash this womb I travel in
and leave me still soiled inside.
I will carry home the weight
of this sky hanging low
like the canopy of grief
over our bed.

iii. What I Cannot Be

She waits in the water
like I wait in the rocks.
She pours her wet dreams
into your ears, stopping them
against the sound of falling rocks.
Her liquid body opens for you
washes you clean, pulls salt from skin
in a hollow suck.

My body is dry.
It hides in mountains,
piercing angle of Organs,
heavy curves of Franklins.
You find me north of El Paso,
sleeping above Highway 54,
my arms curved about my head, body
bent and twisted and dry.

I do not wait for rain to wash
dust from my bones.

I'll take it when it comes.
But you, you look for water,
your legs divining
underground flow.
The caress of stone
holds nothing for you
but conquering.

vi. Without Shade, We Wither or We Thrive

A tree sprouts from my fingers,
sprigs spring from green flesh,
branches spiral upward from my heart
through my chest into my lungs
[no break]
growing trees of alveoli, bronchi
through my breath and out my mouth.

When I was a little girl I slid down trees,
pines fallen against each other in the wind.
The bark bit my thighs, my calves.
Wisteria wrapped me in purple fragrance.
I sat in the crooked arms of oaks
struggling to grow in salted sand.

I thought I was tired of trees.
Maybe I only needed freedom from shade
to let bark rise through my body,
let my fingers split and bud
and burst into leaf and flower—
a place where you could come and sit in the shade,
a branch you could cut,
pull back my first three fingers
and use what's left to divine water.

v. When It Rains

The cranes return to the Bosque,
float down between purple plumes of salt cedar.
My arms split and bud and burst.
You suck blue water from between my fingers,
dance in my skin, rise wet from soaked ground.

Author Biographies

A.M. Clarke lives in Utah right now. She lives by herself and rarely publishes.

Jenelle D'Alessandro lives and works in Los Angeles. She is working on her first chapbook, a collection of homophonic 2nd/3rd gen. translations of Whitman. You will find her on Twitter @freshgreenbeans and penning 50-word reviews of contemporary poetry at <http://jenelle.ninja>.

Lori Gravley writes poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. She earned her MFA from the University of Texas at El Paso. She has published poems in a variety of journals recently including *I70 Review*, *Burningword*, and *Crack the Spine*. She travels the world for her work as a USAID consultant, but her home is in Yellow Springs, Ohio. You can see more of her work at www.lorigravley.com.

Rob Hill was born in Flint, Michigan, of all places, and currently lives in New York City. His work has appeared recently in *Armchair/Shotgun*, *Akashic Books*, and *Eunoia Review*. He occasionally posts rags and bones at hellospider.wordpress.com.

Robert T. Krantz was born and raised in Western New York. He studied creative writing and English Literature at both Niagara County Community College, NY and the University of Akron, Ohio. Robert also published a chapbook of poetry and prose entitled *Leg Brace Legato* (2013). His work has appeared in *Akros Literary Review*, *Bare Fiction*, *Bitterzoet*, *the East Coast Literary Review*, *Poetry Quarterly* and the *Watershed Review*.

Amanda Rose is a solitary soul who thrives in dark green and shadowed places dappled with sunlight. She spills bits of herself in ink and image and occasionally pulls them out to show the world. Her current home on the internet is aimingforthatdistantshore.tumblr.com

Janice Worthen lives in the Bay Area. By day, she is the shipping coordinator for Small Press Distribution. By night, she writes poetry and freelance news stories, blogs, and snores. Her poems have appeared in *The Rectangle*, *Switchback*, and *Your Impossible Voice*.