

Vol. 9 : Issue 1

ISSN: 2523-2126

antae

A Journal of Creative Writing



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On “Relatability”

by Jonathan Taylor

Thus we have the apparently paradoxical situation in which the reader is forced to reveal aspects of himself in order to experience a reality which is different from his own.

– Wolfgang Iser

I’ve been thinking recently about the word “relatable” (noun: “relatability”), a term which comes up a lot these days in discussions of texts and creative writing workshops (“the characters / events / dilemmas / emotions in this work are so relatable...”). The idiom is almost always used in an approbatory sense, as in “this text is good, because it reflects me in some way – my concerns, my feelings, my life.” “The literary text acts as a kind of mirror,” as Wolfgang Iser puts it – and, indeed, it *should* do so, if it is to be classed an aesthetic success.

But where does that leave genres where the mirror is cracked, or distorted, or shattered? Where does that leave, say, the grotesque hall of mirrors that is satire? “Satire,” claims Swift, “is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody’s face but their own.” So presumably it is not “relatable,” at least not in an egocentric sense.

Swift’s view of satire always reminds me of Orwell’s critique of Dickens:

‘Dickens attacked English institutions with a ferocity that has never since been approached. Yet he managed to do it without making himself hated, and, more than this, the very people he attacked have swallowed him so completely that he has become a national institution himself... Before I was ten years old I was having Dickens ladled down my throat by schoolmasters in whom even at that age I could see a strong resemblance to Mr. Creakle, and one knows without needing to be told that lawyers delight in Sergeant Buzfuz and that *Little Dorrit* is a favourite in the Home Office. Dickens seems to have succeeded in attacking everybody and antagonizing nobody.’

As Swift would expect, it seems no-one – cruel teachers, corrupt lawyers, do-nothing bureaucrats – seems to recognise themselves in Dickens’s ferocious satire. Satire makes nothing happen, as Auden might have said.

No doubt there is some truth in this. After all, one of the most well-known philosophies of laughter is the so-called “superiority theory,” which suggests that we laugh out of a sudden feeling of superiority. We laugh at someone slipping on a banana skin because it is not ourselves who slipped. We laugh at satirised characters because they behave stupidly, grotesquely, bizarrely, and we do not. This is the opposite of “relatability”: pleasure at (an apparent) absolute, hierarchical difference between ourselves and the subject of our laughter.

And yet underlying that absolute difference is sometimes a hidden, perhaps unconscious, sense of identification: it *might* have been us behaving absurdly; it *might* have been us slipping on the banana skin. If we had done so, we would have looked ridiculous too. Responding to Bergson’s vitalistic version of the “superiority theory,” Wyndham Lewis puts it like this:

“Men” are undoubtedly, to a greater or less extent, machines... Men are sometimes so palpably machines, their machination is so transparent, that they are comic... If one of us exposes too much his “works,” and we start seeing him as a thing, then – in *subconsciously referring this back to ourselves* – we are astonished and shocked, and we bark at him – we laugh – in order to relieve our emotion’ [my italics].

Laughter, according to Lewis, arises from a “subconscious” self-identification with the comic “machine man.” Using slightly different language, critic Alexander Kozintsev claims something similar, when he suggests that “laughter is a mirror for Homo Sapiens... We are all equal participants in a single comic performance, laughing at ourselves and looking at others as if they were fun-house mirror images of ourselves.”

Comic performance, on this definition, somehow simultaneously encodes otherness and sameness, superiority and equality, difference and “relatability.” Consciously speaking, we might not recognise ourselves in the subjects of comedy or satire – but *unconsciously* we see these “others as if they were fun-house images of ourselves.”

Perhaps all this might be understood by reference to a very famous example of “satire” – or, at least, what I always think of as satire. It certainly has its exaggerated, comic elements, and is at one point called a “poison in jest.” This is *The Mousetrap*, the play-within-a-play in Hamlet.

Hamlet declares of *The Mousetrap* that “’tis a knavish piece of work: but what o’ that? Your majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not.” On the surface, there is nothing “of offence” in the play – it seems to depict something very distant from the world of Elsinore. And yet, of course, secreted within the text is a hidden “relatability,” whereby the King’s own murderous actions are reflected back to him. Lewis’s claims notwithstanding, Claudius doesn’t greet this moment of self-recognition with laughter (though arguably Hamlet does, with his triumphant “Ah, ha!”). Instead, he jumps up in fright and leaves. As Hamlet intended, the play-within-a-play has caught “the conscience of the King.”

In this case, “relatability” has nothing to do with reassurance, comfort, let alone a narcissistic reinforcing of the ego. Yes, *The Mousetrap* succeeds in “hold[ing] ... the mirror

up to nature,” but the nature it exposes is deeply uncomfortable, one that Claudius has tried to keep hidden. It reflects a self that he doesn’t want to be confronted with, and definitely doesn’t want revealed on stage.

So when we use the word “relatable” as a value judgement in literary discussions or writing workshops (and I acknowledge, reluctantly, that the term is here to stay), perhaps we should bear this in mind: that there are lots of different kinds of textual “relatability.” The concept works on many levels. Certainly, texts can often help us “to know we’re not alone” (as C. S. Lewis says in William Nicholson’s play *Shadowlands*): they can mirror our emotions, dilemmas, losses and laughter back to us, through others’ experiences. But they can also mirror our hidden selves, our repressed consciences, our secret desires, the monsters lurking in our ids (to paraphrase *Forbidden Planet*).

This is the dark side of “relatability”: in Shakespeare’s play, for instance, it’s not just Hamlet who is “relatable,” but Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and, for that matter, the players-within-the-play, too. To be “relatable” may be an aesthetic judgement, but it is not necessarily a moral one, as Orwell’s teachers, lawyers and bureaucrats might have understood.

– Jonathan Taylor is an author, editor, lecturer and critic. His most recent books are the short story collection *Scablands and Other Stories* (Salt, 2023) and the memoir *A Physical Education: On Bullying, Discipline & Other Lessons* (Goldsmiths, 2024). He directs the MA in Creative Writing at the University of Leicester. His website is www.jonathanptaylor.co.uk.

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Caged Bird

by Katie Beswick

In the narrow Msida yard where my daughter's ancestors grow lettuce: a greenfinch.
My girl reaches her hand and makes an open-close motion, little paw fist.

This house winds in a
 knotted
 spool
 all
 back
 on
 itself.

Mela... (It's true...)

A wailing sound.

The bird flits in its cage. No escape. Its chest, pounding panic, rises and falls. Rises and falls.

Mela. (Look.)

In the jelly heat, kittens luxuriate on the back step.
Rolling over they expose concave bellies, crepe paper
thin and too warm.

Mela! (Oh, they stink!)

At the back of the yard, a coop stuffed full of so many hens that who can count them? Black, white, brown. This one has a bald pink neck where her feathers have fallen out, or been torn away. There are doves too. Stuffed in smaller coops inside the bigger one, unable even to spread their wings.

Cats sleep on the roof.

See the elderly aunt in the blue dress, with thick knuckles? She could have married her kind boyfriend, if her father hadn't been the type of brute to snatch boyfriends by the lapel; to ban her from the cars of boys until she was too old to be asked anything but the time...

Mela, mela. (That happened. How sad.)

On the kitchen counter, mounds of eggs. The aunt counts a dozen into a brown paper bag, presses it into my hands. She says,

Qatt ma kellek bajd daqshekk tajjeb (You've never had eggs this good).

One of the uncles eats lunch — his face sags, collapsing at him from the same mirror above the sideboard where, as a child, he'd poked out his tongue, stained red with juice from sweet cherries. Another unmarried aunt adjusts his hearing aid.

The tabletop is apple green. Paint still missing from the corners where a cousin peeled it away, and then was punished — but that was then, when the table was brand new.

Mela. (Some things stay the same).

This morning out front a young man in his black baseball cap held up a tiny cage where a canary hopped from perch to floor and back again. Oh! an aunt cried, taking the cage from his hands and lifting it into a slice of sun falling through the shadows.

She opened the cage door.

A canary, ascending.

Mela! (How beautiful! How lucky!)

**Mela* is a Maltese word that can be used in a variety of ways to produce meaning based on specifics of intonation, gesture, context, facial expression, and mood.

Grief Song

by Katie Beswick

After Immanuel Mifsud

Night fell and cars lit their headlamps.
Night fell and street lights flared.
Night fell and the sky glowed gold.
Night fell and birds flew to their nest-beds.
Night fell and I waited at the window
hoping you'd be home by morning.
Night fell and the birds were inside me
flapping against the bars of my ribs,
they fashioned nests from panic.
Night fell and I was still at the window waiting,
I must have looked like a single shop mannequin.
Night fell and clouds flashed red.
Night fell and my fears now reality,
a door knock, a policeman stood alone.
He held his hat in the fold of his hands,
he held his chin upwards, slightly lifted,
he held his breath and I longed for my mother,
he held my gaze and I called for my mother,
he held out the facts and I wept as a mother.
Night fell and I stepped into darkness.

Wifedom

by Katie Beswick

After Sharon Olds

Across my hands taps spurt water
hot enough to use. My face cracking
in the warped mirror of dishwater. Flies from
the garden crawl on old food. Your
husband, if he's like mine in the evenings, all eyes
conveying his mood, like
he understands you as service to needs. Moisture
unnoticed on the ceiling. Condensation. From
heat mould sprouts. Stones
in the shoe of a soul. Resentment swells to a tip under
the boat of my marriage, like an iceberg, heavy.
Under me, a husband moves his pleasure like slow pressure.

Ledge

by J.W. Wood

to Mike and Nic

“But did you really... know him?”

The young man looked up at Howard Gilmour, his tone one of anxious enquiry.

“Sure. We were friends at Cambridge: you could say I taught Rod his first chords. Busked round Spain with him, the works.”

Howard’s attendance at the annual Rod Nicholas Convention was its highlight – at least, as far as Howard was concerned. Each year, Rod Nicholas fans gathered at the spot where he’d disappeared: a concrete ledge over the Grand Union Canal in Dalston, East London.

They listened to Rod Nicholas music, debated details of his biography and moped about the vacuous 2020s versus the sixties, a period that ended four decades before most of them were born. Rod Nicholas himself, creator of two critically-acclaimed albums which both stiffed on release, was last seen here on July 24, 1973.

The boy speaking to Howard was early twenties. He’d obviously bought the Rodney Nicholas myth wholesale. While this boy was heavier than Rod would have allowed himself to become – he was a vain old sod, our Rod – Howard noted the lank, dark hair and long fingernails on the kid’s right hand; the velvet jacket, drainpipe jeans and excess of patchouli oil. So this boy fancied himself as a guitarist. The next Rod Nicholas, even.

Howard wondered if this boy also shagged other people’s girlfriends, as Rod had. Not likely given that paunch, but you never know. A girl wearing clothes of a style Howard had not seen in fifty years piped up:

“Can you tell us your favourite Rod Nicholas memory please, Mr. Gilmour?”

Howard recalled lying on a mattress, listening to the moans and gasps as Rod had it off with his sister’s friend in their squat; Rod smoking so much weed his nostrils turned brown; Rod pissed up and driving like a lunatic through Worcestershire’s byways.

“He was such a spiritual person”, Howard intoned. “I have many fond remembrances. In particular” – he always told them the same thing to embellish the Rod Nicholas myth – “I recall one time, when I’d bought a new guitar. This one, as a matter of fact.”

And with a flourish, Howard opened the guitar case he’d brought along. He did this every year: a bog-standard K-brand acoustic guitar he’d swapped for a piece of hash in 1968. A sigh went round the audience. The girl’s eyes sparkled.

“Did Rod Nicholas play that guitar?”

“Yes he did”, Howard affirmed, leaving out the fact that Rod said it was the worst fucking guitar he’d ever seen, and that a shoebox strung with piano wire would have been better. “But what matters most is what he said about it. He said it would be stuck with me forever – rather like my memories of dear Rod, I suppose.”

Howard’s audience contemplated his words. Someone a couple of rows back put up their hand:

“Two questions if I may... can I call you Howard?”

Howard raised both arms in a gesture of expansive generosity. Of course. He smoothed down the creases on his waxed jacket – chosen to show he was still an outdoorsy guy, if perhaps no longer a hippie – and ran a hand through the fringe of his carefully-curated silver hair.

“Firstly, what’s your favourite Rod Nicholas number? And secondly, where do you think he went after he disappeared? Do you think he might be... still with us?”

Howard took out his tobacco pouch (he always did this, even if he hardly smoked these days) and rolled a cigarette.

“My favourite number? Either *Hear Freedom Chime*, I suppose. Or maybe *Four Minutes Until Morning*.”

“Doesn’t that one mention you?”

Howard grinned his bashful assent. He usually timed this move so he could lick the seam of his roll-up and light it while smiling sagely – and this year was no different.

“So they say”, he whispered through a cloud of smoke. Then louder: “What are the words again?” – even though he knew them by heart. His audience sang in unison:

“Four minutes to morning

Howard will come

Waiting to breathe

His prayer to the sun.

Four minutes till morning

Howard will fly

Then we can offer

Our souls to the skies.”

Howard waited until they had finished, then: “I’m so pleased you’re keeping his music alive. What a talent – a gossamer wing in a steel-hearted world.”

Howard's mind flitted to the sunny afternoon in early 70s England when Rod first played him that tune. He remembered watching long, bony fingers stained with nicotine flying across the frets of a Martin D28 guitar. Rod had tuned the guitar to some impossible key like F sharp minor 9, or something, and formed the most basic chords using five-fret stretches and other show-offy arcana from the expert guitarist's repertoire.

When Howard asked Rod why he had to go to such lengths just to play regular sounds like E major or A minor, Rod chuckled.

"Keeps 'em guessing", Rod grinned. "Got to build an air of mystery, Howard!"

Howard snapped out of his reverie, his focus warping forward five decades. He cleared his throat and checked his audience over. They would now be approaching peak emotional fervour.

He took a deep draw on his rollie. No doubt they were already crafting poems and songs in their heads that incorporated Howard's wilfully over-wrought description of his shagged-out, smoked-up chum into their own fevered imaginings.

"... and... and, Howard? What do you think happened to him?"

This was one of the top five FAQs (Howard learned that term from his post-hippie corporate career) he was always asked. His gave a response calibrated to meet the specific pitch of this year's celebrants:

"Dear Rod was a gypsy soul. I like to think he wandered off from here and ended up someplace else. You know, Goa or Koh Samui or someplace. Somewhere... more spiritual."

At this point, there were usually some further questions before somebody suggested repairing to the pub on Balls Pond Road that hosted this annual jamboree's evening session. The pub would play Rod's two records on rotation all evening, interspersed with studio out-takes, home recordings made on a two-track when Rod was fifteen, and edited snippets from the three interviews recorded before Rod's disappearance.

The faithful would step outside to smoke joints, discuss Rod's guitar tunings – ah, Rod's tunings! – his spiritual significance and his taste in hand-rolling tobacco before eventually falling into taxis or each other or both some hours later. The pub always had good wet sales during Howard's appearance at the convention, and usually made sure he got a share of the take.

But this year, things would be different. As Howard finished smoking his cigarette, he caught sight of an old man poddling along the canal towpath. Although the old man was still more than a hundred feet away, he held Howard's attention for some reason.

"Mr. Gilmour, thank you so much for your time", the organiser, a young drip named Barry or something, intoned. "Would you like to join us in the pub?"

Howard gave his assent, though he never took his eyes off the old man approaching them. The crowd moved off, Howard casting frequent glances at the figure who was now, beyond any doubt, following them. Howard took a final pull on his rollie and crushed it under a Cuban boot-heel.

The man was tall and lean, with close-cropped grey hair. His facial features resembled a relief map of the Ural mountains paired with an unmade bed. Who was he? He looked about Howard's age.

The group soon arrived at The Fiddler's Arms on Balls Pond Road. As always, Howard was asked if he wanted a drink and as always, he asked for a half of bitter. But this time, Howard didn't follow the group into the pub, excusing himself by saying he wanted to have another quick smoke first.

The young people slid into the pub on waves of naïve optimism and occult perfume. Howard sat down outside with his tobacco pouch, watching the old man shuffling towards him. Now he knew what emotion he felt – and it was fear. For some reason he couldn't define, this guy scared him – despite looking as harmless as an ancient insect preserved in amber.

"Hello Howard", the old man croaked as he drew nearer.

"Hello," Howard replied with hesitation. He could smell the old guy now: piss and filth. A tramp of some kind. Howard relaxed a little. But how did this guy know his name?

The old boy wore a Russian officer's greatcoat, despite it being a warm evening in late July, and a pair of ancient corduroy trousers that may, in a previous life, have been bottle-green. Straight-up early seventies gear. All that was missing was a Celtic spirit-symbol on a leather chain around his neck and a collarless shirt.

As the man sat down at Howard's table without being asked, a Celtic cross appeared dangling from a string inside the old guy's striped collarless shirt. Bingo – the full package.

"It's good to see you again after so long", the man intoned.

Those words did it. That drawl which merged privilege with panic, a Cambridge education with the anonymous life of the indigent.

"Rod?"

Then that sly smile, broad as an English summer sky.

"Got a smoke, mate? It's been a while."

Howard pushed the tobacco pouch across the rough wooden table to the man who would be Rod Nicholas and finished rolling his own. Soon he'd pulled out a packet of Bluebell matches and sparked them both up, and it could be 1973 all over again – apart from the dirt and stench emanating from his erstwhile friend.

Howard took another long draw on his rollie, then:

"What happened, Rod? Where did you go?"

Rod paused and took rapid, hungry drags, eyes closed as smoke fumed from his nose and mouth.

"I don't know. I just got a bit sick of playing and getting nowhere, I suppose. So I decided to disappear. Then I realised the less I did, the more popular I became – so I kept my head down. Mum and Dad collected my royalties, and I made sure they always knew where to find me. By agreement, they never told anyone my whereabouts. When they passed away I got my share of their estate, so I – well. I never really needed to do anything, really. So I didn't!"

Rod tapped the ash off his cigarette and turned his head half-on to Howard, holding the burning fag pinched between two fingers exactly the way Howard remembered he'd done half a century ago. Rod took another draw, then:

"So what brings you here? And who were those young people?"

"I'm here to talk to a convention of your fans, Rod. I do it every year."

"Oooh! My fans! I say. Well, now they can meet the real thing. Do you want me to go in and talk to them? I could tell them a thing or two, hey?"

"I don't think that would be a very good idea, Rod."

"Why not?"

"Let's just say they have a certain idea of who you are. Or were."

"Really? What?"

"Remember that night you pulled your sister's mate and the pair of you went at it like rabbits on speed next door to me in that squat? I don't think they'd want to hear about that. Nor would they want to hear how you were about to jack in the music and become a computer programmer. Or was it join the army? Anyway, there's a lot they don't need to know."

"Oh, but I'm sure I could" –

"No, you couldn't, Rod. Here's what I suggest: just piss off. Get out of here before one of them comes out and sees you."

Rod opened his mouth to protest but was stopped by Howard's next angry howitzer:

"Go on! Get out of it! Disappear! You'll thank me later. Here, take my number" – Howard scribbled his phone number down on the back of the pack of matches, the first time he'd done that in forty years. "Now fuck off. I mean it. Get out of here or I'll sort you out."

Rod got up from the table with glistening eyes, roll-up still perched between those slender guitarist's fingers.

"But Howard! Man! Why have you gone all bad vibe on me?"

Howard stood up, fists quaking in Rod's direction. Rod took the hint and shuffled away whence he came, down to the ledge at the Grand Union Canal. The door to the pub opened and the plump young man who fancied himself as the new Rod Nicholas appeared with Howard's half of mild.

"Mr Gilmour! Have you finished your cigarette? Here's your drink. We were just discussing the influence of Rod's trip to Tunisia in '68 on his playing, and hoped you might have some insights."

Howard took a final draw on his roll-up and pinched it out, feeling the angry blood drain from his face and neck. He reached out with a smile and took the glass of beer from the youngster.

"Thanks so much. I'd be delighted to join you. I do miss Rod so very much, you know."

Orientation

by Lisa Kouroupis

rose-colored clay shifts to slush
to ice then back again. *Repetition*
never surprises me a poet said—
the pine; the pine
needle vertical in the river,
by sunlight it twirls a few times,
gets absorbed in my shadow
then appears again; bright, sinking.

we are all aiming to face
the same thing: the killdeer small
at the shoreline, the group of girls
in shorts and college sweatshirts.
my hands pressed to the front
of their pockets, their thin suns.

Afternoon Moon

by Lisa Kouroupis

After Nicole Gonzalez

In the afternoon the moon
gets up from its desk,
goes to the bus stop. The moon
carries a backpack: pencils
and the ends of a sandwich.
It stands at the curb with the clouds
like a sweet question.

My First Song

by Matthew Ellis

I was maybe 5 or 6,
downstairs at my grandma's house
with the orange 70s carpet
repeating lines I had come up with.
Something of opposites, of ice and fire,
in a sing-song voice.
Reaching
Struggling to find the next words.

And my grandma loved me,
she did,
wanted the best for me.
No factory job like her or my mother,
I was to be a doctor.
That's why, when she found me
composing my silly song
she told me to stop.

And I did
for 15 years.
I even went on to become a doctor,
though not the kind she had envisioned
forgoing an MD for scientific discovery
and have come back
full of piss and vinegar
to what I started long ago

Ap-a-ta-pa-tit

by Haley Xuereb

Stench lingers beneath my arms
stretching knuckles against smooth white,
it speaks to me, saying—steady, steady.

Filling the hollow of my hips—more, more, more,
shattering my lower back—down, down, down.

In pieces,
it articulates me into a grid of water,
falling,
split,
a drowned box.

mirth mirth mirth

I wish kl-oding myself were easy,
as resurrection from a life.

I wish I could button up my mouth/eyes
so they wouldn't see me, wouldn't hear me,
would let me hide—
a specter in the streets,
running naked, reflecting in windows.

The streets of Valletta are narrow and long
so that t h e y have a hard time running,
ba-drowning through.

I say strange words like Triq Villegiagnon.
I spell them out,
hurl the letters—whispers, whispers,
melting on the pink-white-pink-white pavement.

And you turn to catch them.
you spell pressure/lambda/letters
p h y s i c a l l y.

Helpline / Hold Music

by Oz Hardwick

I fumble with the details like I'm shuffling a pack of cards underwater, awkward and slow, as rigid certainty gives way to mulch. I said / she said / he said nothing, and the rain blew through the open window, and the bus left town with nobody waving goodbye. Early Bowie on a cheap record deck. Pills swallowed in a stranger's room. Streets became sick veins, pumping poison in ever-decreasing circuits, and the city's flesh and bones grew tough and slow. In a seedy loft, I cut cards with rough speed and tied a snake around my neck. I said / she said / he said nothing, and the rain rained forever in a single night, the waters rising with all the predictability of a myth we take for granted. Forty years later, I am in a room full of straggly pot plants and empty boxes. The door may or may not be locked, but I'm too tired to check. The details are clear as crystals in a run-down museum, my pockets full of business cards of people I've already forgotten. Voices crack behind paper-thin walls. He says / she says / I fumble with even the simplest expressions.

Snowfall

by Mark Keane

Tony France came looking for me in the garden maze where I was pruning the hedges. “You can leave that for now,” he said. “Mr. Davidson has a special job for you.”

“What’s he got in mind?” I asked.

“I’ll let him explain.”

I followed Tony into the house, and up the marble staircase.

We waited on the second-floor landing for Mr. Davidson to join us. He led the way into a room with floor-to-ceiling shelves packed with books. Tiffany lamps in each corner cast diffused light. The Bocote floor was burnished to a rich, brown sheen. In front of one set of shelves stood a four-sided structure with a zig-zag arrangement, like an expanded concertina. Four grey plastered surfaces, nine-feet high and fifteen-feet wide, each with a six-inch wooden skirting board. Three plastic tubs stacked to one side of the structure bore labels that read Brilliant White.

Mr. Davidson pointed to the tubs. “You have been provided with six gallons of paint. Three coats will be required.” He adjusted the cuffs of his bespoke suit. “I want the final effect to capture the whiteness I witnessed following a heavy snowfall in Quebec in January 1981. You will receive credit for any paint you do not use. That credit is, of course, predicated on your achieving the requisite whiteness of the Quebec snow.” He paused, hands clasped behind his back. “On no account are you to get any paint on the wooden border or on the floor. No dripping is permitted. You will not be given any cloth or tissue. If you attempt to cover up mistakes there will be grave consequences.” He pursed his lips. “Joe Spain certainly regrets his carelessness.”

Muffled buzzing came from Mr. Davidson’s pocket. He took out his phone and checked the screen. “I have a meeting. Tony can cover the logistics.” He exited the room, every inch the autocrat used to getting his way.

I waited until he was definitely gone. “What did he mean about Joe Spain?”

“Joe Spain won’t be painting anything for some time.” Tony nodded his head slowly, eyebrows raised, making it clear he had nothing more to say on the subject.

“What’s the reason for the painting?” I asked. “What was all that stuff about Quebec snow?”

“Don’t ask me. I just work for the man.”

“Is it a test?”

“Who knows?” Tony puffed out his cheeks. “If it is, you’d better pass it.”

Up close, all manner of dimples, ridges, edges, and corners covered the four surfaces. “How am I to know if I’ve got the right color?”

Tony shrugged. “Use your imagination. The boss suggested three coats of paint, and he should know.” He glanced at his watch. “Time to lock you in for the night.”

He showed me a small adjoining room. It contained a cot with a Hessian cover, a wooden chair, and a chamber pot. No lights.

“Someone will be back at eight with your breakfast. Probably me or Ivan. Get a good night’s sleep; you’ve a lot of painting ahead of you. One coat per day. Not as easy as you might think. Mr. Davidson will check the final result on Friday.” He leaned a little closer. “I remember Joe Spain’s first night. He was cocksure. Painting a wall was a piece of piss, I remember him saying. He’s not saying that now.”

Tony locked the door. His footsteps faded, and an eerie stillness pervaded the enclosed space, inky black apart from a grey line where a gap under the door seeped pale light from the outer room. I lay on the cot, and didn’t sleep.

The following morning, Ivan Israel unlocked the door. I sat up, and checked my watch: nearly ten o’clock.

“I know I’m late, Taffy,” Ivan said, putting a tray on the ground. “Better dig in. You’ve got to finish the first coat by five o’clock. Mr. Davidson’s instructions.” He stepped back out of the room.

I found Ivan off-hand to the point of hostility. Tall and paunchy with a precarious comb-over and perpetual sneer, he always gave the impression I’d wronged him in some way. Nonetheless, I needed no encouragement to dig in. A top notch breakfast, but I expected nothing less from Mr. Davidson. Blueberry porridge, crispy bacon, waffles and maple syrup, eggs benedict, freshly-squeezed orange juice, and a carafe of Columbian roast.

Ivan reappeared in the doorway. “This is a one-brush job,” he announced. He handed me the brush, large and unwieldy with thick bristles. I turned it in my hand and saw white stains on the handle, dried paint at the base of the bristles.

“Is this what—”

“Same brush Joe Spain used,” Ivan interrupted. “I hope you do a better job than him.”

I thought about the wooden border, and Mr. Davidson’s warning about mistakes. “Do you have a second—”

“One-brush job. Mr. Davidson’s instructions. You better crack on, Taffy. No time to waste.” Ivan turned away but called over his shoulder, “Someone will bring you lunch at one o’clock.”

I stood before the structure. The dimples and depressions I'd noticed the day before appeared arbitrary. A series of intricate rucks reminded me of an animal's backbone. The light from the lamps threw complex shadows that caused the undulations and hollows to shift position. Hardly the best light for painting. Mr. Davidson was testing me and, as Tony said, I'd better pass the test.

I lifted the top tub, my arms wobbling with the effort, and lugged it over to the structure. Ivan provided no tools other than the brush, nothing to lever the lid from the tub. A hard plastic sheath ran around the rim that had to be removed before the lid could be released. I pulled and twisted, cut my fingers on the hard plastic, and finally ripped it from the tub. Using the key to my flat, I pried open the lid bit by bit until it popped.

My hands throbbed, fingernails broken, cuts stinging. I tore the hem of my shirt and wrapped the cloth around the cuts. The paint looked thick and yellowish—certainly not brilliant white. I tried stirring with the brush handle, but it made no difference. Five hours to go and I hadn't applied a single drop of paint.

By the time Hugh Peru showed up, I managed to cover the upper half of one surface. To reach the top, I stood on the chair from my room. Getting up and down from the chair, I worried about dripping paint on the floor and cupped my hand under the brush. The paint missed depressions in the surface. I poked the white tip of the bristles into the hollows, but the brush wasn't up to the job. The lighting was inadequate and misleading.

"Something smells good." Hugh held up a dome-covered platter. "Better eat while it's hot."

Unlike Ivan Israel, Hugh Peru was invariably cheery. A small man in his mid-thirties with curly black hair and an enormous moustache, he could have stepped out of a Velasquez painting.

He handed me the platter and moved to examine the wall. "You've made real progress."

"It's hopeless," I said. "The paint isn't going on properly."

Hugh shook his head. "The first coat always looks like that. You're too much of a perfectionist. I'll leave you to eat in peace."

I lifted the dome, and the warm waft of flavors got my digestive juices flowing. Venison steak in a red wine sauce, garlic mash, and white asparagus tips. A glass of wine to wash it down, and cheesecake for dessert. Mr. Davidson didn't skimp when it came to food. I refused to linger over the meal—no time for such luxury. By the time Hugh returned, I had resumed painting.

"How was lunch?" he asked.

"Tasty." I held out the brush. "How am I supposed to avoid getting paint on the wood with this?"

Hugh grimaced. "Very difficult. I suppose you need to be extra careful. We don't want a repeat of the Joe Spain incident."

“There must be a second brush I can use—a smaller one to do along the border.”

“Afraid not. Instructions from Mr. Davidson. A one-brush job, that’s what he said. You’ll work it out.” He patted my shoulder. “Better get a move on. You have to be finished by five. Ivan will be here to shut up shop.” He dawdled in the doorway. “You’ll get it done. I’ve every confidence in you. You’re nothing like Joe Spain.”

I picked up the pace, moving down the first surface to within three inches of the wooden border. Any closer and I risked getting paint on the wood. I needed a smaller brush. Using my key, I hacked off enough bristles to fashion a precision brush. I should’ve kept the knife from lunch—it would’ve come in handy to cut the bristles and to open the other tubs. No doubt Mr. Davidson wouldn’t have permitted it.

I removed a shoelace, tied it around the bristles to bind them together, then got down on my knees. Slowly, painstakingly, I moved the bristles from left to right, covering the area above the wooden strip. It worked. Starting at an angle of forty-five degrees, the tip just above the border, I let the paint grip and then drew the bristles away from the wooden edge. I followed this with a horizontal alignment, and a smooth motion to the right. Inching along, knees rubbing against the hard ground, my breathing synchronized with my hand. Nothing existed but the wooden strip. I kept going, all the way to the end of the fourth surface.

I eased myself off the ground. Ten minutes to four and I had the better part of three surfaces to complete. I attacked the paint, shoved the big brush into the tub, pulled it out, paused and painted; up-stroke, down-stroke, to the right, up and down, a check to fill dimples, pressing the tip into corners, another press and twist. Back into the tub, careful not to drip. I persevered: mechanical, indefatigable, a painting machine. When the tub became light enough to lift, I carried it with me, minimizing the chances of spillage and working much quicker. I brushed and dipped and probed and squeezed until I completed the final section.

Ivan arrived at five o’clock. I hid the makeshift bristle brush in my pocket.

He walked from one end of the structure to the other. “Looks like you got it finished after all, Taffy. Very messy though.” He hunkered down and inspected the border. “Better hope you don’t slip-up. Mr. Davidson will be here on Friday with special lamps to check for mistakes.”

I said nothing, too exhausted to speak or think. Ivan checked the tub of paint.

“There’s still a lot left; you might have stinted on the paint. Right, put the lid back on and I’ll lock up.” He picked up the brush. “What were you doing, Taffy? Painting or scrubbing the walls? I’ll have this cleaned so it’s ready for you in the morning.”

He locked the door behind me. I lay on the cot, curled into a ball and fell asleep.

Tony France brought breakfast at nine o’clock. Not as lavish as the morning before—two slices of buttered toast, a Danish pastry, and a cup of tea. “Ready for the second coat?” he asked.

“I suppose so.”

He waited in the outer room. When I finished breakfast, he handed me the brush, the bristles stiff and the handle white with paint.

“Word of advice: use more paint on the second coat.” He took away the plate and cup. “Same arrangement as yesterday. Finish by five. Ivan or Hugh will bring you lunch.”

I took the bristle brush from my pocket. It was unusable, hard and unpliant. No matter; I felt calm and assured now that I had my technique. I used my key to saw off more bristles. In no rush, I sat on the first tub, breathed deeply, and pictured smooth white surfaces. I dipped the big brush into the paint, instinctively gauging the correct depth and load. In less than half an hour, I had painted the top half of one surface.

Onto the bottom half, no hesitation or uncertainty, in total command of the task. I reached the border and stopped for a short break to prepare myself for the next stage. I grasped the bristle brush—it felt natural, an extension of my hand. Angled strokes preceded horizontal strokes to complete the first side. I scraped the paint from the bottom of the tub for touch-ups. This time, I had no difficulty removing the plastic sheath and opening the second tub. I continued along the border, angled and horizontal brushstrokes, repetitive and relentless.

I didn’t hear Hugh enter the room. “You’re going great guns,” he said. He watched as I finished one more border section. I made no attempt to hide the bristle brush, leaving it lying on the lid. He nodded his head appreciatively. “You’ve really got the hang of it.”

He carried a smaller dish with no cover: a bowl of oxtail soup for starters, two sausages and one potato for the main course, a glass of soda water, but no dessert. I ate the food quickly. Hugh kept up a lively chatter, but I didn’t listen. I wanted him gone so I could get back to work.

He went into the small room and returned with the chamber pot. “I’ll empty this for you.”

I sipped the soda water and planned my strategy—finish the borders first then return to the top.

Hugh returned, chamber pot held aloft. “You’re good to go.” He collected the dish and glass. “I’ll leave you to it. Remember to finish by five.”

With the final stages using the bristle brush completed, I returned to the mother brush. A fluent sequence of strokes, up and down, in an elegant flow—an elegance, too, in the precise incursions into corners and depressions. I kept at it, oblivious to the surroundings or the purpose of my task. It required my full attention—the physical act of painting was purpose enough.

I had just finished sealing the second tub when Ivan appeared. Seeing his snide expression, I slipped the bristle brush back into my pocket.

“No time to waste, Taffy. I’ve things to do.” He lifted the empty tub. “Have you finished with this?” He surveyed the structure and grimaced. “You better hope the

third coat works. That doesn't look like the color of any snow I've ever seen."

He ushered me into my room and locked the door. I sat on the cot and brooded over what he said. There was no denying the surfaces looked streaky—the third coat would have to be decisive.

Hugh Peru unlocked the door the next morning. I was already up and pacing the available space.

"The day of the third coat; a most auspicious day." Hugh held the door open, and waved me through. "Breakfast is served." He handed me a glass of water and a plate with a slice of bread. The brush lay on one of the remaining tubs, looking the worse for wear: bristles separated and handle thick with paint.

Hugh gestured to the wall. "It's looking good. I feel cold just thinking about that Quebec snow." I chewed the bread, hard at the edges, and drank the water. Hugh leaned against a bookshelf and checked his phone. I passed him the plate and empty glass. "Ivan will be here with lunch. Keep up the good work." He gave me a thumbs-up. "Mr. Davidson is bound to be pleased."

My eyes ached after a night of fitful sleep. The walls appeared streaked and murkier than I'd anticipated. I returned to my room to get the chair and sat facing the structure. A final concerted effort, I just had to ignore my weariness and the hollowness in my stomach. I repeated the words, Quebec snow, like a mantra. I clasped my hands, broken fingernails biting into the soft flesh, and willed myself to proceed.

Seven hours left—precious time. Urgency fizzed in my veins as I pried open the lid and entered the snowstorm, up and down the chair, paint from brush to wall. Paint and snow. Back and forth, more and more paint—every depression and edge, ridge and dimple, under thick, fluffy Quebec snow.

I cut off the optimum number of bristles and began along the border. Bristle brush at an angle and then horizontal, moving higher, encroaching the upper third coat. Then the mother brush to smooth the overlap and achieve the required snowy, brilliant white. One surface finished, then onto the next, and into the third tub. I bent down, legs straddling the tub, bristle brush into the paint and onto the wall, switching to mother brush, tub and wall.

A quarter of the way across, my rumbling stomach caused me to hesitate and I missed the switch of brushes, using the mother brush on the border. A splodge of paint stuck to the wood, glaringly white. I shuffled backwards, shocked and outraged. After two days, and more than four gallons of paint—how could this happen? Walking in circles, I groaned and cursed the brush and wanted to lie down and sleep. No way. No giving up; not when I'd come this far. Giving up was not an option.

I tore a strip from my shirt and used it to sponge the misapplied paint, spreading and smudging the stain. I spat on the cloth, rubbed and rubbed until the paint vanished. No evidence of the mistake remained, not to my eyes at least. But would Mr. Davidson know? I pressed on, slower now, ultra-careful. I could allow one mistake, but no more than one.

Ivan carried in a tray with another slice of bread and glass of water. He gave me one of his derisive grins. "So, Taffy, what've you been up to?"

I said nothing. His grin broadened as though he read my mind.

"Any slip-ups? If you ask me the whole thing looks botched. Mr. Davidson isn't going to accept this. Snowy landscape? More like badly mixed concrete." He nudged the tray with the toe of his shoe. "Have your bread and water so I can get going."

I chewed the stale bread, keeping my eyes away from the spot where I splodged paint. Ivan scanned the books on the shelves and hummed something that sounded like a nursery rhyme. I considered asking him what he honestly thought of the painting but decided against it.

He took the plate and glass. "Finish everything by five. Good luck, Taffy. You're going to need it."

I returned to the border, on my knees, hypersensitive and vigilant. All that mattered was the brushstroke, then the next stroke, bristle brush and mother brush. I completed the border—no visible overlap, a continuum of white. One more check on the area where I'd slipped up, but I couldn't see anything other than wood grain. How could Mr. Davidson tell? His eyesight was no better than mine. He would never know, and I had no intention of telling him.

Entering the home stretch, I painted with renewed vigor. The third tub was severely depleted but enough remained to finish the job. I applied the paint thickly. It went on like a dream, the whiteness lighting the room. I scrutinized the surfaces, searching for paler areas, my tired eyes straining to find blemishes. Absorbed in this search, I didn't notice Tony France until he stood beside me.

"Job done," he said.

I secured the lid on the tub, pressing down so it snapped shut. As I handed over the brush, I experienced a surge of sadness—nothing left to do. "Do you think Mr. Davidson will like it?"

Tony took a step back, as if recoiling from my question. "That's not for me to say. All I can say is you've done a better job than Joe Spain."

Emboldened, I asked, "What exactly did Joe Spain do wrong?"

Tony took his time before answering. "It was more his poor attitude. He didn't show the work enough respect. Can't say that about you."

I went into my room. Tony stood in the doorway.

"I'll be here in the morning with Mr. Davidson for the verdict," he said.

When he left, I sat on the cot, got up and stood in the darkness, then sat down again. Sleep seemed unimportant as I vacillated between hope and disquiet. I pictured whiteness emanating from the surfaces in the other room. Then I recalled Mr. Davidson's reference to grave consequences, and Tony saying that Joe Spain wouldn't be painting anything for some time. And, of course, there were those special lights Mr. Davidson would use to check for mistakes.

The sound of a key in the lock woke me. Tony opened the door. “Mr. Davidson will be joining us shortly. Come on out and wait.” We stood by the painted structure. I stared at the ground, afraid to look up and see the area where I’d splodged paint or the inadequacy of the whiteness.

Mr. Davidson arrived, dapper as ever. His eyes widened when he saw me, and I realized how I must appear—exhausted, three days beard growth, gaunt from hunger. And my clothes, torn and covered in paint, thick smears on my sleeves and across my trousers.

He stood with his hands on his hips and rocked back and forth. “Well, Oscar. I can call you Oscar, can’t I?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Oscar Wales is quite a mouthful.” He smiled, the merest uplift of his lips. “Well, Oscar, you’ve been busy.”

I waited for his verdict, but Mr. Davidson appeared to be in no hurry. He wasn’t even looking at the structure. Where were the special lights? Was the painting good enough? Did it remind him of the snow that fell in Quebec in January 1981?

“Well, Oscar.” He turned towards the concertina surfaces, his face impassive.

I looked. The structure appeared white, brilliant white, but was it what he wanted? The leadenness in my stomach told me it wasn’t. He walked towards the door, and Tony indicated that I should follow him.

“Oscar, I have an interesting project for you.” Mr. Davidson paused and coughed to clear his throat. “It relates to a visit I made in 1987 to a small village in the Urals. An area surrounded by forest, magnificent old oaks. Late September, the color of the leaves was quite magnificent. Something I’ll never forget.” He looked over his shoulder. “Tony, please take us to the other room.”

With Tony in front, I accompanied Mr. Davidson down a long hallway with thick-piled wool carpeting. Relieved and excited, I could barely take in his words.

“You will be provided with six gallons of paint. The effect I want you to capture is the color and texture of those leaves I witnessed in that village in the Urals in September 1987. Three coats of paint will be required.”

Tony stopped at a door and took a set of keys from his pocket. My neck tingled. I flexed my fingers and slowed my breathing, joyful and anxious. Another challenge.

Sacred glade

by Craig Murray

Sacred glade,
the spirits of the past linger here,
whispering voices of dry leaves and
grass that twists about the ankle.
I found her here, chained to stone,
her feet turning to clay, hair to ash and still she laughed.
You, she said,
her voice melodic and light as wind through gauze.
You have surrounded yourself with the dead,
called them to dance,
taken their empty sockets and thought truth lay there
but listen to me.
Rising, glorious, her chains abandoned
she looked down at me and spoke.
I breathe life and plant flowers in those places,
I sing and shells are gathered
by wild eyed children running in the surf.
Once I felt nothing but here in these times
I will teach our hearts to soar with majestic contemplation.

Dual Doubles

by Ivars Balkits

“How are you doing, Roger?” No, not Roger.

So with the new haircut I am double now of someone else in town. Changed look, new look-alike. It used to be the guy who organizes the street party on Halloween. I can only guess who Roger might be.

Once wavy, now spikey. I used to be Spanish moss, now I’m palm canopy. Seagrass, now wheat field. Hippie to hipster or somewhere between; former-Marine look, not once a former Marine. It’s a big deal and no deal at all, surface tension.

I have a phrase and anecdote about my haircut I repeat too often for my taste even. To every friend, co-worker, town denizen met since then, who recognized me before with a nod or hello, I say “I had to face at last that my freak flag had become threadbare.” It might take another six years before it no longer requires or receives commentary.

What do I tell? I tell of my time by the Gauja River in Latvia.

Yes, friend, I got it cut in Latvia (my friends know where that is). Agapi and I were there for almost 6 weeks in summer 2018. Indeed, it really was transformative to be there, the country both my parents came from just after World War II. My beloved and I went to attend the national Song and Dance Festival in Rīga, the capital city. My great-grandfather Indriķis Zīle was director and co-conductor of the first one held in 1873. It had a choir then of 1,000 singers. That year 12,000 were up on stage simultaneously in the Mežaparks amphitheater, 30,000 in the audience.

I usually get a “wow” then.

“Wow.”

We went first to Cēsis by the Gauja. My mother Silvija hitchhiked there in June 1942. I have a letter by her to her mother Herta describing that adventure. The Grīnups family had vacationed regularly in Cēsis. Mamma seemed to be with me in spirit by the river one day. I embellish the anecdote, saying I heard her telling me to get a haircut, as she had done repeatedly and tediously in life. Really it was because I had grown tired of pulling it back into a ponytail to hide where it was growing thin. And that, when let down, it looked to me like the wispy shredded do of the Creature from the Crypt.

By the Gauja I asked myself: “How can one feel a sense of return to a place one has never been?”

I had/have no answer to that.

I made an appointment that day at the Royal Dandy Barber Shop in Cēsis. They would see me at 4, no, 4:30. The women working there seemed to be passing me off to each other: “Hippie, probably wants a trim.” When I told them, at the time of the appointment: “No, all off,” well, then clapping of hands, cheers, and they want to take before-and-after pictures.

The barber did a noble job at the Royal Dandy. Meticulous about the line around the ears, dabbed the buzzer at my ears, and no, oh okay, yes, an eyebrow trim as well. The hair has since then the form of what men much younger than I might appreciate. Not to say I don’t appreciate the effect it has had on my own twenty-something children and beloved wife. “It makes you look younger.” And “It makes you look ten years younger,” say some friendly people I know. And I want to respond, “So, what age does that make me?” (They may not know my chronological age, and may accidentally flatter me.)

Blush.

So from “Almost cut my hair...” to cut off almost all my hair.

I’ve gotten used to the image only slightly. Mostly I’ve forgotten what I used to look like, really have. So, gotten, forgotten, begotten a new identity? I retort, “My politics have not changed.” Still, I seem to be shaving my face more regularly. The stubbly look went well with the wild locks but now discomfits me somehow. The face and head in the mirror look poorly collaged. I will probably get over it.

I am at last my own doppelgänger. I am what I was, looking the same (relatively) at age 10, whittling my hemlock stick in Latvian Evangelical-Lutheran summer camp in the Catskills. I’m referring to a portrait of me in a black and white photograph.

I am also, incidentally, a dual citizen, though that is not as apparent as my haircut.

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Yes, friend and neighbor, 8 years ago I attained dual citizenship. It was first made available in 1991 when the three Baltic States tore away from their SSR status non-violently, throwing off the Russian Bear, and re-establishing themselves as Republics. Descendants unto the third generation of Latvians who had sought refuge just after WWII from Soviet Russian domination could now opt to be dual. My Latvian parents, following different paths, ended up in New York City in the late 1940s and met at Mt. Sinai Hospital, my father working in the laundry room and my mother clerking. That is how I became Latvian-American.

Since then I have lost my hyphen.

I did not bother applying in 1991, not interested then. All my life, I resented the indoctrination by this émigré community of mine and their insistence I regard myself as Latvian first, and American as other. At age 25 (1975), I broke completely with them, moved out of New York City, left behind all 66,000 of them, never returned except to visit my family. Though everywhere I continued to make people pronounce my name correctly (first name at least), I was American. Hippie-American.

After 1995, the opportunity to be both Latvian and American was no longer available, temporarily. In the intervening years unto 2011, however, pressure mounted among Latvian immigrant workers in Ireland and elsewhere in the EU to have their offspring who were born there recognized as citizens of Latvia as well. So the door reopened in October 2011 for first-generation sons and daughters of WWII exiles also, and two years later I applied. It took a while.

I received my personas kods on March 16, 2016.

I call it my trapdoor out.

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I am so sad for America – so full of anger and fear, paranoia and suspicion, alienation from neighbor and often from family. Duped, deceived, and miserable. Deluded and in decline. Really nothing seems to have slowed the deterioration since the 1980s. Inequality, inhumanity, hate and a kind of numbness descends like fog on our populace. Deliberately ignorant of the lies told and freedoms lost. Striking out at phantoms, propping up autocrats. The rest of the world looks on and can't believe its eyes.

As I watch these United States splinter and decline I worry that it may become unbearable here for me and my family. Through my Latvian citizenship, I want all of them to be able to exit with me to Europe if or when this nation goes berserker totalitarian. If that seems paranoiac, remember that my parents' history gives me justification for the feeling that things can turn around fast. It is beginning to look like empire here and there is increasing acceptance at top levels for fascism, oligarchy, racism, misogyny, and homophobia.

The deep state is right out in the open now – a deep state that says it is fighting the deep state. We are in deep (state) doo-doo.

--

I could try hiding out. Google my name and you will find an “ivars balkits” who is not me. Rather, it is the title, in lowercase, of a musical CD put out by my friends the Jarts, who asked me if they could use my name for that purpose. I guess it's because the name is so mysterious, so other, so non-centric in this society we label America (just guessing, friends). I doubt it will throw off the FBI. Facebook does keep track of my politics. And the FBI actually has a file on me, as I discovered one day in the office of the school district I used to substitute teach in. It's likely there because I was once a war tax resister.

Despite the government's recommendation not to hire me, I was not let go. The district kept me on three years after they received this memorandum. Substitute teachers were and still are at a premium in rural Ohio schools. Premium, if not paid well.

I could hide out in my community, a very liberal college town and an adjacent countryside containing a number of progressive intentional communities based on the back-to-land movement of the 1970s. Our bubble. I've lived here 30 years now. It's just the pressure of knowing that the rest of the country could find its way here that makes me afraid – the militias, supremacists, jingoists, prosperity pastors – that makes me think I need a plan A.

When will it be too late to leave? When will the borders close and the wall go up running the full length of our lost freedoms?

--

Am I a traitor to both countries? By belonging, eek, "belonging," to the other as well. Two-timer, twice owned? It is about who gets to own me, isn't it? Frightfully fragmented at the moment wondering who should get to own me, and I don't want ever to be owned. I want to be entirely free of citizenship. Even "world citizen" implies a state and its attendant violence and coercion. Borders are the means of control of the meek by the powerful. They are for keeping labor from crossing into better circumstances.

Plus, there's the haircut.

Okay, it's just a haircut. Skin, hair, muscular frame, symmetry, all your toes. It's superficial, but it's real how people interact with you and what they assume are your attitudes about life, politics, philosophy, religion – and likely you consciously frame your head with hair to let people know what those attitudes are. Though since the 1970s it has become less clear what you mean by your looks. Once it was clear that if you removed all your head hair you were a skinhead and what that meant. Now you may mean business; now you might be a female celebrity; now you are the hip offspring of Mr. Clean, the soap giant. With long hair, you could like country, jazz, classical, grunge, folk, and fantasy football. Anything hairs. We are pluralistic about hair now.

Hair, beautiful hair. I laugh at myself. I look in the mirror and laugh.

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Agapi, my beloved wife, wakes earlier than I do and reads by the light over the movable chair. Despite that spot being the best light in the house, her eyes have gotten awfully blurry. While preparing coffee in the kitchen, she looks into the living room at me and says, "There are two of you." Her eyes are so unfocused she is seeing an overlapping double, as I used to see before I got my prescription glasses. I say, "Has one of me still got long hair?"

Twenty Years Since...

by Jacob R. Moses

Tried to write about that day so many times
Cried in fright into the grey, then the rhymes
Avalanched from my thumbs, wanting to
Pound my fist into my own brain

For I deplore the disdain contained
And conditioned within me

I am not the same person I was
Twenty years ago, but the pain lingers

Middle fingers are what stigma feels like
Constant reminders that I lost myself
Punchlines made out of my fall from grace

No idea whether I'm worse for ware
Too many struggles since then
Too many muggles smoked when
Pills weren't enough to sustain me

Every time I enter the room
I am that dark stranger with a past
Park ranger of a land unseen
Untraversed, devoid of footprints

Prince of darkness within my mind
I've tried for twenty years to purge it
Imbided many beers, I just scourge it

Knowing I was not born to suffer
Not my birthright to run into the same

Pitfalls time and time again with those
Without my best interest at heart

To be taken for granted, to be abused
To be hanging from the balance
Like I did when I could have died

And here I am writing out my sorrow
And my trauma wondering if
This poem will end abruptly
In the same way I could have

Ended this life
Ended these voices
Ended these mood swings
Ended this paranoia
Ended this rage

With a Long Island Iced Tea
Packed in a thermos

But this poem needs to end smoothly
This life I'm living needs to conclude
Without interrupting my pulse

And every damn day I struggle
Not to repeat my mistakes
So I don't end up somewhere
Authorities claim is safe for me

What is safety but protecting the public
Instead of protecting you from derision?

I could count every finger on my right hand
Tallying how many times I wanted to die

I could count every toe on my left foot
Tallying how many times I survived

The song "Born To Be Alive" plays
All the while wondering if I was

Born to simply survive the constant
War I fight with my nervous system
Battling intrusive thoughts daily

They say a tornado is supposed to sound
Like a runaway train and I hope the next
Two decades don't place me
In front of cyclonic winds
Regardless of the power they have
To dry these suppressed tears

such a strange day

by Allen Seward

what a weird day it was
that day

1. to die like that

2. when the wind pulled the wings
off flocks of geese

3. and traffic stopped to watch

4. as the geese fell belly-up
from the sky
like airplanes

someone spoke of Revelation
and I found that odd

but, I suppose, might as well
on such a strange day

1. the locusts all carried baby scorpions

2. John the Baptist
put his head on backward

3. Christ shook his head and turned his horse away

the field-dressing of a deer

by Allen Seward

my father gave me this knife
but never taught me how to use it.
I've been picking my teeth with it
and cleaning the dirt out from under my fingernails
ever since.
“you can't be serious!” he's yelling.
“hurry up and gut that deer!”

When they were small

by Fotoula Reynolds

I know better my hands
than my face
they wake my mornings
they bathe and dry my skin
they throw themselves into
the waves of my hair
they thread a needle
and sew and mend
they fold the clothes
and the days
they know when to prune
the trees in the garden
and when to pull the weeds
they know when I am tired
and hold my head so I may see
the smiles of birds

They don't belong to me
I belong to them

My hands had the task of
collecting my children's childhoods
proof that they were once children
now grown and independent
I go to the storage box
and visit them again in the years
when they were small
they lead me to undertake
the privilege of preserving those
young years before they were tall
Give me a heart as high as

the treetops so that in the distance
I can always follow the flight of my
children, who are not afraid of the wind
sometimes, I look at the world as if inside
a picture frame, a life without knowing
the weight and gravity of the land

Nothing is as it was
as when they were home

I will open the doors and let the seasons
take over the house
I will learn to look at the sea again
I will take pause when the eagle soars
and shows me the beauty of a fly by visit
I will honour my mother, who has seen
many mothers before me

When all the cafes have turned off their music
and when the streets are filled with loneliness
let me die standing, like the trees

Flâneuse

by Susana H. Case

The poet Gérard de Nerval strolled with his pet lobster,
Thibault, on a blue silk ribbon-leash, argued
a lobster was no more ridiculous than a dog.
You are a botanist of the sidewalk, Baudelaire would say,
if he were rambling beside me. Crowds
by the river—a trumpet covered in polka dots, a straw hat
with Carmen Miranda bananas and cherries catch my eye.

Fashion

by Susana H. Case

On the subway, I'm looking at a woman seated across from me, all dressed in pink. Pink clogs with pink jewels, pink socks, pink pants and shirt, pink jacket, pink handbag, pink streaks in her hair. It works—and I'm enjoying her style. When I get up to be near the exit, she says to me, I just want you to know I love the way you look. The skirt, eyeglasses everything—perfect. She's Japanese, young, holding a travel guide to New York City. It has a pink cover!

I'm in New York black—black shoes, black tights, black lace skirt, black top, black coat, black handbag. Funny, I say, I've been checking you out and thinking exactly the same about you. We're both all thank you, thank you and laughing. The people next to us start smiling. We're completely opposite, she points out. I know, I say. And for just a silly moment, on this ride to Brooklyn, disappointment, everyday violence in this city, this country, recede, and nothing matters but style.

The Poor Are Always Crossing the Sahara

by Mickey Corrigan

Poems about James Baldwin (1924-1987)

Feeling invisible in America
James Arthur Jones Baldwin
Jimmy to his friends, step-
father a preacher, angry
fiery man who stood
Jimmy in the pulpit
at 14
at 17
writer, dropout, menial
factory jobs, meatpacking
elevator boy and janitor
earning money to help
support seven siblings
on the streets of Harlem.

A lifelong workaholic
voice full of elegance
in essays, novels
short stories and plays on
masculinity and sexuality
race, class, human rights
civil rights, gay rights
the cultural obstacles
to social acceptance.

As a member of a minority
within a minority
within a minority

artist
queer
black
in a country condemning
all that he was
he left
for France
for freedom
to be visible
to be himself.

Trouble Means You're Alone

by Mickey Corrigan

Poems about James Baldwin (1924-1987)

*I want to be an honest man
and a good writer.*

He arrived in France
with forty dollars
no savings
no French
nights in sordid hotels
days in expat cafés
writing tragic stories
his characters stuck
in the cage of reality:
*They got us in a trick
bag, baby.*

Life-changing obsession
with a white teenage boy
who married a black actress
leaving him flailing
a self-destroying limbo
suicide or harsh reality:
facing who he was

a small, slight man
charming, entertaining
big eyes, big grin
his stature growing
on the cover of *Time*
the voice of black America

literary, wild and cool
or drunk, depressed
writing, always writing
with morality, humanity
clarity, brevity, *baby*
we are gonna burn it down.

A big house on a hill
in the south of France
Johnny Walker Black
all night long
typing, typing
to change the world
an honest man
a good writer
still relevant today.

Ex Cathedra

by Sheila E. Murphy

The problem between them was his lust
for proclaiming. He didn't mingle
just right. He wallowed in self adoration
rationing affection for all others.
Perhaps the exception was for those pinkly
perfuming the environs thereby freely
flitting from blossom to blossom while
out-blossoming the blossoms themselves.
He lived between his ears for years thundering
various opinions blundering through
social circuitous geometry
as if the panoply of arrangements
were his to call all quite predictable
dogma determined by him as hymnals
brittle and crackable as unsung.

The Fireman's Wife

by Jonathan Vidgop (translated by Leo Shtutin)

Small-statured Master Zet is dressed in blue knee-highs, burgundy breeches and thin-soled sandals. Master Zet's frock coat is well tailored, and a dark green bow, knotted neat by the hand of a mute maid, constricts his slender neck. Master Zet is twelve, and he is permitted to stroll beside the flowerbeds laid out along the house that is home to his father, fat, moustachioed Mister Zet, his mother, wiry, peculiar Missus Zet, a maid, an aunt, a dog and a cat. Little Master Zet harbours a quiet hatred for cat and dog, aunt and maid, wiry lady and moustachioed gentleman. His neat-sandaled feet trace imbecilic figures of eight between the flower beds. His desires are modest: all he wants is to leap out of his sandals and wrench off his blasted knee-highs.

The mute long-nosed maid eagle-eyes him from a window. *Flowerbeds are made to be trampled...* Savage thoughts give Master Zet no peace. His sandals carry him past the flower beds and trace yet more confounded figures of eight. The long-nosed maid's lopsided smirk follows him from the window.

Master Zet's dream is to find himself in the rear yard, if only just the once. And open that soot-besmirched door.

The rear yard is where the boiler house stands. All firemen—of this Master Zet is convinced—belong to some mysterious caste. Naturally, they worship fire; their rituals are enigmatic and frightful, and the sacrifices they must offer to their insatiable god are without measure.

The family of the resident fireman is three-strong. There is the fireman himself, a lank, dirty-faced, red-palmed man. There is his wife, a lady whose impossible proportions have extinguished the young gentleman's imagination. And there is their daughter, a wizened, diminutive creature, all crooked legs and orange batiste dresses.

Master Zet is scarcely acquainted with them. They do no more than bow to one another from afar before turning aside in discomfiture. Master Zet is too timid to make the first approach. Which is why he is so enticed by a fantasy: that of flinging open their soot-besmirched door and bursting into their world. No one knows what awaits him there: the anguish of a purposeless existence, or rituals replete with ignorance, incantations and passion.

The fireman's daughter buries her wizened little face in the hem of her batiste dress. Her crooked legs trot her over to the soot-besmirched door, with her father in great-strided pursuit. The fireman's wife looks round, and Master Zet sees her large face, her discomfited grimace, her red, half-open mouth.

The door, as always, slams shut.

The maid leans half her length out of the window and cranes her neck hither and thither to see what has drawn little Master Zet's notice. From the depths of the house comes the piercing voice of Missus Zet. Clambering down from the broad marble sill and gathering up her voluminous skirts, the maid hastens to answer her mistress's summons.

The time is now, thinks Master Zet. He takes an enormous leap, trampling the flowerbed, and flattens himself against the wall as hard as he is able. Now the maid won't see a thing, however far she pokes her nose out. Body flush with the wall, frock coat snagging on its brown brickwork, Master Zet darts on tiptoe towards the corner of the house.

He rounds the corner, and freezes.

Nothing can prevent him from making a break for the fireman's dwelling. There is no time for anyone to call out a warning, seize him by the coat-sleeve or block his path. Perhaps Master Zet's dream has already come to pass: this is the moment he's awaited for so long. He is so free he can turn back without regret.

All at once he is overtaken by a lassitude of sorts, seeming harbinger of endless ills. Ought he to carry this adventure to its conclusion? But the strange sense of duty he feels before his own fancies impels him onward.

The soot-besmirched door swings open in front of him.

The fireman palms his forehead. His daughter sinks into a clumsy curtsy. His wife's large face is aflame with discomfiture. Master Zet makes his way down the stairs. The fireman bows and begins to withdraw. His daughter snatches up his red hand, and, nodding ceaselessly, they retreat together behind a dusty velvet curtain which separates the room from a world of boilers, coal and infernal flame.

The fireman's wife sits in her armchair, eyes downcast, furious fingers worrying at an openwork doily. Master Zet looks about him, and sees only a wooden stool standing solitary in the middle of the room. Nasty little tremors take hold of Master Zet's legs, and he flops onto the stool.

Guest and hostess remain silent, not venturing to utter a word of conversation. How to conduct themselves neither has the faintest. Master Zet has been too well drilled in the brick house, while the hostess is too meek to engage in genteel chit-chat with a distinguished guest.

They scrutinise one another. Master Zet adjusts his frock coat. He makes to pull up his socks. He thinks better of it and sits erect, hands darting to his knees. The hostess straightens her skirts on her immense hips, but Master Zet's movements freeze her into stillness. Bolt upright and statue-still, they continue to scrutinise one another.

The tension is such that the telltale tremors resume in Master Zet's leg, and he clutches at it with both hands. She notices, and smiles, and leaves her mouth ajar. He leaps up. Her impossible gargantuan breasts billow out at him as she rises from her seat in a deliberate, almost ceremonious motion, pillar-like legs planted firmly apart on the floor. He snatches for breath, hands groping downward like a blind man's. She stands there before him, her boundless, behemothic, absurdly bedizened body swaying back and forth. Master Zet leaps out of his sandals and wrenches off his blasted knee-highs. For the first time in his life he is bare of foot.

In a languid, infinitely drawn-out movement, the fireman's wife raises her blouse. Her skirts slide half way down her elephantine hips, exposing her immense insatiable belly. Its extraordinary pink bulk overhangs her salad-green bloomers. Master Zet hurls himself forward and presses his cheek to this orb, hot to the touch and aquiver with life. Keeping her breasts in check and digging her heels into the floor, she leans back. Tears streaming down his cheeks, body atremble, he takes fast hold of her belly. She screams with joy as she cradles his head.

Sobs convulse Master Zet's twelve-year-old frame. He throws back his head and looks up at the fireman's wife. In the brick house the dog begins to howl. Master Zet finds himself gripped by a sensation of higher truth.

The fireman and his daughter re-enter the room and freeze in a wordless bow. The door growls open, and the maid materialises wide-eyed on the threshold. In the brick house the wiry lady collapses in a swoon. Her moustachioed spouse tumbles into a flowerbed, crushing the cyclamens. The cat yowls. Master Zet is barefooted and free.

Coping Mechanisms

by Leslie Benigni

The cow's hoof bore an upside
down heart of an abscess. We cut into
the ivory-tinged-purple while she waited
patiently in the stall. Looking straight ahead, while my father
lodged the small crowbar tool, curling out the mush, I remembered wondering
who is born with pain built into their bodies and can
tolerate the world as it is and who is born as gentle as an afternoon sun
burnt at the tip of an unknown flame.

Inheritance

by Leslie Benigni

If you don't mind a touch of hell--
could we imagine a return to our prayers?
In their fragile heels and long black skirts,
I'm speaking with my selves by the window.
I folded my sorrows in with summer linens and
my blood of oldest strain leaked through, curling
red on the floor. Wipe/tear up the floorboards,
let the doctors pile up from below to let me know
my body is not obeying demands given and must be
returned. But my body is not mine but mother death's
steel bone corset. My body is not mine, but it's the outward
facing bay window looking inward. If I break out a stick of battered
lungs, would you comfort me as I'm led below the floorboards?

Beauty Marred My Own Little Cargo Cult

by Eamonn Stewart

As a child, mother's aluminium head-lice comb
Was more beautiful than any princess's diadem.
I saw it's avatars in music box clockworks,
Turnstile's thaumatropes , science fair spectroscopes
And lately, on the Grosvenor Road .

The park railings' diffraction grating
Transfigured the wet road.
The tram-lined aurora of traffic and car lights
Slothful as electrophoresis.
Blink comparators of Belitia Beacons at either end.
Efflorescence of smashed glass
From bottles the winos had flung.
Chromatographs of oil leaks where I stopped
To cross the road;
Lit by white headlights, then jaundiced sodium
Like variegated Plasticene I overwrought to brown
As a child.
The sign subsumes the signifier in the park.

The Apocryphal Anglerfish

by Marie C. Lecrivain

Many people will
postulate, or comment
with frustrated smugness.

Some will weep
and mythologize.

Others will sneer
and provide scientific proof
as to why this scenario
is nothing but a charade.

Like many others,
I wept as you drifted upward
with what felt like a purpose.

But there's beauty
in your departure.

Your small lumen
winked on and off,
like you were sending
a morse code to the sun
to say, "Wait for me!
I'm almost there!"

When you broke
through the veil
your life went out,
as you merged
with the Light.

You've shown us all
we're just like you,
a lost soul who longs
for their final moments
to mean something,
or make a difference.

Pacific Palisades

by Marie C. Lecrivain

Yesterday, my city caught fire. I watched smoke and flames erupt out of nowhere. Even with a mask, my eyes watered, my throat closed up, and my nose burned as the fire consumed everything in its path: homes, schools, trees, and history. The wind lifted up the fire, like a lover, and spread it across the expanse of the Santa Monica Mountains. The majestic destruction took my breath away, a chemical wedding I never thought I'd witness in real life.

*under a red sun
life and death unite
to write a new chapter*

Guāi 乖

by Annie ZH Sun

When she's born, she is greeted by a word that is the sound of a lowered jaw, pursed lips and breath pushing high against the tongue, straight into the roof of the mouth, where expectations set. It is a murmur that cuts above her wailings in the night, becomes a weapon disguised as lullaby stalking her through childhood, a synonym for 'no' towards simple demands of another ice-cream, five-more-minutes-please TV time, of please-please-let-me-wear-purple-during-New-Year, and please-don't-send-me-to-violin-lessons-I-hate-it. That word is the justification of unbuilt boundaries, doors with no locks, and do-not-argue-with-us-we-know-best in her teenage years. It is the reason why she must not have opinions or hobbies or friends outside the approved list. An adjective crafted to describe the collective image of millions of faceless and ghostlike women who are the perfect daughter. She is not them, but she must be them.

She tries to fight. At five, she soaks the festive red of her dress in fancy berry juice. Her mother does not speak to her for a week despite her cries, pleads, apologies. At fourteen, she chops off her hair with a pair of garden shears and the uneven bits sticking on her head are as sharp as her father's slaps. At twenty-three, she decides not to marry. The tears and disapprovals flowing from her parents, her relatives, the neighbours turn into a river with no end. She never expects that one little word in negative form to be so potent, so poisonous. She is a sinner, an existence stripped of identity, ready to be shunned by society. She learns to loathe that word.

It is everywhere; it sits on tongues of boyfriends who compliment her for her considerate nature when they show up late, wearing bad breath and bed hair. It borrows deep into relatives' speech when they urge her to reconsider her choices in life. She does not know it yet, but in spite of her battles and aversions, she will have a child, a baby girl who will steal her heart and melt her principles. She will marry for the sake of her daughter's future, so those gossipy stares and vile whispers of 'bastard' will stop its hauntings. She will vow to her growing belly that she would not be like her own parents, that she'd be different. She does not know yet, that between balancing a job, house chores, and mounting bills, and a husband who never helps out, she will cave in the dead of night, and while the baby cries insistently, she will whisper, plead, beg her to stop.

Don't cry. Be quiet, be pliant, be submissive. Be obedient, be good: “乖.”

The Mountain-Drifter

by Douglas Thornton

The world only a rumor
Hard to leave, unwavering
In exile and posterity;
Unison as untroubled
As the breeze, touching nothing
But the moonlight with the darkest
Intimacy. Here to make
What is difficult easy,
The call of the heart is simple:
The only place we are heard
Is in silence; the summit
Never rises above the ground.

New Morning

by John Grey

Early morning,
cocks stop crowing,
other birds take up the call.
A town awakes,
leaves the sex dreams in their bed somewhere,
pushes the fear dreams to the back of their heads.
Much shaving, face washing, coffee,
now the dreamer must go out and do it.
Work harder or less, steal or put back,
screw the neighbor's pretty wife
or demons in an office bathroom.
The light has moved everyone on from where they were.
Apology replaces act.
Honing in trades places with randomness.
It's to do with the brightness
and the stirring of a spoon
or the spray of hot water on the skin.
A scrawny rooster booted last night out the door.
Other birds feed on its flesh.
A town barks like its dogs,
purrs like its kittens.
Today, a bum could be the mayor.
A mourning widower might find a bride
behind that tombstone.
A shy girl will read Homer.
A boy from Brooklyn will go to Texas.
The rooster flops down from his fence,
double-trots to the barn
to rustle up some hens.
The birds are singing a song
that a clock taught them.

A guy says never leave me
to a woman who wasn't here before.
A child recites the alphabet
before the day knows that's how words are made.

Shedding

by Martina G. Mifsud

Recovered Casefile #0054. Date, March 21st, 1991.

PLAY RECORDING? [YES] NO

Recording is loading...

Recording starts.

Click.

FIRST VOICE: State your name, age, sex, and today's date.

SECOND VOICE: Quinn [REDACTED]. Sixteen. Female. 21st March 1991.

FIRST VOICE: When did it all start?

SECOND VOICE: 10th September 1990. My brother's birthday. But you already knew that, right? And may I say, you look fantastic in those black suits. Very much like shadows.

FIRST VOICE: Let's stay on topic. The purpose of your being called here is to obtain additional information about the incident. The Board at this institution will decide what action will be taken after hearing the recording of your statement. You're not the only case, after all. You may begin.

SECOND VOICE: [AUDIBLE DEEP BREATH] Okay, then. My brother was born on one of those summer days that feel like autumn. It was the day I noticed it for the first time...

It was a simple shed at the back of our new house.

I saw it from the window in my room, the night we returned from hospital. The house felt different. Colder, somehow. I remember my jumper reeked of bitter antiseptics and sweat, so I had rushed upstairs to get it washed.

It was when one passing car splashed it with a brilliant yellow light – a rare thing, since our new house was in a more rural part of town – that I saw the shed. The car revved, vanishing into the night, but I could still see the afterimage of it emerging from the shadows of the nearby pine trees, an unnatural swelling from the woods.

From that first day, my brother was a crying mess. My mum and dad were always slobbering all over him. As soon as he went back to sleep, both of them would make tea and look out the kitchen window.

I noticed them doing this on each day that followed. On the tenth night, I couldn't sleep and went into the kitchen for some water. I found my father staring motionless at the back door, his hand on the lock, staring out toward where I knew the shed must have been. I slipped past him, grabbed a glass of water, and left. He barely moved an inch.

I asked my mother one October afternoon about the shed. She was in the kitchen at one end of the table breastfeeding my brother, eyes focused on his rosy face. He was only a month old; roughly the size of a small pillow.

"Don't be silly, Quinn," she said. Her gaze remained on him even as she spoke. She continued, voice lilting, "It's always been there."

"I swear, it wasn't," I insisted as I sat down on the opposite side of the table.

"Maybe it was covered by the trees," she said absently.

"But mum, I swear, I didn't see-"

My brother widened his big eyes, and he burst crying.

"There, there," Mum said softly, caressing his small head.

Without lifting her head, she spoke sharply. "Quinn, go see for yourself. You're upsetting your little brother."

I stared at her.

"Fine," I said.

I stomped out of the kitchen, and as I turned to shut the door behind me, I saw her grinning at my brother. I saw her lips move as she cuddled him.

I took a deep breath. A breeze blew air fresh with pine trees.

Instantly I felt an urge to run into the forest and never look back. If I did run, it wouldn't matter to them. I'd be gone from their lives and they wouldn't bat a single eye. But the courage to run away never came.

Instead, I walked around the house. I stopped a few paces away from it, cautious. It didn't look threatening at all, but there was a strange way the afternoon golden light seemed to bend around its small, quaint frame. Old greenish paint faded and peeled off in some areas, revealing dull, termite-eaten wood. It was just large enough to fit two people inside. There were no windows, and the two front-opening doors were sealed shut. What I couldn't fail to notice was the long, silver, metal chain tightly wrapped three or four times around it, and the huge padlock dangling at the front doors, glinting in the afternoon light.

At that time, I couldn't think of any possible reason why it would be wrapped in chains, and why my parents were acting so dismissive. Now I know why – and this is where people think I've gone mad, but it's the only explanation. The *thing* inside was controlling them. I don't know how or why it would do that, but it did. It made them sick.

I walked back to the front door with an odd feeling. The shed was not alive, I kept telling myself. It was just a place right outside the house. Yet it felt warm, like an old friend.

The days shrunk as winter grew closer. Three months passed without much happening. I went to school in the mornings and came back home early evenings, so I wouldn't know what happened in the house during that time. But I knew my brother was growing, fast. He wolfed down all the food, and when he cried for more, they would give him more. Then in the evening, he would be put to sleep in his old wooden cot and my parents would busy themselves by making tea, looking out the window, cleaning the house, watching television.

As for the shed, I did not get any closer after that time. I would catch glimpses of it from my window from time to time, always giving me that strange, warm feeling. I tried to distract myself—doing homework, studying, playing video games. I sometimes went outside and watched the butterflies dance on the grass, as far from the shed I could get. I once caught one coming out from its pupa, its wrinkled yellow wings shimmering and unfolding. Change comes over everything, after all. Everything needs to adapt.

In spite of this, I was always acutely aware of the shed's permanence, like it was waiting for me to visit it again.

It was around mid-December when the symptoms started.

I developed a dry cough first. Then came the ear ringing. The constant, incessant, high-pitched ringing. It became harder and harder for me to concentrate on work. I would hear sudden noises around the house. Wood creaking, metal rattling, animals scuttling. My health worsened too. It still makes me shiver, remembering the bony hands I put up to my face to feel my gaunt cheeks and sunken eyes. Outside, the weather darkened, and for the whole week the grey clouds growled like some threatening beast.

It was the bad weather, I told myself. I was not used to the cold there. In our old neighbourhood, the weather would always be warm because there were many houses and many people. This new house was isolated. The forest made everything cold.

One dreary December night, I went to check on my brother. I don't know why, exactly. I could only move slowly. The sounds of the television bounced around the house from downstairs.

I was feverish. My body dragged itself across the long corridor. Everything was spinning around me, lights and shadows, becoming two, then three, then whole. Two, three. Whole once again. My vision sharpened on my brother, sleeping in his old wooden cot.

His cherubic face looked so peaceful. There was a bit of drool on his small parted lips, and it dropped to the side as his tiny chest rose and fell.

His eyes opened gently, and to my surprise, my brother's lips stretched into a smile I can never forget. It was a loving smile that reminded me he was just an innocent baby and, above all, my brother. For a moment I forgot my sickness. He reached out excitedly and I moved to grab his outstretched hands.

I didn't realise the television noises had stopped, nor heard the bounding footsteps as my parents scuttled into the room, eyes wide with horror.

They pulled me out of their room and the door shut in my face. I heard my brother's wail as clearly as if he was right next to me. My parents coaxed him, and I stood there in shock.

The aches returned. My head ached. My bones ached.

This sickness... it consumed me.

My skin was ablaze. I did not walk, my legs walked, and each step sent a shock of pain all over. The scenes around me shifted like storm clouds. Sight came to me in flashes. Walls, stairs, leaves. My legs stumbled, my legs moved, my legs stopped.

I stood in front of the shed. The doors were wide open. Chains, gone.

There was a noise coming from inside. Something squelched; something thick and viscous. Black liquid oozed from the shed. I couldn't tell where it was coming from until a shape materialised as if from nothing. Grey. Ovoid. It was fibrous, made of what looked like silk from a cocoon. The black ooze dripped from a small opening.

Then, the sound of ripping. Something was tearing through the cocoon's thin membrane one limb after the other. It looked human, but I knew it was not. Its arms were too long, its torso too narrow, its grey skin too tight. Its movements were jittery and rapid. All I could make out from its shadowed face were two glowing eyes.

Its eyes haunt me. Even now, I remember their faint red glow, and how they were suspended in darkness like two distant stars on a moonless night sky. Maybe it was the fever but they seemed to get brighter the longer I looked at them. The light hurt my head, but I kept looking. Not in defiance, but because it felt like they were the only things that existed in the world. Two flaming eyes. Fear scorched my throat and the feeling sank to my stomach like a rock.

It put one arm slowly out of the shed and then the other, making horrible clicking sounds. It twitched like an insect, jerking its limbs and its head like a newborn wanting to take everything in. It stopped and I heard its low guttural breaths.

The grey clouds were overhead and the air had gone deadly cold. Flash. Thunder. The first rain drop pierced my body like a blade of ice.

For a moment I thought it hesitated. I thought it was scared of the rain and I could make a run for the house. I heard voices shouting but they were directionless – I wasn't even sure they were human voices. They could have come from the forest for all I knew.

Then the beast came for me. Limbs snapping. *Click. Click, click, click.*

I lurched to where I thought the house was, unthinking, fear rising in my chest and fever plunging me in a wave of dizziness. In front of me was a blurry facade of grey and green. I forced my legs to keep moving. My head was a throbbing pain and my heart bounced in an odd rhythm, hammering blood in my ears. All I heard behind me were those horrible clicks coming closer and closer, faster and faster, echoing and tormenting my thoughts. The rain sent painful shockwaves throughout my body. It wasn't long before I lost my balance and my body tipped, crashing into the wet grass.

Above me I saw a burst of yellow light with human-shaped shadows moving through the mist. Body shaking, I pulled myself towards them. The shadows moved in flashes – hypnotic almost – their dance slowly lulled me to sleep. In the last images I remember I saw the beast scuttle past me and towards the house. The clicks grew further away and I saw its dark body merge with the yellow light—so much light it looked like sunlight. So many shadows I couldn't count.

I woke up, and my brother and the beast were gone.

I woke up and there were flashing red and blue lights all around me. They told me later what happened, but I didn't believe them. They told me that I had ran out of the house, delirious with fever. My parents were shouting behind me but I kept going, not listening to them, right into the forest. The thick rain made it hard for them to find me, so they called the authorities for help. They found me passed out in the dense forest and brought my body back to the house.

What a load of crap. Am I right, sir?

I asked my parents about my brother and the shed.

“What shed?” they said. They didn't even remember having a baby.

But I still remember that soft smile so vividly.

A few days after I recovered I went to the place the shed had once been to look for any evidence that it existed. Only grass grew in its place. I was beginning to question myself until I moved a bit of the grass with my foot and saw a flurry of footprints of some kind of animal leading into the forest. Some of those footprints were strangely human, and they blended in perfectly with the animals' footsteps. What was even stranger was that it appeared that there was more than one human.

Then one of you found me lurking, pretended to be the police and arrested me. You brought me here. To the Board. It took a while for you to talk to me, but I waited patiently for the moment you would call me in.

Now, I can't help but wonder about a few things. Maybe you can help me think through them, dear Board members. You were the ones who called for this interrogation, after all. There must have been details you had already known about, and others that you wanted me to clarify. Maybe something shouldn't have happened.

I never really explained why the shed was wrapped in chains, did I? Nor did I tell you how the chains disappeared. I had asked my parents if they unlocked the padlock, but they didn't have a key. Didn't even remember they could have once had a key. It's almost as if something—someone else—removed the chains.

And why did I get that fever, just a few days before I saw the beast? Why was it so strong when I finally saw it? It was like I was not supposed to see something. Something important. There was something else that happened that night. I caught a glimpse of it just before I passed out. Inside the house, what peeked from the yellow light were not shadows, but people wearing black suits.

And now, as you're looking at me, I can feel it again. This numbness, this dizziness. Oh, my poor brother. My poor parents.

I am sure you know how the incident happened very well, dear Board members.

I can see it in your eyes.

SECOND VOICE: *Stop the recording. Now.*

Click.

Recording ends.

multilingual

by Dustin P. Brown

a polyglot
living monolingually

the language I used to speak
 warm
 cold
 the only thing I had

the phrases and metaphors and slang
 picked up along the way
from various men and women
 lost to atrophy
 years since spoken

a piano
 only playing middle C

the language she taught me before before
 moth in the wardrobe
 first of many to come

a paintbrush
 only painting blue

the language he taught me before
 hard
 cold
 forgotten, not lost
 hidden, not forgotten

the language you taught me

warm

cold

matched set

code to be broken

match to be sparked

moon to be phased

Transplant

by Dustin P. Brown

In the back alleys of Salamanca,
a stray dog knocked out my knees,
and I fell
into a sticky puddle,
smacked skull on
golden stone.
Suddenly

I spoke fluent Castilian
and could meld into crowds.
I was domestically foreign.
No eyes lingered
as they had before. I was rich
with the history of the Mariquelo,
the family blessed/cursed
to make music from the highest tower

just because of a Portuguese earthquake.
My voice, the call of a canary,
became master of trills and fricatives,
became yet another miracle

to a historied dogma. The smack
of my head that day echoed
through the old town
for three hours, reverberated
through the cathedral's copper-studded bell.

It was an injury I passed out from
later that same day, just after twilight
near the hidden university frog. One moment,

fluent words streaming like melted
ice through my teeth
welcomed into Spanish ears
like a cool glass of gazpacho. Next,
nothing but nauseous black.

The doctors said
I was lucky to survive,
that they'd never seen hemorrhaging
so fully clotted
that the blood became a new organ.

And now, after I've recovered, I've lost
my Spanish, I've lost that tenuous
connection I'd made
to these Iberian roots deep
as spinal cords, deep
as the chords pounding
out of the cathedral's two organs
and spilling into the street,

Latin kyries in a Castilian town. The audience
smiles pleasantly. They clap
at the end without conviction,
not fully hearing
the slurs and lethargic melodies,
never really understanding
but nodding politely anyway.

our end

by Nathaniel Lachenmeyer

you are old and very sick
now so you ask if I remember
this and that and I do

but it doesn't help because
I also remember what
you say you never said and

what you say you never did
so let's not talk about
remembering or not remembering

in fact let's not remember
let's just talk again about
how it looks like rain and

how awful the nurses are
but how that one doctor at least
seems to know something

and let's pretend it isn't
that there is nothing you or I
can do or undo about any

of it ever again
let's pretend
we haven't reached our end

Ekphrastic Goodwill

by *Nathaniel Lachenmeyer*

With his right eye unblinking and askance
and his left too trusting by far, he stares

and stares at me. Has for forty-odd years,
if you can trust dates scrawled in minium,

stared at someone, beginning with *M. Stein*,
who, dead now or still alive, painted this

lost self-portrait. Were his glasses misplaced
or was he an expressionist? (Those eyes!)

As in so many things, intention counts
in art, but not enough. Ask Stein, ask me

and all the others whose goodwill did not
keep them from being shunted at day's end

to this lonely place (him, to lean against
this wall, and me, sideways on a bookshelf).

Fourteen bucks for the two of us and still
no takers. Everyone's a critic.

Your Excellencies

by Abdullahi Buba

Your excellencies

You've won

We no longer discuss

Your FAILURES

In our majlis

Under tree shades

By the roadsides

We only discuss

Our bedeviling problems

And the vicious circle

That envelops our being

The high price of foodstuff

In relation to starvation

The upward review of medical bills

In relation to ailments

The beautifully built schools

Without teachers

The meager salary

That cannot maintain our bills

The dirt roads

With potholes

And the increasing road accidents

The inadequate water supply

The diseases that alternate

With seasons

The scarcity of petrol, kerosene, and diesel

And the long queues in filling stations

Yes! Your excellencies

You've won

We no longer discuss
Your failures
We only discuss
Our misfortunes and calamities

Your excellencies
Enjoy the public treasure
Loot all it contains
As it is all yours

Your excellencies
We only discuss
Our PROBLEMS

A Bloom of Jellyfish

by Danila Botha

People say you remember your first time with a clarity like no other. I remember following Mo down the stairs into this guy Chris's basement. He was from Labrador City, and even though everyone said he tried to hide it, it was there, dangling from every *best kind* and *where I'm to* that dripped quietly out of the sides of his full mouth. He was heavy set, with loose red cheeks that hung like a basset's and a sandy blonde buzz cut he was always running his thick fingers across. But he was friendly enough.

He motioned to me to sit beside him on his huge grey sectional, with people standing and lying on the floor, or draped over the sides, talking over a hip-hop mix. On the wall behind us was a huge LED 75-gallon fish tank, though he seemed more interested in telling us about the specs than the fish themselves. He talked about the filter and the heater, which cost two hundred dollars a piece, but I lost him, staring at all the fish. There were fish whose faces were a surreal purplish silver and had glowing orange stomachs, dotty backs, and it made me think of a book I'd loved as a kid about a beautiful fish who was lonely and gave away all its glittering scales to make friends. There were thin, brown polka dotted fish that looked like hyenas with bulging eyes. There were delicate fish whose see-through tails and fins hovered like dragonflies, and tiny black and white fish that looked like drops of watercolour paint blurred by rain.

The fish that excited Mo most of all were the clownfish. "Look it's Nemo," she said, her white shiny nails a perfect match for their thick middle stripes. She walked around, her plum bob sticking to the glittery blush on her cheeks. She said she didn't have anywhere to sit, and before I knew it, she was straddling some guy, kissing him. I wished I could shrink myself to the size of the fish, or maybe slightly bigger. I wished I could jump in and swim in circles with them while the filter made small gentle bubbles above our heads.

A little while later, she got bored with the guy and flopped down beside me. She threw her legs over mine and called Chris over. He said he had a present for both of us.

I got all excited, knowing the anxiety I was feeling was going to pass, and then finally, I'd be talking, talking so much, so much to strangers that my jaw would hurt. It wasn't coke even though it looked like it. I breathed it in, the soft white powder like sea foam. The water in the tank crashed like ocean waves.

Mo started giggling first, slapping her legs, telling me she couldn't move them, that she felt like she was sitting in a tub of maple syrup, or better yet, the rubber cement we used in one of our art classes, and it was funny but scary. And me? I felt like I was floating, like the tank had expanded and we were all swimming, languidly, or suntanning, like seals sunning ourselves on the sand.

A Kendrick Lamar song was playing, and I swear he said "Backbone don't exist/born outside a jellyfish" and I felt the skin on the inside of my arms ripple and swell and suddenly I wanted to learn everything about these beautiful, gutless creatures. I googled what a group of jellyfish was called, and it turned out it was a bloom, and I wished I had a group of terrified eccentrics to swim away with so we could form our own bouquet of creatures. I didn't like the artists in my program, there was no way of knowing what they really thought or cared about or believed in.

Even Mo, whose real name, I'd recently found out, was Monet, as in the guy who painted the famous water lilies, and not as she'd told people, Monique. I'd known her for two years, had been roommates with her for one, and the other night, her ID fell out of her pocket when we were drunk and I picked it up before she could stop me. It was like finding out that a friend named Tammy's real name was Tamarind. If a person can deceive you about something as fundamental as their name, what else are they lying to you about? Is anything you think you know about them true?

I didn't open up much, but if I did, I told people how ridiculous my parents thought my wanting to be an artist was, how they acted like I told them I was taking out a loan and moving across the country to go to clown college, and Mo always said her parents were equally unsupportive, though it was clear now that they weren't.

We stumbled home that night, after I flirted with some girl and she slept with some guy, and the next day we were dehydrated and had headaches, but she made me go jogging in Point Pleasant Park, which woke me up a little. The sweating and coconut water did it for her. The salty brine and calm greenish blue with rocky sand that surrounded us, even if it was full of harbour run off, was enough for me.

"It's stupid to live in Halifax if you're not going to enjoy the ocean view," she said, which was true. I'd tried donairs and sea scallops wrapped in bacon. I'd drank pints of Oland's and Alexander Keith's and saw local bands play, but nothing connected me to the east coast like the Atlantic Ocean.

Mo and I were both from small Ontario towns near Lake Simcoe, but we didn't know each other until we got here. Mo's specialty was drawing, mine was painting. We worked hard in the studio, stayed for hours to get things right, or good enough, to submit to our professors, and then on weekends she always wanted to go out.

Mo loved to party, and I kept partying with her, because why not, what else were we going to do? She always knew where to go, how to get in for free, and how to score for free. The alternative was gallery crawling, taking photos on our phones or listening to people romanticize the down-to-earthness of artists who painted boats and harbours, maroon and powder blue clapboard houses and water melting into the yellowing sunset.

We went to lounges and clubs, houses and bars and we sweated and danced, or lay down and felt the rush of water floating all around us, filling up our ears.

When Mo lay on the floor beside me, her full dark hair splayed out around her like glossy acrylic paint, she looked like a mermaid. Sometimes when I took K, I imagined that scene in the Little Mermaid where Ursula's spell came into being, and the mermaid's tail was split into two legs. It was like that for me, but in reverse: it bound my legs together and formed a tail, it cut tiny slick gills into my ribs, it made me who I didn't even know I wanted to be.

I wanted to feel calm all the time. When Covid hit, I started buying Ket during the week, and it wasn't long before I was doing it every day. Our friends who dealt thought I was cute enough not to pay, most of the time, but before I knew it I was going through over a thousand dollars a month on Ket, sometimes two if I'm being honest.

I didn't have many side effects, no nosebleeds or guilt, just the feeling that I was uncovering something vital. I'd been reading about how jellyfish had no brains, or hearts, or bones, but they could sting or inject poison that immobilized their prey. They could produce their own light and use the water in their bodies to help them move around. There were so many kinds of jellyfish, but the best, I decided, were the Immortal ones, the ones who swam freely and when they reached maturity, preyed on other jellyfish if they wanted to, and when stress inevitably came, reverted back to their tiny innocent selves, living to see the cycle repeat indefinitely, with infinite chances to do everything over.

Mo found some guy she liked named Will, who liked to surf at Lawrencetown. The waves were good, he insisted, even in the beginning of April, and we sat huddled together on the sand, our feet resting on pebbles, the wind and dampness blowing inside our bones.

My bladder had hurt a lot lately. I'd needed to pee with alarming frequency, and before we left, I could have sworn something else came out of me.

I walked for about ten minutes, took off my pants and underwear and waded into the water. I heard Mo laughing and shaking her head, like this was going to be a great story to tell our friends, something to roll my eyes about later.

A stream of gelatinous goo poured out of me. It curled and swirled like a tentacle, a tentacle made of dark, blood-orange coloured jelly. Soon I felt more tentacles shooting out of me, four, or five, then countless more, forming a lion's mane around my face and body. They were retractable, and I found myself curling them in, the pain as blinding as the sense of clarity, the knowledge that I was finally being re-formed.

I felt my body tightening and shrinking. I felt the last of my clothing float away.

I tried to lift my head above the waves, to have one last look at Mo and even Will before I submerged myself forever, and I waved one of the thickest of my many tentacles as high as I could. I'm not sure she saw me. I saw her get up, her body a blur as she ran in my direction, and I thought that I might miss her a little bit before I saw some three red jellyfish in the distance, their skin lit up like flaming cranberries against the floating seaweed all around them, and I felt my tentacles reach for them like celebratory sparklers. This time, finally, I would bloom. I felt tears run down my body as I finally stopped thinking. I let my viscid, undiluted body take over.

April 2024 in New York with a Line from *Moonstruck*

by Anthony Lioi

For Samer Alatout

Cops arrest protesters at CUNY
and the fountain at Lincoln Plaza
helpless and beautiful as God
descends from the Catskills
lit from an unseen source
does silly tricks for children—
fountain goes up!
fountain goes down—
this water reaches
for the desert of Gaza
for the cure at Bethesda
in the world to come
this fountain reflects
blue sky and scrapers
on polished black stone
in the Brutalist plaza
where *Moonstruck* was filmed.

O Cher!
O Nicolas Cage!
La bella Luna rises
over riot gear and skunk spray
in a world designed, *cara mia*,
to rip out your heart.

Jennifer versus Climate Change

by Anthony Lioi

I'm palpating tomatoes at the farmer's market
and I turn to Jennifer who I haven't seen
since the remnant of Hurricane Ida hit
and I say to her: How's the basement?
knowing that ten inches of rain in four hours
caused her hundred year old sewer pipes
to burst, leaving six inches of raw sewage
in her basement and she has two kids, a dog,
and doesn't wanna talk about it. Well,
she says, my garden survived but my
tomatoes don't look as nice as these do.
Yeah, I say, I guess you got lucky.
Well, when I called the plumbing
people or whatever they said the whole town
has the same problem and there's a waitlist
and I'm like it's not admissions at Princeton,
can't it go any faster? And they're like
No, it can't and it's gonna be six weeks
at least and can we have your cell number.
No, I said, and hung up. So is the water
still in your basement? Well, she says, I
have two kids and a dog and I couldn't
let six inches of raw sewage sit for six weeks.
No, so what didja do? Well, she says,
I called around--look at how nice this
muzzarell' is--and I found some people
who'd come over right away. What kind
of people, I said. I thought the pros were
all busy. Listen, she said, they came right
away and it was a team of nice guys
who pumped the sewage and tore down
the sheetrock and hauled it all away

and washed the floor with bleach and
stank up the whole house but it was clean.
Nice, I say. So no trouble after all.
Well, I felt bad because their boss
didn't give them any protection
so I went to Costco and got rubber gloves
and bottled water and I made sandwiches
which was the least I could do, really.
So you called the Mob, I say.
I did not call the Mob, she says.
All the pros were busy and you called
and got a team of nice guys but
they didn't have any gear or lunch
and they came over right away for a price
much lower than the 27,000 dollars
you expected to pay with the first people
so you hired the Mob. Well, she says,
it wasn't really the Mob, it was like
Mob-adjacent. You mean like Tony
Soprano was garbage-adjacent? That family
lived over in West Caldwell, you know.
It wasn't really the Mob she says 'n' anyway
the kids are fine but we have to replace
all the drywall and it'll be a while before
we can use the basement again but at least
the garden survived and I made sandwiches.

Notes on Contributors

Balkits, Ivars

A dual citizen of Latvia and the USA since 2016, Ivars Balkits lives in a small mountain village in Crete, Greece. His poems and prose have been published in multiple anthologies and most recently in the following online and print publications: *Feed the Holy*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Sortes*, *Meetinghouse Magazine*, and *Mercurius Magazine*. He is a recipient of two Individual Excellence Awards from the Ohio Arts Council, for poetry in 1999 and creative nonfiction in 2014.

Benigni, Leslie

Leslie Benigni is a multidisciplinary artist and writer from Pittsburgh, PA. She received her MFA from Bowling Green State University and has been published in many publications including, but not limited to: *ANMLY*, *LandLocked*, *Tint Journal*, *Coffin Bell Journal*, *Permafrost Magazine*. Find her on Twitter @lbeni894 and Instagram @benignileslie.

Beswick, Katie

Katie Beswick is a writer from south east London. Recent poems have appeared in *Narrative Magazine*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *Modern Haiku*, *New Verse Review* and *Rattle*. Her poetry chapbook is *Plumstead Pram Pushers* (Red Ogre Review 2025), her hybrid book of memoir, poetry, cultural history and arts criticism is *Slags on Stage* (Routledge 2025). She works at Goldsmiths University of London.

Botha, Danila

Danila Botha is the author of three short story collections: *Got No Secrets*, *For All the Men (and Some of the Women I've Known)* and *Things that Cause Inappropriate Happiness*. Her novels include *Too Much on the Inside* and *A Place for People Like Us* (Oct 2025) Her first graphic novel will be published in 2026.

Brown, Dustin P.

Dustin P Brown is a Michigan-born, Spain-based author of poetry and prose. He received his BA in Creative Writing from Western Michigan University and currently works as an editor and interpreter. He's published poetry at dozens of journals including *Bacopa Literary* and *Lit Shark* and flash at *Falling Star Magazine*.

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Buba, Abdullahi

Abdullahi Buba lives in Maiduguri, Nigeria. He had his B. A. English from University of Maiduguri, Borno state. He lectures in the department of Remedial and General Studies, Mohammed Goni College of Legal, Islamic and Educational Studies, Maiduguri. The thematic preoccupation of his works mostly center on poverty, starvation, and bad governance. His poems 'Maraya' and 'Ours' have appeared in *LIBER*, an anthology of poems, and 'Our Torchbearers' published in *ANTAE*, a creative writing journal, Malta.

Case, Susana H.

Susana H. Case is the award-winning author of nine books of poetry, most recently, *If This Isn't Love*, Broadstone Books, and co-editor with Margo Taft Stever of *I Wanna Be Loved by You: Poems on Marilyn Monroe*, Milk & Cake Press. The first of her five chapbooks, *The Scottish Café*, Slapering Hol Press, was re-released in an English-Polish version, *Kawiarnia Szkocka* by Opole University Press and as an English-Ukrainian edition, *Шотландська Кав'ярня* by Slapering Hol Press. <https://www.susanahcase.com>.

Corrigan, Mickey

Originally from Boston, Mickey J. Corrigan hides out in the lush ruins of South Florida. She writes pulp fiction, literary crime, and psychological thrillers. Her poems have appeared in literary journals and chapbooks. A collection of biographical poems on 20th century poets is in press with Clare Songbirds Publishing.

Ellis, Matthew

Matthew Ellis (he/him) is a queer poet living in Columbus, Ohio. His first collection, *Little Heresies*, is due out late 2026 by Wayfarer Books. With a background in chemistry, he spends his time teaching yoga and following creative pursuits in music and writing. To keep up with his work, you can follow him on Instagram (@matthewellismusic3) or visit his website (www.MatthewEllisContemplation.com).

Notes on Contributors

Grey, John

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *River And South* and *The Alembic*. Latest books, “Bittersweet”, “Subject Matters” and “Between Two Fires” are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Rush*, *White Wall Review* and *Flights*.

Hardwick, Oz

Oz Hardwick is a European poet, photographer, occasional musician, and academic, whose work has been widely published in international journals and anthologies. He has published “a dozen or so” full collections and chapbooks, including *Learning to Have Lost* (2018) which won the 2019 Rubery International Book Award for poetry, and most recently *Retrofuturism for the Dispossessed* (2024). His manuscript *Orion Highway* won the 2024 Dolores Alberola International Poetry Prize. Oz is Professor of Creative Writing at Leeds Trinity University.

Keane, Mark

Mark Keane has taught for many years in universities in North America and the UK. Recent short story fiction has appeared in *The Interpreter’s House*, *Paris Lit Up*, *For Page & Screen*, *Midsummer Dream House*, *Zero Readers*, *Avalon Literary Review*, *Bards and Sages Quarterly*, *Shooter*, *untethered*, *Night Picnic*, *upstreet*, *Granfalloon*, *Into the Void*, and *Firewords*. He lives in Edinburgh (Scotland).

Kouroupis, Lisa

Lisa Kouroupis is an American poet. She is currently pursuing her MFA at the University of Montana, and is a poetry editor for *CutBank Magazine*. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Hyacinth Review*, *West Trade Review*, *Funicular Review*, *Lavender Review*, and elsewhere.

Lachenmeyer, Nathaniel

Nathaniel Lachenmeyer is a disabled author of books for children and adults. His first book, *The Outsider*, which takes as its subject his late father's struggles with schizophrenia and homelessness, was published by *Broadway Books*. Nathaniel has forthcoming/recently published poems with *The American Poetry Review*, *Poetry International*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Red Rock Review* and *DIAGRAM*. Nathaniel lives outside Atlanta with his family.

Notes on Contributors

Lecrivain, Marie C.

Marie C Lecrivain is a writer, and co-publisher of, *Sybaritic Press*, and an ordained priestess in the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica, the ecclesiastical arm of O.T.O. Her work has appeared in *California Quarterly*, *OMNI Reboot* (under the pen name M. Justine Gerard), *Gargoyle*, *Nonbinary Review*, *Orbis*, and *Pirene's Fountain*. She's curated several anthologies, including *Ashes to Stardust: A David Bowie Tribute Anthology* (© 2022 Sybaritic Press www.sybpress.com).

Lioi, Anthony

Anthony Lioi has published poetry in *Blast Furnace*, *FAUNA*, *Now Hear This*, *Watershed*, *Environmental Philosophy*, *The Dark Mountain Project*, *The Green Humanities*, *Numinous*, *Assaracus*, and the anthology *Poetics for the More-Than-Human World*. His work has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize. He is at work on a book of poetry called *Choirpunk*. He lives on a creek called Second River in Montclair, New Jersey, and teaches at the Juilliard School in New York.

Mifsud, Martina G.

Martina G. Mifsud is a young Maltese biologist and writer. She's currently completing her Masters in Environmental and Rural Sciences at the University of Malta. A scientist at heart, she experiments with different genres, mainly science fiction and horror, but also dabbles in creative non-fiction, fantasy and comedy. All her stories include elements of nature, identity, and humanity, as these are things that inspire her daily. You can find her on Instagram as [@tina_naturaa](https://www.instagram.com/tina_naturaa) for updates on her writings and other pursuits.

Moses, Jacob R.

Jacob R. Moses is a poet, educator, and spoken word artist from NYC. Publications featuring his work span five continents. He is the author of *Grimoire* (iiPublishing, 2021) and *WTF: Writing Through Fascism* (Bainbridge Island Press, 2024). In 2024, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize by New Generation Beat Publications for his poem 'Lottery'.

Notes on Contributors

Murphy, Sheila E.

Sheila E. Murphy appeared in *Verse Daily*, *Fortnightly Review*, *Poetry*, *Hanging Loose*, and others. Most recent book: *Escritoire* (Lavender Ink, 2025). Won the Gertrude Stein Poetry Award for *Letters to Unfinished J.* (Green Integer Press, 2003). Won the Hay(ha)ku Book Prize for *Reporting Live From You Know Where* (Meritage Press, 2018). She lives in Phoenix, Arizona. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheila_Murphy.

Murray, Craig

Craig Murray has been writing prose, poetry, non-fiction and fiction for a long time. He has a poetry collection *Watching her Walk* and several novels: *Lunchtime with God*, *Savage Lands*, *Laetitia's Woods*, *The Forgotten Man*. He has been published in dozens of magazines both print and electronic, has been the featured writer in numerous collections, and was once a featured artist for the city of Boston Massachusetts. He is the editor and publisher of the print *Liquid Sky Review*.

Reynolds, Fotoula

Fotoula Reynolds is a poet, born in Australia of Greek heritage. She is the author of four poetry collections and is published widely in journals, reviews and magazines. She has been anthologised multiple times in Australia and internationally. Fotoula was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2019. She is the first prize winner of the 2024 Greek-Australian Cultural League Book Award for her collection titled *Kairos*.

Seward, Allen

Allen Seward is a poet from the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia. He is the author of multiple poetry collections including *the grimy job called living* and *orders of magnitude*. His work has appeared in *Scapegoat Review*, *Spare Parts Lit*, and *Impspired*, among others. He currently resides in WV with his partner and five cats. @AllenSeward1 on Twitter, @allenseward0 on Instagram.

Stewart, Eamonn

He was born in 1964 in Belfast, and, while still at school, won first prize in the Irish Children's National Poetry Competition, on two occasions. He trained in advertising photography and worked as a curator in a photographic gallery. Now, he is retired due to ill health, but occasionally works pro bono as a director of photography on student films. His passion these days is for large-format fine-art photography.

Notes on Contributors

Sun, Annie ZH

Annie ZH Sun is a Chinese Writer who grew up in Malta. She graduated with a Msc in Creative Writing with distinction from the University of Edinburgh. Her work has been published in *Hex*, *IHRAM Press*, *Bag of Bones Press* 'This is too Tense' anthology, 'Silk and Foxglove' Anthology and others. She is the winner of the Horror Competition in Edinburgh Writer's Club.

Thornton, Douglas

Douglas Thornton is an English teacher living in France. He has published two books of poetry (*The Uninitiated*, *Woodland Poems*) and a collection of prose (*Seasons Of Mind*) while currently maintaining a website: www.fromapoet.com. You can also connect with him on Instagram @from_a_poet.

Vidgop, Jonathan

Jonathan Vidgop is a theatre director, author, screenwriter, and founder of the Am haZikaron Institute for Jewish family history in Tel Aviv. Born in Leningrad in 1955, he was expelled from university in 1974 and worked as a locksmith, loader, and White Sea sailor before army service in the Arctic. He immigrated to Israel in 1989. Vidgop received a presidential writing grant; his latest book was published by NLO, and his stories appeared in *Los Angeles Review* and *Pembroke Magazine*. His piece *Nomads* won Meridian's Editors' Prize in Prose.

Wood, J. W.

Most recently, his work has appeared in *Short Story Substack* (Los Angeles) and *Pulp Literature* (USA). His first collection of satires, *Captcha This!*, was published by AN Editions. He is currently under consideration for the 2025 Edgar Allan Poe Award in the US, and the International Mystery Writers' Short Story Award, both nominated by Wildside Press. Last year, he won the Strands Short Fiction Award in India.

Notes on Contributors

Xuereb, Haley

Haley Xuereb (2006) is a Gozitan poet, book reviewer and law student with a deep passion for literature, language, and culture. Her work explores themes of identity, embodiment, and memory, often weaving personal and historical narratives. She has been published in *Leĥen il-Malti* and has participated in various writing programs, including *Kjażmu*. She co-founded and co-edits *Mgħawġin*, the only active Gozitan literary zine. Beyond poetry, she is actively involved in student organisations and community initiatives, blending her love for academia with artistic expression.