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Mind the Iamb

Of Cretics and Amphibrachs

by Abigail Ardelle Zammit

*[I]f, for matters of prosodic convenience, a meter is decided not to exist,
it will drag a whole trail of potential poems along into oblivion with it.
Meters bring words and ideas along with them, more than the other way around.¹*

There's a pitfall, as I see it. A risk—often overlooked by writing tutors and creative writing curricula—a rhythm that unspools itself at the height of composition when you think you've become voice and poetic utterance, when the line draws to its conclusion in a befitting array of sound—that feel about it that there's no other way of writing it.

Five strong beats, even four, or six.

And always rising: ta TAM ta TAM...

But you don't always see it for what it is unless somebody points it out, unless you undertake the task of scanning it. And why would you? You're not a formalist. Free verse is your credo, your fall-upon style.

Beware. There's a peculiar strain to a poem that's been free verse throughout, only to fall upon the iambic metre at the end. Or a poem that wants to be iambic, and a writer that doesn't hear where it's going, or where it could have sauntered had it been left to its own devices.

To master the craft of writing is to see beyond your inspirational thrill and come to the poem as a reader might. Yes, even a critic with a well-trained ear. Which is sometimes to acknowledge that what you think of as free verse has the stamp(ede) of the ta TAM about it.

And the iambic—I confess to having lain with it many a time, often in a drunken stupor—has a knack of insinuating itself everywhere, under pillows and in the recesses between sleep and wakefulness. It's got all the seductive flair of a well-

practiced preacher. And how could it not when the vast majority of formal verse in the English language is iambic? How could it not when we've been taught that it's closer to the rhythm of spoken English than any other metrical foot?

For many of us, in fact, to write formally is to master the iambic; we might play with trochees for a little while. At most, we'll dabble with dactyls and anapaests—and then go back to that most 'natural' of signs.

Don't misconstrue this: I love the iambic. So many of my favourite poems are in iambics—Edwards' 'Rain', Plath's 'Mad Girl's Love Song'. The list is endless.

How much of this editorial note is in fact iambic? And how much of what you know is written in three-syllable feet? 'Over hill, over dale, / Thorough bush, thorough brier'²: TA ta TA | TA ta TA... Or this: 'The orchard, the meadow, the deep-tangled wild wood'³: ta TA ta | ta TA ta... The cretic. The amphibrach. Respectively. (Respectfully). These two feet, mostly unknown except as in-betweens, practised on the margins, in the interstices between story and fable.

The first cretics I ever heard as a full poem, putting aside Blake's juvenilia, were by Annie Finch. In 'Lammas Chant (August 1)' which is sung in two voices, the dual processes of creativity and destruction are enacted through the incantational pull of the verses, the grain sacrificed for the making of bread:

Fill the earth's belly full.
Bring the food, bring the grain.
There are cold months ahead
Give them peace in the ground.⁴

/ u / | / u /
There are cold | months ahead

/ u / | / u /
give them peace | in the ground

The cretic lends itself to ritual, outrage, dissent. Although rare, it has great potential for the downtrodden and dispossessed. Perhaps it's no coincidence that most of the poets experimenting with cretic metre are women. In this extract from 'Marcha de la Muerte',⁵ I've used the cretic's subliminal energy to question the ethics of lithium

mining in the Atacama desert, turning the names of the offending companies into compositional elements for public scrutiny and accountability:

SQM, Albemarle—

was it you fathered drought,
drained the gold from its brine,
ripped the lung from its heart?

/ u / | / u /

SQM, | Albemarle—

/ u / | / u /

was it **you** | fathered **drought**

The obverse of the cretic is the amphibrach, also a rocking metre, its strong middle syllable surrounded by two weaker ones—known mostly for limericks, but capable of much more than it is given credit for. In conversation with a Slovenian translator, having mentioned that the amphibrach is the staple metre of Russian poetry, it was edifying to discover that it's also the foundational metre for traditional Slovenian poetry.⁶ Listen to the amphibrachic breath of the first Slovene art ballad 'Povodni Mož' ('The Waterman') by France Prešeren. The waves of push-pull capture the allure of the water sprite who carries proud Urška away:⁷

"Fear not," he declares, "if the thunder resounds,
Fear not that the water so noisily pounds [...]"

u / u | u / u | u / u | u / (u)

"Fear **not**," he | declares, "if | the **thunder** | resounds,

u / u | u / u | u / u|u / (u)

Fear **not** that | the **water** | so **noisi**ly **pounds** [...]"

If the ballad form is easy to dismiss, consider the brilliance of the amphibrachic dimeter in 'A Saving Aphasia' by Philip Metres:⁸

I'm dreaming your body
 undone of the bindings
 of leather and thread –
 a thrumming vibration
that stitches my mouth shut

and opens my eye –

u / u | u / u
I'm **dreaming** | your **body**

u / u | u / u
un**done** of | the **bindings**

This isn't a manifesto against the iambic, but a gate creaking open to metrical otherness. For the Modernists who chose free verse to break away from the tyranny of iambic pentameters, metre was their inheritance. For us who are steeped in free verse, composition is not as consistently deliberate as it could possibly be. Perhaps this is also a plea for awareness. Of a kind. Music of a kind. For 'undoing the bindings' with vigilance and care.

There can't be innovation without mastery.

— *Abigail Ardelle Zammit is a Maltese writer, editor and educator. Her poetry collections are Leaves Borrowed from Human Flesh (Etruscan Press, 2025), Portrait of a Woman with Sea Urchin (SPM, 2015) and Voices from the Land of Trees (Smokestack, 2007). Abigail's poems, translations and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in Ploughshares, CounterText, and mpT, among others. Abigail is currently researching desert landscapes from around four continents and her most hybrid collection :deserere #desertum is forthcoming with Tupelo Press (2028).*

Endnotes

- [1] Annie Finch, *The Body of Poetry: Essays on Women, Form, and the Poetic Self* (University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 15. This epigraph acknowledges the thorough scholarship in metrical diversity that is the lifelong work of poet, translator and critic Annie Finch.
- [2] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act II, Scene I, eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (Simon & Schuster, 2016).
- [3] Samuel Woodworth, 'The Old Oaken Bucket', as reproduced in Annie Finch, *A Poet's Craft: A Comprehensive Guide to Making and Sharing Your Poetry* (University of Michigan Press, 2012), p. 407.
- [4] *Measure for Measure: An Anthology of Poetic Meters*, eds. Annie Finch and Alexandra Oliver (Everyman's Library, 2015), p. 245.
- [5] From 'Ruta 27', first published in the Tupelo Quarterly, Volume VII, Issue 32, and forthcoming in :deserere #desertum (Tupelo Press, 2028).
- [6] O prevajanju slovenske poezije v malteški jezik / Prevodni Pranger 2025
- [7] France Prešeren: POVODNI MOŽ
- [8] As reproduced in *Measure for Measure*, p. 176.

Flowers at my feet

by Soonest Nathaniel

They are perfect proof —
nothing in nature makes sense
except in the light
of evolution.

- *Dandelions breaking through concrete.*
- *Violets licking at the heels of the wind.*
- *Wet-lipped tulips gasping at dawn.*
- *Petals unfurling like accent scripts.*
- *Chromosomes singing in soft symmetry.*
- *The quiet arithmetic of inheritance.*

What green hunger invents a way to live?
Once, they were wild, nameless things,
a reckless experiment of time, & mutation,
a screaming mass of nameless elements;
roots groping blindly through centuries,
drunk on the sun's algebra.
And now this —

Petals shaking their gold into the wind, the impossible softness
of a daisy unfurling against my bone. The arrangements of meaning,
engineered elegance; sculpted — survival.

But the science of survival is brutal, and holy; written on the blueprints of bees,
sucking pollen into futures, the sequence of seed and soil, the long patience
of chlorophyll turning sunlight into breath.
And me —

*this improbable creature
with my upright spine and equations,
standing at the threshold of billions of years,
staring at the quiet mathematics of cotyledons,
the genius of green veins threading through eternity.*

At my foot, a tangle of fragile equations, DNA stacked like brittle staircases, ankle deep in a field of quiet architects. They do not bow, they do not worship, they do not pray, they do not know me at all; yet, here we all are, together, each of us still learning how to be, how to become; each of us unfolding, stretching toward whatever comes next.

African Speculative Realism

by Soonest Nathaniel

In the silence – a gourd

In the gourd – a mask

In the mask – a prophecy for the unborn

In the prophecy – a storm of retributions

In the storm – a woman kneeling with a knife

In the knife – a proverb patiently waiting to be spoken

In the proverb – a python singing of swallowed empires

In the song – a mountain of bones hoping again to be revived

In the mountain – a burning city, streets paved with unburied histories

In the city – a cracked throne, all its treasures and heritages carted away

In the throne – a stone with a heart of flesh, blood boiling in its veins

In the stone – a mother's eye weeping, watching from exile

In the eye – a bush fire refusing to be extinguished by water

In the fire – a flight of birds migrating, wings caught in electric wires

In the bird – a secret written in Nsibidi, Ifa codes for the watchmen

In the secret – a road forgotten, deliberately left out by cartographers

In the road – a river brimming with the corpses of dead narratives

In the river – a shrine of mirrors built for the forgotten gods

In the mirror – an oath unbroken by new language

In the oath – a riddle for the architects of movement

In the riddle – a craft made of iron and clay

In the craft – a dream of new un-fallen worlds

In the dream – a child planting trees on the moon.

Anyway

by Jim Paterson

She rarely picked the horses
nor put the crosses on the coupon.
Tea leaves were her forte, up to a point.
The point was either

The Day She Got It Right -
confirmed in a parcel of black pudding -
over-endowed with the giftie?
It can be crippling to see ourselves as others -

or the day she decided on teabags.
She never seemed to like communicating.
Perhaps that was it at the end.
She said she wouldn't have him back.

Anyway —
getting to be time to roll these orange cubes.

The Conspiracy Theorist's Mantra

by Damen O'Brien

Never shake a hidden hand / if it stinks, bury it / if you don't want to hear something, don't listen / if you don't want to hear something, nor does anyone else / there's always two sides to any story, but you only have time to listen to one of them / if you don't believe the science, chances are it is wrong / if you don't believe the science, there is always other science / there's always a deeper State / dig down / false flags never fly at half mast / if you don't believe something, trust your gut / if someone is criticising your opinion, they are criticising you / rights are absolute / facts are negotiable / if someone comes to you with stories of dead children, demand proof / if they show you photos, question the authenticity / if they say they were there, question their integrity / if they appeal to your humanity, question their motives / if they appeal to your ethics, question their memory / if you think people are out to get you, they probably are / if it smells, it's probably that rat which died in the skylight / bury it / if you still smell a rat, it's probably you.

Dreams of the Beach

by Damen O'Brien

You said, *come down to the beach and see*,
but I lay face down on the bed in frozen jetlag,
our bags piled around me in various stages
of deconstruction, the bed unmade, pillows
scattered. So you took your canary yellow sunhat,
your sandals, and walked into the roar of light
that is Korora beach, while your father
and our son worked in the garden, cracking
one hive open to make two, and your mother
clattered ambiguously in the kitchen above,
and I dozed and dreamt of buying ladders
until I found the only one that had no top,
or dreamt of opening doors until I found
the only one that did not open to this world
but to somewhere else and another me
went with you to the beach and stood
with our backs against the sun and watched
the silver spatter of the spray, burn its solder-
wash and soda on the beach and you said,
look! How did you know what we'd see?
There in the last light, in every broken curl:
each wave sheltered a rainbow in its fist.

The Artist

A Portrait in 15 Tableaux

by a.d.

He surrounds himself in beauty to drown out his feelings of inadequacy. Like the mad emperor, smothering out the world in a suffusion of petals, so must he smother the unseemly about him. He has become the opposite of God, birthing the perfect from the imperfect.

When asked about love, he claims to have never been in it. This is just another of his prevarications, the ones he has erected so diligently around himself, a shiny distraction like the orchards of the Hesperides. He knows that the first step to becoming an artist is to bare open your heart to the world. This renders it pliant and unguarded. Eventually, something will wander into its softness and refuse to leave.

He has three methods of painting: the first is where he paints entirely with his mind, letting his limbs be strung and led. The second, where he paints only with his body, like an automaton. The third is where he disremembers himself, forgets he has a body at all. Most of his best work was produced during these momentary lapses of being.

His mornings are abrupt and almost always dawnless. His footsteps fall heavy and silent over the carpet of his secluded world. He would like to know how it feels to flit through life blindly, as a bat does, immune to beauty.

Like a decadent, he denies himself nothing. He evades labels, limitations, confinements. He exists in the negative space between meanings. *Declination is the game of the ingrate*, he tells me. *The universe has proposed all this beauty, has laid it all out before us and invited us to feast. Who are we to decline its offerings?*

Consistently, he probes the countless mysteries of the universe. He pours his vast knowledge into the minds of his acolytes, who absorb his every word, as if by osmosis. When away from him, I can feel his words glimmer on my mind like the shimmering trails of a snail.

His mind is a wanderer. He despises questions to which there can only be one answer. He evades the stifling casket of consistency, eschews the fetters of fame. He refuses to betray himself or be bound in servitude to the bland desires of society. He remains enslaved only to beauty, terrible and unremitting.

He ponders his mortality dauntlessly, like a skeptic. *Death is merely a metamorphosis*, he says. Upon his transition, he intends to come back as a flame of inspiration — he shall compel his spirit into the receptive minds of creatives, to carry on his vision through the willing hands of strangers.

He often gets lost within the intricate dance between him and his paintbrush, where the rules are dictated as he goes. Devoid of inhibition, his heart beats in tandem with the earth, whose soul, he says, is withdrawn from the city. This is a man whose mind is ruled by his various passions — as difficult to know as he is to unknow.

So much of what we see is distorted by our preconceptions. He knows that art, like the soul, is precarious; that to paint, to capture any vision at all, is to look not through the eyes, but the mind. He lays his lamentation softly like a gauze: *People are so often deceived by what they think they should see that they fail to look at all.*

He is crescively decimating my various reserves about life. He chastises me for my idleness. He is adamant about dissolving the shroud I have woven to shield myself from the world. Every night he leads me to face the canvas and cuts me open. *A piece of art bereft of the artist is as mute as a virgin canvas*, he says. After all, the most precious thing we can impart on the world is a shard of our ephemeral soul.

His appraisal of artwork is a flaying. He believes that good work is multifaceted and inexhaustible, like the ocean where, every time one looks, something new is begging to be gleaned. Like a blessing, these hidden meanings are only administered when we are ready to receive them.

All his childhood dreams congregated on one thing: the act of creation. He would spend hours in solitude, devoting himself to his visions. The outcome, rather than the process, was what engrossed him — to gaze upon something that until minutes ago was still nonexistent. The most enthralling part was watching the conception take wing beneath his hands.

His studio he enters unshod, like a temple. Years of abuse have made a Pollock out of the hardwood floor, satin drops of dried paint that press roundly against the soles, a reminder of your purpose here — to leave some kind of a mark upon the world, unremovable and unmissable.

When he sleeps, he does not dream. He plans, he envisions. He entertains visitations from the near future; his still unrealized works, fleshed out, speak to him, beckoning themselves into fruition. How wondrous it must feel to have your own creations seduce you, make love to you through their longing to be born.

Dream after an open-heart surgery, or how a breakup feels after promises of marriage

by Lavanya Arora

Your heart is a surgeon.
It makes an incision in your chest
from within. Your sternum takes a curtain
call as if its role on your body's stage is over.

Through the space between your lungs,
your heart emerges
slathered in decades of beating
alone. Your heart has always longed
to belong, witness the world
with its own untiring eyes.

Veins and arteries
heavy with teenage aspirations,
sit befuddled in the broth of blood
on your chest, a bed of noodles
for the meat of your heart
to rest its infinite possibilities
before launching into its primal quest
to touch the world's lacerated nerves.

Like a helium balloon, it rises up
gnawing the atmosphere's gossamer flesh
until it reaches the stratosphere, transforms
into an immediate Sun. Everything is red.

The moon, blood red, reflects plasma
storms. Painted black, earth's once blue
bewilderment kills every organism
except the thermophiles. They dream
of drifting clouds with acid rain.
That sharp tinge of sulfur vapour.
Incessant lava floods.

A Pheasant Walks into a Bar...

by Mike Guerin

Character list

Brian Meade (barman) — in his late twenties

Danny Nail — early seventies

The Jackal — hard to put an age on him

John Buckley — early sixties

Scene 1

Lights up on a bar interior. Two men sit on high stools with their backs to the audience and the third is leaning on the counter with one arm akimbo. The barman behind the bar is looking at his phone. There is a large window behind the bar counter with yellowed opaque glass. The characters are frozen in tableau. Each character becomes animated for their soliloquies. First is the barman who looks up from his phone when he speaks.

Brian: I can't say I ever wanted to be a barman. It was always just there. I worked here all through my teens and it was part of the fabric of our family life. We were like farmers, we didn't know what holidays were. Except for good Friday but that day was spent cleaning the bar, a deep clean they called it. *(Pauses and looks around)* I don't know has this place ever been deeply clean. How can it be? We're legalised drug dealers, we spend our days servicing alcoholics, bleeding them of the scant resources they have. You can't think like that though if you want to stand behind a bar, someone else would be slinging them out pints if we weren't us, and at least we're decent to them. I give them slices of toast, easy bits like that, pot noodles, and if the mother makes soup she gives them out a bowl of it. We wouldn't be officially a bar that does food like, that'd be some amount of red tape to be dealing with. At least it's easier when you own the bar to treat them like real people, fellas renting have to squeeze every drop out of them to make it work. I don't own the bar. It's my parents' bar. I don't even think it's coming to me, there's older than me in the family. I don't want it really.

What happened was that I was doing engineering in college. I loved it. It was something completely different. Not the engineering part. The being in college

part. Then I failed second year. And then I repeated it and I sort of dropped out half-way through, and told no-one. But I was never going to get away with that and then when everyone did find out it was desperate, and I was told that if I wanted 'continued financial support' from my family, I needed to start working in the bar. It was supposed to be temporary, until I had made enough money to pay for my own course, teach me a lesson I suppose. But time has passed, six fucking years have passed and I'm a procrastinating eegit and I can see my parents struggling with their urge to not interfere too much, not to make me lose the rag, but try to encourage me to do something else at the same time. I don't lose the rag much anymore; I'm getting too old for it.

Every day is the same, it makes it easier for time to sneak past, when every day is the same. These three fuckers are pretty constant; in early, out before the evening crowd; the working alcoholics, the night owls. It's around five o'clock when the changing of the guard happens but John Buckley often pulls a double shift. He's some man to put away pints. The Jackal is here every day and Danny Nail is here about half the time. They're grand now, they're not too talkative at this hour. They'll talk amongst themselves a bit but not too much either. In a couple of hours, when the fuckers get chatty, 'tis then they wreck my head. John especially. (*Slight pause*) I suppose Danny Nail is grand even when he is boozed, I'm just being cranky now.

Brian Meade returns his attention to his phone. Danny Nail turns around.

Danny Nail: I worked hard all my life; I still do on the odd day one of the old farming families need a bit of light labour. I wait at the crossroads from eight 'til ten, every morning, 'cept Sundays, and if no-one has picked me up by then, I head here to Meades. I reared a family on the back of my labour and there isn't one of them living within five hundred miles of me. What was the point of it all? I couldn't tell you. You just had children because you wanted to have sex and that was the only way you could achieve that goal back then. Marrying someone you barely knew and sticking your buldanger into them the first time you spent a night together under the same roof. Not a great way to start a life together. A funny old set-up when I look back at it now.

I still share a house with my wife, but that's about the height of it. She'd be off visiting children places a lot of the time, America and Australia and Sweden and one in fucking South Korea if you can believe it! God forbid any of them would have just gone off to Cork or Dublin or even London, to be able to be a help to us, because we are getting fucking old now and we're one fall or stroke away from sitting in the chair by the fire and I don't think the two of us would be able to mind each other. Intimacy of all sorts has been abandoned. A failed punt at a happy marriage. There was neither of us pricks but we had no business spending a lifetime together. They do courses now you know, beforehand. I try not to sneer at the modern world because 'tis only that I missed out on living in it that makes me bitter.

I got to work outside all my life. Tisn't many get to say that. I lived the dream one young fella told me; work outside all day, come home to my dinner in the evening then go out to the pub at night. I never cooked a meal nor washed a child. I don't know now if he was right or wrong in calling it 'the dream.'

Danny Nail returns to his pint and The Jackal turns around; he speaks in a conspiratorial manner.

The Jackal: I don't know why I'm called the jackal. No-one ever told me why. I can't ask now, it's been years. I don't like asking questions anyway because it only makes you look stupid. My eyelids make a massive noise when I blink. Sometimes I think people can hear it. but it's better when I have a few pints, it dulls the click of them. Lubrication of some sort. Lubrication is key. A tube of grease is the best thing you can have if you're trying to fix anything. I know lots of bits and pieces like that. One-liners, and secrets too, small things that other people don't know or maybe they do but they know they're secrets too and say nothing, the way I do. *(The Jackal takes a sip of beer).*

I like the way drink makes me feel. And not feel. Drink is great. It softens people mostly and there's a lot of hardness in this world. I've seen my share of it and I rather it the other way. This is a nice bar. I come here every day a while. My mother wouldn't have liked that but sure she's dead now and I can walk in and out of town whenever I like. I don't like going any place with a big crowd. There's a lot of looky-loos in those places. Danny and John are grand that way. I don't ever get the crawling skin with them. If you've never had crawling skin, then you're a lucky man. 'Tis like the whole of you is wobbling on the outside and you think people can see it, but they can't. People don't see a lot of things.

The Jackal turns back to his pint. John Buckley turns around. He is exuberant.

John Buckley: I've been drinking here since I was fifteen years old. I had my first pint here. A beautiful pint of the black stuff it was, little drops of water on the side of the glass like you'd see in an ad. 'Twas just beautiful, and you can still get a good pint in Meades but the consistency is gone when that fella is behind the bar. Brian is a pure useless barman, head stuck in his old phone the whole time, looking at pictures. Tits and things I'd imagine, you can see all these things on the new phones you know. T'would want to be tits or something, the amount of time he gives to it. No manner! *(John takes a sup from his pint).*

And what's worse is that he's well able to have the craic with the younger crowd when he wants to. There was a time they won the county and the place was black with young people for three days, there was mighty craic all day and all night, he was well able to laugh and give free pints that time.

He has no time for the likes of us though. The fellas keeping the show on the road. That's what we are, truth be told. *(John takes a sup from his pint).*

He'd badly want to get over his college fiasco and get on with his life, have a small bit of fucking banter with his customers. Tis like getting blood out of turnip - getting any fucking chat out of him. The fucking gom and he sitting on a gold mine. At least it could be a gold mine if he may stop being such a miserable prick. All these places could be going good again. Pubs used to be some craic. This is only a shadow of the way things were.

John Buckley returns to his initial position and the light goes straight to black.

Scene 2

Lights up. There is a pheasant in the middle of the stage. It is in profile to the audience but its head is slightly cocked in their direction. All the men have turned to look at it. Danny Nail stands and walks around the bird before speaking.

Danny Nail: There's two types of pheasant in Ireland. This is the one without the white collar, the less haughty-looking one, the rarer of the two. I've shot at them from time to time but there's something unfair about pheasant hunting. They make it too easy with their big 'TUCKETUCK, TUCKETUCK, TUECKETUCK' as they take off and their slow glide to earth means you can afford to miss your first shot because you'll have an easy time with your second. Brought over here by rich gobshites with too much time on their hands and now you have rich gobshite wannabes carrying on their traditions. They'll try to tell you that they care for the animals but 'tis the same as farmers trying to tell you they care for their cattle, you don't kill and eat things you care for. The crowd shooting pheasants will tell you pheasants can't live naturally in Ireland without them breeding them but that isn't true either, I've seen plenty pheasant chicks in my time and seen them grow to adulthood without any help from a gun club. They should drop the pretence and just get on with. If you want to shoot something, just say you want to shoot it and don't be letting on to be some sort of fecking animal rights activist who just so happens to own a rifle. This poor bastard shouldn't even be in this country, and it definitely shouldn't be in this pub!

Danny returns to his seat and The Jackal speaks.

The Jackal: I've eaten a fair bit of pheasant in my time, but I don't really like it. There's an oiliness to the meat, not a nice oiliness either, it tastes more like something you'd use for gears. There's also the danger of pellets. You have to chew pheasant meat slowly, consider every mouthful carefully for fear of breaking a tooth, the mush that ends up in your mouth is something you'd as likely spit as swallow.

Now swallows, there's a tasty treat, but you can't be telling people these things. I wouldn't want people to know the best way to hunt a swallow anyway because they'd all be at it. I developed it myself. I put glue on the telephone wire in front of my house. I tie two ladders together; it makes one giant stepladder and it is shaky but it's worth the risk. They always land there and enough of them get stuck for me to make a meal out of them in the range. The roasting birds give the kitchen a sweet, sweet smell. 'Tis the African air that makes them so sweet. I think, anyway. I have it in my head that the heat and all the different animals and the smiling people, they make the air sweet. There isn't much sweetness in the air around here. I can smell cows and milk, all the time. Except for when someone's spreading slurry. You'd look forward to it, for the change.

The Jackal returns to his initial position. And John Buckley becomes animated. Standing over the pheasant, bending at his hips and looking down at it.

John Buckley: Ah lad! Ah lad! This is gas, this is fucking gas! A pheasant, here, in the bar! This is a story and a half, this is like something from long'go. Like the time the mountainy man brought his donkey in the door of the bar and asked for a pint of Guinness for the beast, for medicinal purposes he said, or the times Davey Ryan used to put a rabbit in the ladies' jacks, the screaming! Stuff like that used to be great craic. People having high piss competitions at the back wall, fellas daring each other to try to jump over stacked stools in the bar. People were mad to be out with people. I don't know what's happened to everyone, they have no interest in each other anymore. The old people blamed cars for the death of the rambling houses, my parents blamed telly for the death of the dances. *(John takes a sup from his pint).*

Are pubs dying too? They're deader than they were. Drink driving laws, smoking bans, fellas fecking jogging, they all had something to do with it. But they're not dead yet! There's still hope, there's still people out there who want to meet people. People like me. Something just needs to happen; they've done all the things to kill the pubs but something needs to happen, and that'll make them good again. *(John takes another sup from his pint).*

Something good just needs to happen now too; to make it a proper gas story. Someone has to say a gas thing or the bird should take a shit on Brian Meade's boring bastard head, it might liven him up a bit!

John Buckley returns to his original position. Brian Meade becomes animated.

Brian Meade: That's a fucking pheasant. What's a fucking pheasant doing in a bar? It has no business in here. Can you shoo a pheasant? I don't think it's dangerous. This is the last thing I need. *(Pause)* It's beautiful.

Black-out.

Scene 3

Lights up, The room is brighter than before. Danny Nail is cowering near his stool. The Jackal is still in his seat but he is in profile to the audience and there is a feather seemingly stuck in his upstage nostril. John Buckley is on his stomach on the floor. Brian Meade is nowhere to be seen but the window at his back has been smashed and we can see the village outside. Brian Meade stands up from behind the bar where he had ducked.

Brian Meade: A pheasant on the ground looks to be around the size of a basketball but when the fucker is in the air, he's the size of a round bale. His wings are like electrons — everywhere at the same time. *(Notices the brightness of the room)* That window must have been fair dirty. I should have cleaned that. I'd have to stand on a crate to reach it though. There's a drop on the outside. I was afraid someone would see me. Off he went to college and look at him now, washing windows. Having notions is one of the worst sins you can commit around here and people drop and roll in it when they think someone's had their notions confounded. That fucking pheasant had notions. Walking into a people bar.

Brian Meade ducks down to his original position again. Danny Nail stands to face the audience.

Danny Nail: I have never been that close to the 'Tucketuck, tucketuck, tucketuck' before. I understand it now, it makes all the sense in the world to make that noise if 'twas a fox or something rushing at you, because, when you're only four feet away from it, the noise deprives you of your senses for just a moment, like thunder, maybe that's why they always answer thunder? Imitating it, practising. It buys you time to get up and away and glide off in a goading manner. The way it leapt into the air! The tail feathers were like one of those lads in the Olympics with the ribbon. Had it been a man it would have cleared the roof of the building! A thing of violent energy, but a thing of beauty too.

Danny returns to his original position. The Jackal does not turn from his profile position but he does sit up slightly.

The Jackal: There's a feather up my nose. I don't know if anyone has seen. I'm afraid to pull it out in case it's stuck into something important. There probably isn't anything important up there. *(The Jackal tentatively removes the feather)*. That bird was a demon. A shapeshifter. A witch maybe. 'Tis usually hares and cats they turn into but my Granny said some of them could turn into anything at all they wanted, maybe 'twas one of them. I'm keeping this feather. It could be magic. Maybe I got some magic from it. That'd be gas. I could change, just a little.

The Jackal stills again. And John Buckley raises himself up off the ground.

John Buckley: I played Junior B football at a time of especial lawlessness in the rich history of North Cork Gaelic games. I had a few scrapes in my time and I was banned twice, no fault of my own. I had none of these so-called technical skills but I could stop a good player from playing. I have big fingers so I used to hook my little finger on the hem of their jersey and they couldn't shake me, the ref would end up giving them a yellow card for going mad. I did a great line in falling awkwardly too. I could take out three men with a good fall. And if all else failed an uppercut is the only type of box you've any chance of throwing without getting caught. These were all skills that were much admired by my teammates and our supporters. A Tullylease fella shouldered me hard one time, after I had fouled him on the sly, and he broke his collar bone, it was probably the highlight of my career. The story grew legs over the years. One night here, late late, a young fella told me that he heard I had killed a man from Tullylease during a football match and the whole thing had been covered up by the GAA, that it had gone right to the top. I didn't contradict him.

But there can be no doubt about it. The pheasant came out on top. He barrelled into my chest and there is weight in them, let me tell you that. I'm an ample bulk of a man but the pheasant was ample enough for me. He used me as a springboard to burst out the window there and fly off across the street. Fuck all wrong with him. I ended up going arse over tit onto the tiled floor. There's no give in a tile. I'll feel it tomorrow boy, I can tell you that. But, and I'm in the heat of it now, it'll make one hell of a story! He was one hell of a bird!

Black out

Scene 4

The Tableau is the same as scene one except for a poster of a pheasant on the wall behind Brian with a red cross through it and the words 'NO PHEASANTS ALLOWED IN THIS BAR' written on it. The window has been replaced with clear, clean glass. Brian Meade becomes animated. The others animate as they speak.

Brian: We owned the story now, the four of us, it was ours to tell.

Danny Nail: Ours to regale the world with.

John Buckley: Ours to milk and twist.

The Jackal: Ours.

Brian: And we all left our mark on it. Through repeated retellings, to any who crossed the threshold – especially at the right time of day. It always started the same way: as soon as a shadow darkened the door the lads would turn and make like they had gotten a fright and John Buckley would exclaim...

John: “Christ! I thought the Pheasant was back!”

Brian: And then Danny Nail would say...

Danny: I’ll be out the back door if I see him coming.

Brian: The Jackal would then point to the feather stapled to his peaky cap and say...

The Jackal: I suppose she’ll be looking for her feather back.

Brian: Then Danny would correct him.

Danny: ’Twas a male pheasant, Jackal, I’ve you that told a hundred times at this stage.

Brian: The Jackal would only raise his chin at Danny and then I’d come in with, “I’d have to show him the sign,” and I’d point up at it and read it aloud, ‘NO PHEASANTS ALLOWED IN THIS BAR.’ And we’d have a laugh and if they were interested, the people that came in, we’d tell them the whole thing from start to finish and people didn’t know whether to believe us or not but we’d knock a bit of craic out of it ourselves so we didn’t care really.

Slight pause.

Danny: And the story meandered amongst us as the sign faded and curled.

Slow fade to black.

The End

Immortality Project

by *Michaela Pia Camilleri*

I've always wanted to be famous. There's no point to life unless you leave something behind for people to remember you by, above the soil you're buried under.

When I was 13, I read Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*. He wrote that the only way for humans to cope with their mortality is with the pursuit of 'immortality projects', ensuring that our existence on this godforsaken Earth survives as more than a line on the government's register.

Twenty years later, I finally committed to my immortality project. I wanted to do something high-stakes, but relatively easy. So I decided to bomb the Vatican.

My plan was this: dress up as a priest with an ugly backpack slung behind my back and sneak into the Basilica. A nerdy little priest, wearing a nerdy little backpack, with a not-so-little bomb inside it. Nobody would suspect a thing.

I arrived in Rome on Thursday night, and as I weaved through Bernini's columns, I planned my innocent itinerary for the next day. It seemed that everything would go according to plan. I could already picture all the newspapers on the *edicole* with my face splattered on them.

The next day, at 8:55am, I scurried across Piazza San Pietro with a long priest's dress swishing at my ankles. Good thing my (now dead) uncle was a clergyman.

At the entrance to the Basilica, I insisted that the guards let me in quickly, as mass was about to start in five minutes. One of them looked at me suspiciously, and nudged me back behind the scanners, knocking me into one of the machines. My backpack slid off my shoulder and fell onto the ground. There was an explosion and everything went black.

In the hospital, I managed to get hold of a newspaper. On the third page, it said that the bomb had gone off, but not fully, and the guard and I lost two legs and an arm combined.

Tragically, there wasn't a single front page with my face on it. It turns out that exactly seven minutes after the explosion, the Pope decided to die of natural causes.

So now, here I am, sitting in prison, missing a limb, and the Vatican still immortal.

Revision

by Maria Grech Ganado

there comes a time when you are moved out of the lives of others
and can't seem to inhabit your own —
you never knew your own, it's true,
and panic at a date that merely seems repeated —

every new day pushes you further into a past
that cuts inside you as keen as it did then
when ache was once a pain you couldn't bear
but muted now by lessons learned at last
that what has been has been, and cannot change.

It is the years that change, slowly moving your life
into new spaces your mind may yet vacate
and so you smile in case your memories are mistaken.

Talking Things Over

by Maria Grech Ganado

it's run off its tracks, this train —
its rails could no longer stretch parallel
under a tongue too hot —

I only wanted to explain
and thought we'd meet at last that way

but it was warm enough, perhaps,
just seeing that our lives were running close
and we'd arrive as we set off

together

And now?

by John P. Portelli

You told me: I reconsidered everything, and it is best that you delete those photographs which have been tormenting you for fifty years from the shelf of memory. I know we were created for one another; all was lost a while ago because of doubts, fixations. You know that for me you were the world. But either destiny is blind or a firmly bolted door. Our love is built on that which once was. I crave you, but I can't. And now?

I replied: I wandered and wandered to find you again and maybe it was a fatal mistake. I empathise, but you left me as one does burnt food at the bottom of a pan. If only you had allowed me to kiss the calmness of the sea that I still witness in your eyes. I would have been able to forget all. In vain I played the accordion of our youth to console you! Talk of passion is too harsh for your taste, like my life of solitude. Yet, we are still here turning in our dreams without anyone spotting us. How long shall I purse my lips to stop the tears? And now?

The Carnival Mask

by Andrew Zammit Montebello

Recording session of AE:07-PE, carried out by Archival Research-Assistant Dr Jerome Reid on the 28th July, 20██.

Anomalous Entity number Zero-Seven dash PE, The Carnival Mask.

Zero-Seven is a two-toned, black and white carnival mask with two horn-like protrusions attached to its upper corners. A black tear drop pattern is noted on the white half of the mask. On the back, two fabric strips are attached, seemingly for tying the mask onto the wearer.

Comparison to standard carnival masks find that, with exclusion of the horns, Zero-Seven's base seems to pertain to Carnival stock characters; in this case, the design implies the stock character 'Pierrot'.

Samples taken from Zero-Seven during its rest state found the primary base of the mask fashioned with a mix of paper-pulp, animal leather, and animal glue. Further testing done on the samples found the leather, glue, and horns were derived from the ox breed 'Gendus Malti' or 'Maltese Ox'. Examination carried out by conservationists estimate the mask to have been constructed around the early to mid-19th century.

The item produces sound, seemingly constant save for two instances. This effect is observed by individuals within an estimated radius of one-point-five metres from Zero-Seven. Previous attempts to record this effect with conventional audio equipment have failed. Due to this, and agent testimonies following experiments, the Carnival Mask bears the item designation 'PE' due to the psychological and physiological effects observed.

Testing found the audio effect varied dependent on certain factors; these details can

be found within the test log regarding Experiment 07-PE-02, and will be provided further into the report as it is the most relevant information regarding Zero-Seven's audio effects.

Addendum 1: On the 11th and 12th February, two additional effects were noted:

On the 11th, hence referred to as Event 07-1, Zero-Seven secretes a red viscous liquid from the eye holes, simulating crying. Testing of this liquid has shown it to be a composite of ox and human blood. Attempts to identify its source have failed due to the chemical makeup of the samples being degraded. It is also noted the audio effect it produces is at its highest, being audible to any individual within the sphere of influence, not just those observed in testing.

On the 12th, hence referred to as Event 07-2, Zero-Seven enters its rest state, with the anomalous effect inert and the secretions having ceased.

Addendum 2: In Experiment 07-PE-05, an additional effect is observed should a subject wear Zero-Seven. Upon putting on the mask, the subject vocalises how they struggle to breathe and the audio effect becomes, quote, Deafening, end-quote. Prolonged exposure seems to form bruises and injuries consistent to a crushing event form across the wearer's body.

The test log pertaining to Experiment 07-PE-05, alongside additional notes, will be attached further into the report.

Hypothesis: Considering the significance of the event dates along with the effects observed in relation to the Anomalous Entity, it is not outside the realm of possibility that Zero-Seven is related to a historic event known as the Carnival Tragedy of 1823 on the island of Malta. Available records show this event to be a crowd crush incident whereby, Good Lord..., over one hundred lives were lost, primarily that of young boys. An accurate number of casualties from this event is not obtainable due to a lack of concrete documentation with various conflicting estimates. This absence of documentation is sadly not an uncommon occurrence, having been observed within many postcolonial governments.

However, further research is advised to confirm no malicious tampering through anomalous means.

Due to Zero-Seven bearing significant allusions to the incident, two hypotheses are proposed regarding the relationship between said event and the Carnival Mask itself:

Hypothesis A: Zero-Seven was created prior to the tragedy, and had influenced the event itself.

Hypothesis B: Zero-Seven was crafted following the event, and later obtained its anomalous properties.

With present evidence acquired by the Institute, Hypothesis A can be disregarded. Whilst there is a lack of primary sources relating to the Carnival Tragedy, what can be found in state archives and government documents indicate no observable link to the mask. Especially as, at the event itself, there was no mention of the anomaly present, nor reports of any of the observed effects. Ergo, Hypothesis B proves more likely.

Should any evidence be found which confirms or disproves one of these hypotheses, a supplement with the provided information will be attached at the end of this report.

Experiment 07-PE-02 Report

On the 15th of June 20██, the Institute's Board of Directors approved of the use of human test subjects to understand how exactly Zero-Seven's anomalous nature affects different individuals. This was decided following reports of inconsistent observations noted by staff and researchers assigned to Zero-Seven.

Initial experiment carried out by Dr Rayner Phillips had four agents stand individually at cardinal directions outside the Carnival Mask's area of effect before gradually walking towards it. Any agent who heard the effect was to stay on spot while others move further along.

The agents involved will be referred to by pseudonyms; North, East, South, West, respective of their location in the experiment. Information pertaining to the agents relevant to the test will be detailing where said agent was affected by the anomaly. All four agents were provided noise cancelling headphones so as to assure that what was heard was solely the anomaly and not outside interference.

Upon commencement of the test, Agent North stopped immediately upon stepping

into the area, hearing the effect at one-point-five metres from the Mask. Agent South stopped at one metre from the mask. Agent East stopped at approximately the zero-point-eight and zero-point-six metre mark. Agent West had to stand directly against the anomalous item.

After five minutes from when Agent West reached the Carnival Mask, agents were signalled to leave area of effect and be debriefed.

Agent 'North' (forty years old): North at the time of the experiment was a registered foster parent and had recently finalised adoption of their second child. North also volunteered for community youth programs such as [REDACTED]. No records of biological children. Upon entering Zero-Seven's field of influence, North 'heard' the auditory hallucination, gradually increasing in apparent volume despite not leaving position. North commented that the voices began to quote, Sound like my kids, end-quote.

Agent 'South' (fifty-six years old): South has had little to no contact with their still living offspring for the past thirteen years. South claims to have a decent relation with their godchild. South commented that the audio effect sounded like their godchild. South admitted they also heard the sound of their deceased son as well.

Agent 'East' (thirty-one years old): East claims to have no living offspring, biological or otherwise. However, they had donated material to assist a friend who had reproductive issues. When asked regarding why they had shifted in position during the experiment, East claimed the audio effect they experienced seemed to have faded in and out. Quote, Like they were underwater or something, end-quote.

Agent 'West' (twenty-nine years old): On initial questioning as to why West went right up to the item, the agent claimed they heard nothing when approaching the anomaly. However, approximately four minutes into waiting, West claimed to hear whispering, though they could not properly discern the source or the words. With regards to offspring, West admitted to having given up a child for adoption fourteen years prior. West commented, quote, Kid's got their lives, I got mine. No reason to bother them, end-quote.

A commonality observed between the exposed agents was that the auditory hallucinations seem to be that of multiple voices screaming, with the apparent volume increasing over time within the affected area. Linguistic experts exposed to Zero-Seven identified the primary languages of the vocalisations as English, Italian, and Maltese.

Observation: From the above experiment, it can be observed that Zero-Seven's effect pertained more to those with overall positive relationships with children. It seems more focused on the more emotional connections rather than purely biological. As seen, especially, with Agent North having the most visceral reaction at the farthest affected distance despite having no biological offspring. Whilst Agent West had almost no immediate or notable reaction to Zero-Seven's effect even when being physically the closest one to Zero-Seven.

Whether this effect is purely due to the emotional aspect Zero-Seven latches onto, or as a more cynic agent would say, is just because it wants to 'hurt more', is pure speculation at this stage. Any further testing to understand what relations Zero-Seven deems 'effective' have been denied by order of the Ethics Department.

Honestly, I think that was for the best. I doubt there's any scientific justification that can be given to subject a parent to what Zero-Seven causes.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: DUE TO CONTENTS OF TEST LOG, DISCRETION IS ADVISED WHEN VIEWING. SHOULD ANY RESEARCHER FEEL DISCOMFORT OR ANXIETY, CEASE EXAMINATION OF THE REPORT AND PROCEED TO THE NEAREST PERSONNEL RESOURCES FOR ASSISTANCE]

Experiment 07-PE-05 Test Log:

Conducted on the 30th of August, 20██, Lead Researcher Dr Rayner Phillips carried out Experiment 07-PE-05 with the goal of understanding the physical effects of Zero-Seven should a subject don the mask. The subject of this experiment is listed as Agent [...]. It seems the agent's name had been redacted in the transcript, as such, when the agent is referenced to within this report, they will be hence referred to by the pseudonym 'Eleusis'.

Agent Eleusis had been selec— I mean, volunteered for this test due to having no offspring and living as a self-proclaimed 'isolationist'. With no living family nor close bonds outside of some colleagues within the Institute, Eleusis provided a control test subject to limit Zero-Seven's effects as solely from being worn.

Prior to the experiment, Zero-Seven had been removed from its containment cell and placed in Observation Room Gamma, allowing the research team to observe the experiment without risk of being exposed to the anomaly themselves.

At the beginning of experiment, Eleusis had entered Observation Room Gamma and approached Zero-Seven, vocally confirming with researchers that they could not hear the anomalous hallucinations induced by Zero-Seven, including when standing against the Carnival Mask.

At the one-minute mark of entering the chamber, Eleusis was instructed to place the mask against their face, yet not to tie the fabric straps in place. Eleusis proceeded as instructed, agent commented it was awkward to hold, still no audible effect noted.

Two minutes from entering the chamber, with no discernible reaction, Agent Eleusis was instructed to secure Zero-Seven to their face using the fabric straps attached to the Carnival Mask. Eleusis did so, though initial complaints vocalised, quote, You lot try tying a knot behind your head, end-quote.

Four minutes from entering the chamber, Zero-Seven had been secured to Agent Eleusis' face. The agent commented on hearing something, clarification given that it sounded like crying. The effect consistent with previous tests carried out.

Within five minutes, Eleusis commented further on how the crying was, quote, Getting louder, end-quote. The research team noted that at this point Eleusis began taking shallow breaths. When inquired, Eleusis said, quote, It's just a lot okay? And you guys turning down the lights doesn't help!, end-quote. It should be noted at no point had the lighting of the chamber been reduced, suggesting a possible visual hallucination in effect. Eleusis began to grow erratic, shouting at the research team before struggling to remove Zero-Seven. The agent's recorded vocalisations had been redacted due to containing language too explicit for the report.

At approximately seven minutes into the experiment, Eleusis had collapsed, leading to a forced halt of the test. Zero-Seven had to be cut off the agent before medical intervention could be administered. Eleusis was tended to on-site before transferred to Medical for proper treatment.

Examination showed that bruises and minor fractures had manifested across the agent's body, particularly on extremities and torso. These injuries have been consistent with those observed on bodies of victims found in crowd crush and collapse events. Agent Eleusis had to be treated for oxygen deprivation.

Following treatment, and as of the time of this report, Agent Eleusis has made a full recovery.

The Carnival Mask was sent for restoration following the fabric straps being damaged to facilitate removal.

Observation: ... Apologies, I just... I needed a moment.

Following this experiment, two hypotheses had been proposed following the discovered physical effects of Zero-Seven.

The first proposal observed how it seemed that the Carnival Mask had 'latched' onto Eleusis to prevent removal, suggesting a level of sapience within the anomaly. This proposal was quickly dismissed as, on review, it was found that when Agent Eleusis had secured the mask in place, they had used a 'False Knot' commonly known as a 'Granny Knot'. This binding knot has known issues of either slipping open, or jamming in place when attempting to untie it. It would seem, in this case, the knot jammed, making removal difficult.

The second proposal on Zero-Seven's effects is observed when, in a follow up interview, the lead researchers took note of how Agent Eleusis was visibly uncomfortable when in an enclosed space. This is being suggested as evidence that Zero-Seven had induced claustrophobia on the agent via anomalous means. This, unlike the previous theory, is more plausible, if only just. In research papers, it was found that most survivors of crowd crush events would develop PTSD symptoms, with a recurring one being claustrophobia. As such, there is no confirmation whether this is an anomalous induced effect, or a natural response to the frankly traumatic event.

Proposals for further human testing on Zero-Seven's link to this claustrophobia effect have been suspended by the Ethics department until further notice.

Attempts made to track down and follow up with Agent Eleusis have proved difficult due to the redacted details. Although, considering what they had experienced, I don't quite blame them for wanting to forget this event. Regardless, a request was sent to Dr Phillips for any additional information to be provided if possible.

The current containment procedures advise that the Carnival Mask be locked within a standard anomaly containment cell, measuring no less than 5 metres across all sides. Zero-Seven is to be placed on a display stand in the centre. Personnel are instructed that no agent with close relations to children may be stationed near the cell due to possibility of being affected by the anomaly.

Despite containment within the [REDACTED] Quartz lined cell, Zero-Seven periodically acts up (note Event 07-1 and Event 07-2 for further details). As such, cleaning of the cell must be carried out. The substance produced by Zero-Seven is to be collected and subsequently disposed of, presumably via incineration, with exception of testing samples.

The fact that the [REDACTED] Quartz, a known dampener of Anomalous materials, seems to have no effect on the Carnival Mask is being researched further. Whether this is a unique trait of Zero-Seven, or whether the [REDACTED] Quartz is losing its neutralising effect, is vital information for the Institute, particularly if this could mean other, more volatile anomalies in containment might be 'resistant' to the [REDACTED] Quartz too.

Restorers who specialise in examining and conserving masks, particularly papier-mâché carnival masks, are to be brought in to examine Zero-Seven due to the potential damage which could occur following Event 07-1. Any requests for conservation intervention or repairs must be approved by both the Head Researcher and Site Manager.

At present, primary concern noted by conservationists has been the discolouration and moisture damage found where the secretions trail down the item.

Final Thoughts:

Considering Zero-Seven's effects and the obvious links to the aforementioned Carnival tragedy, it can be theorised that the Carnival Mask is meant to take the symbolic role of an effigy for grief.

This practice is fairly common; various cultures crafted effigies to be symbolically used to absorb painful emotions or even illness. A noted example of such practices could be found with the Saint Brigid's Crosses in Ireland, where the woven crosses were burnt at the end of the year to symbolise the cleansing of the homes they had been hung within.

This idea of the Carnival Mask being an effigy could be further argued with how the design of the base mask reflects the stock character 'Pierrot'. This character, originating from the early Italian theatrical genre of 'Commedia dell'Arte', was often linked in culture to the ideas of isolation and suffering.

The noted addition of the ox horns to the mask could be a way to further entrench a cultural link with the 1823 tragedy and the island where the event had occurred.

As observed with other Anomalous Entities such as Seven-Eight (The Photo Album) and Four-Nine (The Sweatpants), a variety of the specimens collected and examined within the Institute reflect concepts found within an archetypal image. In the case of Zero-Seven, the ox horns and carnival mask bring about a specific cultural idea, particularly in the context of the island it seemed to have originated from.

A running of wild beasts.

A trampling of starving children.

A stampede...

Of course, this is pure conjecture due to lack of supporting evidence. However, a copy of this report shall be sent to the Culture and Folklore Department to see if this avenue of thought is worth further exploration.

This has been Dr Jerome Reid's report on Anomalous Entity Zero-Seven dash PE, The Carnival Mask.

End of Report.

Lost Letter to the North Pole

by Annie ZH Sun

Dear Santa,

When I was five years old
you forgot to show up. Under the
unlit chimney the cookies remained
uneaten, milk untouched.
They didn't have time to make you exist,
so I grew up.

When I was ten years old
they brought home a new baby
in your name. I took care of him while
they worked. I wrote letters and burned them.
I hope the smoke carried my resentments
to the North Pole, even though I knew

that wasn't where you lived.

When I was fifteen years old,
my kid brother waited for you under
cheap paper tassels and sputtering lights. Once
his shining excitement turned into
soft snores, I finished your cookies by the
cold window sill and dunked your
disgusting milk into the toilet. You still
owe me twenty three dollars and eighteen
cents for the new truck you left him.

At twenty, I ditched old nests for big wide skies but,
under the brilliant, metropolitan lights, I was incredibly
alone. After my eighth call went to voice mail, I
gave up on them. I bought milk, brownies and your
favourite cookies. Maybe it was for the best you didn't
show up. I wouldn't want your old, fat, diabetic
ass to get a heart attack in my dorm.

At twenty five, I've finally had adequate therapy and make enough money to sever
ties. That year, I move in with an eccentric knitting fanatic who cries during
bake-off shows and treats bookshops like a weed-parlour. We order
a five-foot-tall tree. Under real pine and functional lights, I leave you
no cookies, no milk. I have made amends with
you, but inside one of the boxes, an infinity scarf sits like
a long-awaiting
hug. The note says: *From Santa*.

Thank you for showing up.

Darkness

by Douglas Haberman

stalks the books
Standing shoulder to shoulder
Like soldiers in formation
But defenseless
Against the treachery of madness
And the lights that won't make up
Their minds to act
The darkness feeds
Like any living thing
It's hard-wired to grow
It slips
Its slender needle
In between the pages
Nosing dramatic climaxes
And happy denouements
And stunning twists
To siphon off the ink
That will sustain it
Indifferent
To the pages' plight
In this light the books
Seem more like prisoners
Imminent victims of a death squad
Shoulder to shoulder they hold each other up
But little by little
Letter by letter
Darkness is bleeding them
White

Fleeting Encounters

by *Elina Petrova*

i L'Oiseau bleu

Running late. A sudden jolt of wonder —
indigo bunting under my window:

small bodied and molting, like the four
red finches in my feeder — only blue.

He pecks at shells they spit.
I like him best.

ii Chickadee

“What do you want me to make?” — says little Jasmine:
black cherry eyes & a hundred braids.

She makes a nest. She makes ice cream. She
makes gumbo. All is sawdust & blades of grass
stuffed in a gap between oak surface roots.

There is a chickadee above her — black cap & bib,
a pure two-note *fee-bee* outside of the bebop
in the hastening highway.

iii Bard

If a wren in hand is better
than a crane out of it,
then the wren was my crane.

I walked for him to this suburbia,
like a druid,
made nests of old shoe boxes
until I merged in his trill.

Now you won't see us
unless we sing.

iv Possibilities

Heidegger suggested roaming graveyards.
Pascal — sitting quietly in a room alone. Derrida —
deconstructing the language of *mauvaise foi*.
James Baldwin, ah — just recall his full eyes,
scarfed figure passing a Parisian bridge.

A Mississippi kite perched on my pine—
grey against grey sky before thunder.
Greeting first gusts. Awfully beautiful.

Temperature drop. Songbirds leave my patio.
Only he and I, in a sleeveless shirt,
stare at each other: curious and calm —
sitting quietly, just as Blaise said.

v Ptashka –

little bird in Ukrainian—a 20-year-old paramedic who sang folk ballads
to the soldiers in Mariupol's dark, besieged "Azovstal". Swapped for
several Russians, she is finally back from a hospital after beatings by
guards. Her smile is still blithe, the silt of pain buried deep in the lakes
of blue eyes, when she says how she missed kava — Turkish coffee
sipped alfresco in Old Kyiv — and squints at the October sun caressing
her dear cobblestones and passersby.

vi *Ibis*

An ibis guides me at dawn in Donetsk —
the hobbled woman, she slowly paces upstairs
to my abandoned Apt. 55, bows
to former neighbors — mostly dead
or drunk from the morning to cirrhosis,
but keeping doors ajar, so Ibis and I
could seep to the limbo of coal miners.

Mines are flooded. So are homes in Kherson.
Explosions beyond the Kalmius recall the future.
Ibis looks at the old maple from my window,
and what enframes her is intact and brown,
as a forgotten surveillance file.

vii *Heron*

A yellow-crowned night heron
perches on the power line
and watches me — now from the roof —
as I talk on the cellphone with my dead
friend's daughter.

She left her ex, drinking
on the wrong side of the war,
moved her new man from Nashville
to the Sunshine State, but doesn't swim —
only tans, drives to the gym.

Her mom once reviewed my book
in Russian. Now it's my turn to
introduce her chick to America.

The sun sinks, but what do I know,
except that herons' stomachs
dissolve shells of crustaceans.
Your daughter *is* an American —
don't worry, Natasha.

viii *Protection*

Like a hummingbird
under the hawk nest,
I settled here, hiding
from murder jays.

ix *Poet*

She might've flown two
thousand miles again.
The tiniest bird: the largest
brain, the fastest heart.

Her job is to flutter
at petals and glass flasks,
to open flat tips of her tongue
and draw nectar until

it doubles her weight
with sweetness
from the bright
harsh world flashing by.

Bird Feeder

by Elina Petrova

A cardinal snacks on sunflower seeds.
Two feet from the feeder to my patio table — blue,
with yellow chairs just painted by my father.

A year together. Three days he's been
back in Ukraine, in his *safe* village... "he's got family" —
I lull my conscience, bitch.

The bird feeder (the forked leg of whose iron pole
my dad straightened to pull the squirrel baffle on) —
the heart of my yard.

It's full of flying beings.
Wrens with chickadees. Finches, klutzy doves.
And here is my favorite — the cardinal.

Buses. Buses to the no-fly zone. Pushing
bags forward and hopes forth. Krakow →
border → Lviv → Uman → Kyiv.

Dad stopped by Kraków, I saw him
in a dream, an aged traveling monk: coarse
gray frock with a cowl and a rope belt.
The monk?

Even in mom's hospice ward
he never talked beyond things to bring, buy or fix—
anything but intangible, winged, of Spirit.
But doesn't Spirit mean love in verb form?
Why can't I, a birder, *fix* father's burdens?
As my neighbor says:
"Bring 'em *all* from Ukraine."

tired, teetering between the tides—still life in Venice

by *Francisco Izukiri*

From the airplane window, I caress
 a little fish of stone and cement
 emerging from the lagoon
a bittersweet smile;
so charismatic, nostalgic
drenched in cursed beauty;
a diamond of a fallen republic
 adrift among the waves,
 like a plastic bottle
tired, teetering between the tides.

I step into your heart,
leap from one ventricle to another —
from hotel to Airbnb.
No one cares for you to feel loved;
they want you to be a whore
 at the mercy of their gold,
 to be used, drained,
 until the inevitable collapse.
A ruin, useful as an elegy —
from protagonist to backdrop
to sell paintings or pride.
And in part, I understand you, my dear —
abandoned among the waves, you and I.

I trace the red bench with my fingertips
sink my feet into the canal
 frosted by the fine rain.
Looking for timid white clouds in the distance,
 I abandon my back to your *fondamenta*
as I once did with my past
 upon the Bridge of Liberty.

I wrap myself in your palaces,
my silky duvet of salt and stone,
so I can fall asleep certain
I will wake in a dream.

My Rolling Seas

by Rory Doherty

My Rolling Sea

Alone I waited
for the sun to rise
over the Sea of Galilee.

Aching feet numbed
by cold relief
plunged ankle deep
in a life-long dream.

My rolling sea of memory.

Alone I saw
glory and awe
line by line
shade by shade.

Thinking nothing yet
feeling I am touching
the face of peace
in the silence
between the waves.

Cold feet pain differently.

My Rolling Sea

Aged I waited
for the sun to rise
over the Sea of Galilee.

Aching feet numbed
by cold relief
plunged ankle deep
in a life long gone.

My rolling sea of memory
pulled from beneath clutched toes.

Alone I saw
glory withdraw
line by line
grain by grain.

Thinking nothing yet
feeling I am touching
a cold wave of silence
pass between us.

Feet have use beyond pain.

Garden of the Fugitives

by John Menaghan

I.

Once taken up by homes,
this whole expanse had been
transformed into a vineyard.

The *triclinium* held a trio of beds
on which at outdoor banquets lay
both hosts & guests, also in threes.

A pergola protected them,
its open lattice wreathed in
woody vines supplying shade.

II.

Across a sizzling heap of pumice stones
already reaching three-plus meters high
women and men and children sped.

The pyroclastic flow, 500 degrees
of burning cloud, a swirl of gas and
dust and stone, cut short their flight.

As 13 strove to reach Nocera Gate each
faltered, fell. These days along a garden
wall, encased in glass, lie 13 plaster casts.

Things to do in Ulaanbaatar

by John Delaney

Visit an old Buddhist monastery.

Take a tour of the cashmere factory.

Catch a lecture at the university.

View contemporary art in a gallery.

Toast at the top of the Blue Sky Hotel
on the 25th floor; dine there as well.

Bargain at the black market where vendors soft sell
unique handmade items to show and tell.

Listen to throat singing at the town hall show
where traditional dancers leap to and fro
at the sounds of the horsehead fiddle's low
groans, while acrobats contort in synchro.

Too hot, we took a plane north, not knowing
we'd come back in a squall. It was snowing.

*Ulaanbaatar has the lowest mean temperature of any capital in the world. Almost half of
Mongolia's population lives there.*

Angst the Color of Thunderstorms

by William Doeski

I've lingered too long over texts
that fail to instruct but inflict
angst the color of thunderstorms.

My doctor could prescribe a pill
that would chemically resolve me
but would also dull my senses

and leave me flopping like a trout.
The day dawns with moist overtones
after a summer of drought and dust.

Sandstorms in Arizona eroded
friends who had retired there far
from hurricanes and tidal surge.

A derecho staggered an old friend
in Colorado, where the Rockies
nod in tremendous skullcaps.

I stay home and expect an abrupt
rebirth to swoop from the clouds
and rip the books from my hands.

It would scatter the gloom so thinly
no one will suffer it again.
The color but not the music

of thunder shades me as I sit
in the last of September heat.
The day tallows into amorphous

and inorganic matter some
opportunist sculptor could shape
into a hearty and cheering grin.

Bio-Rhythms, 24 August 25, 8IIpm

by Gerard Sarnat

Twenty days 'til turning that big 8-0
doing your damndest
to kick my multiple
middle of night
awakenings
(not unlike
our new
grand
child)
Gerardo
now attempts
to spend at least
a very few minutes
outside before the light
vanishes or after it returns
each morningtime to reset circadians.

Woodhaven

by Cal Freeman

During the reading at the library
of my old school, I mentioned
a stone tower throwing light signals
to guide the freight trains'
switchbacks and frog maneuvers
around the railyard in Woodhaven, Michigan.
Afterward, a young Woodhaven woman
approached me and said she didn't know
you could put Woodhaven in a poem.
She asked where the stone tower
I mentioned was located,
and I confessed I may have
simply imagined a stone railroad tower
existed at the railyard there.
It might be there, she said.
I just haven't seen it.
She said she'd look for it
when she took her walk that evening.
I said in the poem
that the brakeman switching lights
on and off in that stone tower
was as close as we might come
to defining the word "mind,"
which doesn't make a lot of sense,
and it is evident I don't know
exactly what a brakeman does.
Coincidentally, I went to Woodhaven
the following morning.
I read Yeats's "Tower" on my phone
while looking out the auto-shop window

at the sledding hill of the municipal park,
thinking *Ben Bulben's back*.
Thinking about how poems
are really only ever about themselves,
wondering whether the young woman
had begun writing a poem
about the fictitious stone tower
near the railyard in Woodhaven, Michigan,
hoping that she had.
I wandered out into the autumn sunlight
and laughed at myself for using that line
to describe my leaving [my leaving, gerund,
I'm leaving, I'm present participle,
Allen Road, Tom's Family Auto Care]
and walked to the closed-down Bill Knapp's Restaurant
on the corner, relieved that the tan
whistle stop sign with the green
cursive lettering is still there.
I took a few pictures of the sign
and the beige building made to resemble
a Midwestern farmhouse.
I wondered how many packs of cigs
Aunt Nancy and her boyfriend, Theron Brown,
smoked while talking about deros
and other Shaverian mysteries.
In his younger days, Theron,
an animator and illustrator by trade,
drew Richard Sharp Shaver's
air looms and detrimental robots
and thought-stealing welding guns.
Deros in the gears breaking
the transmission while facilitating
darker pneumatic transmissions.
Sparse woods here, a few copses,
some clearings, a little stream
flowing through a culvert.

The Day We Saw the Whale

by Stephanie Sant

It happened exactly one August night at three in the morning. It was an August night at three in the morning that would happen every year since the year I turned twelve, but it was the year I turned twenty-five when the realisation had hit. One August night every year, during the Santa Marija period, all six members of my family would pack a week's worth of food onto the sailing boat and sleep onboard. At three in the morning, my father would wake up and start the boat, the rest of us fast asleep, and set sail in the direction of Sicily. He would start the boat this early so that by noon we'd pause at the shore of Portopalo, have a swim, and eat the baked pasta that would have been prepared in Malta. Following a nap we'd continue our way to Marsamemi.

It was a routine established once and henceforth anticipated each year: a collaborative mission that centred the splendour of the sea. Starting the journey at three in the morning would mean being halfway there by breakfast time. Then one only had to endure a mere four hours of gruelling sun, encouraged by the promise of a cool dip once the anchor was cast. Those four hours would still feel like they lasted all eternity, with the Sicilian horizon, once the excitement of the appearance of the horizon after four hours of sea void dissolved in the sun, appearing to be stuck in place at a particular distance. The engine starting at three in the morning would jolt the whole family awake, of course, but we would all soon go back to sleep basking in its hum, knowing that we could not be in safer hands and feeling as light as a feather at the prospect of rest being our sole duty for the nine some hours to come.

So at twenty-five years of age, fast asleep in the cabin I shared with my sisters, I was woken up by the engine starting. For a moment, I expected to curl up and fall right back to sleep, still under the charm of the sandman that had visited at around ten o'clock the night before. But by some somnambulist force I dragged my body out of the cabin and up on the deck where my father was pulling the ropes. I remember it being too dark to tell whether my presence on the deck surprised my father, who was focused on manning the boat. He did not question my being awake, in any case.

Still half asleep, I heard myself announcing to him that I will keep him company for the early hours of the morning. I made us both a cup of tea and got myself a blanket and we sipped the tea from the enamelled mug as the Grand Harbour's glow got smaller and the stars got bigger. We silently looked out for any shooting stars that travelled still onwards after the recent *dmugh ta' San Lawrenz*, occasionally commenting on what was within our visual reach: light pollution, darkness, satellites, Orion's belt, the sea.

I woke up that night despite a big part of my mind willing myself to go back to that sweet cocooned slumber, ferried with the rest of my siblings and our mother by our father, our captain. But there also awakened a small voice in my mind, perhaps one that was more wary, more cautious, but more empathetic and humanising of my father. One that pulled him from the skies of my endless, daughterly admiration to the earth where the rest of us lay, determined to keep him in the skies. As I dragged myself over to the deck, knowing that I would never be able to remain asleep during this journey, or on any future journeys, the part of me that deemed the flesh of my father immortal died, allowing the thought of my father one day dying to be born and take its place. What jolted me awake at three in the morning that night was not the engine starting, but the realisation that my father was not invincible after all, and that he was even vulnerable, manning the boat by himself with the responsibility he carried for the five of us, a pride he nurtured weighing on his shoulders. I knighted myself responsible for him that night, and stood watch in the early hours of the morning, under the guise of wanting to see the vestiges of the Perseids.

We were alone, just the two of us for three and a half hours. We watched the tenebrous West and the luminous East merge and dissolve to form daytime. The disappearing stars somehow meant that my father was a little less vulnerable now, and I could soon resume my slumber. I wriggled out of my blanket and made us both another cup of tea, and the kettle's whistle woke my brother up. Ever the fan of endurance, I kept my brother and father company and then decided it was finally safe for my guard to retire. My back turned to my brother and father, and I was climbing down three out of four steps to the cabin when my brother cried out.

For the split second until my brother announced his reason, until I could decipher the excitement in his exclamation rather than an imagined dread, my heart rate soared and I flew back out onto the deck. My flight to protect my brother and father from whatever peril may have struck turned to absolute delight as I registered what my brother had just exclaimed: *Hawn balena! (there is a whale!)*. This sentence, a foghorn for the rest of my family to scamper on deck, was the beginning of the most magical few seconds our family had ever experienced at sea.

By the time I was on deck looking into the direction my brother was pointing, most of the whale was submerged. It generously left its visible blowhole spurting out water with that spectacular sound which, up until then, was one only imagined in our collective consciousness. The more the gigantic body, as big as the boat we were in, became smaller as it sank to the depths, the more a feeling of fear and vulnerability rose in me as the idea of the thalassic unknown became an impressive reality. Would the whale emerge in our vicinity? What if it hits the hull accidentally? What if it hits the hull deliberately? Impossible to sleep after the surge of adrenaline, I remained on deck surveying the sea, desiring to witness it on its next emergence. It never did, and to this day I have not been blessed with a whale sighting, not even in the deliberate three-hour whale tour I went on in Iceland four years later.

Unlike the hypervigilant and joyous buzz I had felt that morning, and that wore off into a pleasant memory with time, the dawn of the realisation of my father's vulnerability has remained with me since. Like the love and admiration I eagerly claim for him, the realisation continues to evolve and grow exponentially. That day, the whale understood that my refusal to go back to sleep at 3am was not uneventful, and it sealed this inauguration. Its saluting presence is a gift I will forever cherish.

Propinquity of the Green Castle

by Salvatore Divalco

Julia had insisted on the picnic. Mario had no say in the matter. The grounds were well-groomed, lush and green. She spread a red cloth with a pattern of small black flowers, opened the picnic basket and removed from it a dark wine bottle and a small but laden charcuterie board. Her lavender garments contrasted with it and the surrounding greens. The happiness of life depends upon little things like this. Mario ate a wedge of cheese that had started sweating in the sunshine. Then he started sweating. It was warm, but not unseasonably. Julia uncorked the wine bottle and poured him a glass. He sipped it, his lips convulsing to a pucker.

“It’s a Zinfandel,” she said.

Mario nodded, moving his mouth to resolve the acute astringency. His head swirled. The green castle in the distance looked toylike and harmless. He wondered what was going on there. He smoothed his black cloak with the flats of his hands and thumbed his thick black eyebrows. He should have dressed more suitably. He glanced at the castle. Very little is needed to make a happy life, he thought. Each day provides its own sweetness, its own reward. But sometimes you have to urge things along, juice the pace. He abruptly stood up.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Do you want to fly a kite?”

She reared her head. “A what?”

“A kite, a kite.”

“Did you bring a kite?”

“Take my hand,” he said.

Julia hesitated, but when he insisted she took his hand. He gripped it tightly and began to jog around the grounds, pulling her along, her shoes thudding over the sod. She looked confused, but didn't resist. They picked up speed.

"When I say jump, jump high!" Mario shouted.

"I can't jump that high!" she cried.

"Believe me, you can!"

They continued running briskly around the grounds. Mario ran with his face forward, teeth bared in a wine-tinged smile, cloak flapping. Julia looked stunned, undone, her eyes saucer-like.

After a few minutes of running — she pink-cheeked and panting, he sweating profusely — Mario shouted, "Jump!"

Her feet lifted off the ground and fluttered under her as though made of crepe paper. Then they floated up, legs angling to the sky. Mario held her hand firmly as she floated above him but fixed his gaze on the green castle. What did he perceive there? What was it? Teeth clenched, chin raised, he started running toward the castle, still holding Julia's hand, her body fluttering above him — a languid, lavender flutter.

It's likely that an onlooker from the castle would have witnessed something altogether different.

Empires Rise and Fall

by Salvatore Difalco

The tiny couple by the brandy cask at the end of the bar dance like there is no tomorrow. A neck-bearded fiddler on a low stool and a man banging a veneered wooden box with his palms perform an old ditty. I remove my cap and scratch my head. It has been a long day. I ask the burly barkeep for two fingers of spirits.

“Preference?” he says, studying me with the tops of his eyes.

“Surprise me.”

He glances at me and nods.

It goes like that sometimes. You let the universe or one of its agents handle the decisions, at least the ones that don’t matter. The left side of the barkeep’s face bears the very detailed tattoo of a woman’s face. How many hours did that take? I want to ask him about it, but I have not lost my mind yet, not completely.

“What are you doing here?” the barkeep asks me.

“I’m taking a break from the war.”

He looks at my uniform, his eyes pausing at each brass button.

“Why is it green?” he asks.

I don’t have an answer for him. Perhaps it is green for reasons of camouflage. Or for reasons of a strategic or morale rationale to which I am not privy.

“Are we winning the war?” the barkeep inquires.

“Depends who you ask.”

“I’m asking you.”

“I know the horse of darkness is riding fast to the east.”

The barkeep frowns, flips a rag off his shoulder and wipes the bar.

The music stops and the tiny couple bow to each other and return to a miniature table positioned by a jar of pickled eggs. Hard to tell how old they are. Could be any age, really. I sip my drink. Rum on ice. Naught soothes the soul as religion and rum. I eyeball the barkeep. He smiles. I smile. I glance at the couple, now seated and sipping beer from tiny steins. They turn their wee faces to me and also smile.

All That You Are

by Salvatore Difalco

Capretto didn't believe in faeries. That is, before he got married he didn't believe in them. A devil-red one floated overhead now in a state of suspended gesture, a little simper playing about its face, small clouds slipping by it. Capretto's wife Mafalda had summoned it for their tenth anniversary. She had a number of faery friends who were always doing her favours. She said they were a blessing on their lives, but Capretto could not care less about these fussy creatures. Any magic they possessed only manifested itself in stingy drips and drabs. They never delivered the goods entire, the total show. They never exerted more energy than was necessary to trick their human contacts into letting their nonsense slide.

Hiding his indifference to the faery, Capretto embraced his wife vigorously in their yard by the fuchsia tree. He stroked her shoulder and planted his muzzle into her neck cavity.

"Your breath, dear," Mafalda said, averting her face.

"Sorry," he said. "I ate an onion this morning."

"You eat them like apples."

"And how are they supposed to be eaten?"

She didn't want to argue with him this morning. Yesterday they'd argued about him eating her tulips. "Was not!" he'd protested. But she'd seen him munching them from a vase on the kitchen table with an unnatural gleam in his eyes. Anyway, exhausting. The happiness of life depended on the quality of discourse, yes, but also on compromise and good manners. Even love couldn't overcome a lack of these qualities. Fortunately, good and cheerful things existed on the world to offset the negatives. She looked up and waved at the red faery who smiled and waved back.

"He's so high up there," she said, screening her eyes with her flattened hand.

“So it’s a male, this one?” Capretto said. “How can you tell?”

“Oh, don’t be silly. That’s Fabrizio. He’s a real character. He’s going to do one big thing for me today. He promised. He’s just waiting for my signal.”

“What’s he going to do?”

Mafalda closed and opened her eyes. “You’ll see.”

Capretto followed her back to the house. He loved his wife, but her humanity often angered him. He saw it as a character flaw, if not a crippling weakness. He had tried to explain this one evening over beers to his friend Giacomo, a full-blooded goat, but he wasn’t sympathetic. He didn’t like humans. He thought they smelled horrible. “That’s the least of it,” he’d say. “They also stink, behaviorally speaking, as fellow occupants of this planet.” But Capretto always steered Giacomo away from this line of talk. It could lead to trouble. You never knew who was leaning in with an ear. Now he wished he was with Giacomo so he could ask him what he thought of faeries, if he considered them as useless as he did, as absurd as he did.

“You’re frowning,” Mafalda said. “Why are you frowning?”

“I’m not frowning,” Capretto said, standing at the kitchen window. “I’m thinking, I’m thinking. For god sake, can’t a person think anymore?” He moved his mouth in pseudo-disgust and stomped the floor. Mafalda had replaced the ingested red and white tulips in the vase on the table with tantalizingly vibrant yellow ones. Mafalda thinned her eyes at him. He cleared his throat and asked, “So what’s this special thing your faery friend is going to do?”

“Only if you want,” she said. “He’ll do it only if you want.”

Capretto winced at the sound of this. And it didn’t take him long to figure out what Mafalda had up her sleeve. She wanted him fully transmogrified! She wanted him to go one hundred percent! Yes, they had talked about it. If they planned children, wouldn’t it be better if both parents were one hundred percent and so on, this sort of thing. That’s what Mafalda had posited. That he should transition to fullness for the sake of these hypothetical future generations. He found the idea laughable. He asked her, why she didn’t go half-and-half and let the faery do his business on her? Wouldn’t that amount to the same thing? No, she’d said. It was a technical impossibility. The faeries could only perform the transformation on him.

“What if I need more time to think about it?” he said. “It’s no small thing, Mafalda.”

“I know, but it’s for the best, I think.”

Indeed, it was no small thing. Mafalda was making an ultimate ask. Was he prepared to commit?

“At dawn, birds can do nothing but sing,” he said.

Mafalda glared at him. “How’s that?”

“At dawn, birds can do nothing but sing.”

Exasperated, she shook her head and went back out.

Capretto stood at the kitchen window and watched her converse with the faery — what was his name again? Didn’t matter. What could she be telling him? That her half-human husband was a deadbeat and a bore? And would it have been that bad in the end? Being fully human? He thought about it as he watched Mafalda waving at the faery. She looked so earnest it made him glance over at the trembling yellow tulips on the table.

Vanities

by Salvatore Difulco

One night Mirella could not sleep. She tossed and turned and finally got out of bed. She went out to the courtyard in her nightgown. The night air cooled her face and smelled sweetly of the nearby meadow. She walked to the stables. Halfway there she realized she was barefoot. She smiled. No worries. Her smile lingered. She chose the red pony, Rodolfo. She smoothed his mane and cooed to him. He nickered. She bridled him and took him out to the meadow.

They rode over the sighing grasses and flowers, the candelabra of the sky illuminating their way. "That a-boy," she said to Rodolfo. He smoothly trotted around the meadow. They rode past the fragrant orange tree and the red rooster Antonio, patrolling his perimeter. "Hallo, Antonio!" Mirella cried. "Hallo!" Antonio paid her no heed, bobbing his flared red head and poking about the chicken wire fence. Weasels lurked. Antonio made quick dispatch of weasels when he managed to run them down or root them out of their holes and hiding places. Mirella admired Antonio, but at the same time she thought he would make a good soup when his life ended. It was well known that old roosters made the best soup.

Rodolfo galloped around the meadow, kicking up grasses and little blue flowers. Mirella let the pony do all the work, making herself light on him, softly squeezing together her thighs and gently holding the reins. She made chucking sounds, but more out of habit than because they were necessary. This was a lovely moment she would not soon forget. Moments like this defined a good life, made for fond memories. Glassy-eyed and panting rhythmically, Rodolfo trotted smoothly without once breaking gait. They rode past the orange tree again and Mirella opened her nostrils and sighed.

They rode past the dusky villa where votary candles flickered in the cut glass windows. Others were awake. What would they say if they knew she was out there? Nothing good. Mirella pulled the reins right. Rodolfo leaned and turned away from the villa. Once again they rode past the orange tree and Antonio the rooster. Antonio disregarded them.

Mirella's nightgown trailed behind her, merging with Rodolfo's tail. His hooves thudded over the meadow. In the interplay of shadows, starlight, and candlelight from the villa, Mirella looked like she was on fire. Indeed she felt her body heating up as they continued circling the meadow. Rodolfo was sweating now, his chest heaving.

"I'm burning up," Mirella thought. She glanced at her nightgown and screamed.

At this moment Antonio turned his beady but fierce gaze to Mirella and Rodolfo. He made a soft clucking sound. Mirella was screaming and shaking her head as they trotted around. What was the problem now? Always something with that human. Last week she fell into the well. Likely trying to gaze at her own reflection. Humans were vain that way. He felt bad for Rodolfo, the red pony. But not too bad. He had seen the pony gazing at his own reflection in the trough. He was guilty of vanity, too. And he wasn't really red, in Antonio's opinion. More like a maroon. I'm red, he thought, bobbing his head. I'm bloody red.

Haibun Littoral

by Colin Dardis

Locked inside office hours, I look at a map and plan my next walk. What's reachable, what could be done in one stretch without injury. I'm drawn to a patch of shore I haven't walked in over twenty years, a patch that contains just enough of the basic commodities to be called a beach, rather than a waterfront, or land's end. Train out, walk, two buses back. It's modest, but still, anything is ambitious beyond the confines of one's desk. At the most northerly point of this beach, you can climb a few small rocks and stand at the back wall of a shoreline house, where no one else goes, and feel the sea for yourself. I stood there a few times during university years, walking down between lectures, when neither the library nor anyone's company was appealing. Odd, that this small scene has stayed with me, the humble ingredients of

stone, moss, seaweed and sand
waxing back into the memory
like a rare wave.

Finding Nomadic Refuge

by Michael Salcman

When my mother lived in Prague
and I lived in her
my father collected papers
for our immigration
and I entered the refuge of a refugee
in a permanent divorce
from other tongues
like Czechoslovak
and Hungarian,
distracted by proof of concept
shaking hands with the air.

When a single tobacco ash
fell on my index finger
looking like a black mayfly
I became
one more refugee as a victim
in a paradigm
absorbed and reproduced
in a future
of refugees and children of refugees
themselves and their stories
lost within myself
yes and no
facing the inevitable end.

A Melancholy Tribute

by George Freek

When stars die, they disappear,
but we take no notice of them,
They take none of us.
Yes, but when something dies,
it should have a place
in a catalogue of the dead.
All death is a shame.
My old dog howls at the moon.
Does he sense his time
will be arriving soon?
Can he know what it means to be dead?
No one can say what dogs know.
He's sleeping near my roses,
but in some time soon,
he'll be sleeping forever,
and the roses will
be growing over his head.

Notes on Contributors

a.d.

a.d. is drawn to the sacred, the profane, the mysterious and the mythological, which provides inspiration for her work. She is a Pushcart- and BotN-nominated bisexual poet, writer and visual artist, and her work is published in *HAD*, *Aôthen*, *THINK*, *REDAMANCY Mag*, *ECHO Review*, *Prosetrics* and elsewhere. Meanwhile, her visual art, mainly photography and self-portraiture, is featured in *Hominum Journal*, *Welter*, *Occulum*, *Antler Velvet*, *Bleating Thing* and other outlets. She is currently working on her first poetry collection. Tumblr & Twitter: @godstained

Lavanya Arora

Lavanya Arora is an independent researcher and writer from India. Their work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Frontier Poetry*, *Soft Union*, *Muse India*, *Tamarind Literary*, and elsewhere. In a past life, they tried understanding plant and bacterial DNA.

Michaela Pia Camilleri

Michaela Pia Camilleri is a Maltese lawyer who often contemplates reading for an English degree. An avid reader as a child, having loved anything by Enid Blyton, Anthony Horowitz, and Rick Riordan, her taste has slightly shifted, now tending to prefer the likes of Sally Rooney, José Saramago, and Immanuel Mifsud.

Colin Dardis

Colin Dardis is a neurodivergent poet, editor and sound artist from Northern Ireland. His recent poetry collections include *with the lakes* (above/ground press, 2023) and *What We Look Like in the Future* (Red Wolf Editions, 2023). He currently co-hosts the long-running Poetry Poetry open mic night in Belfast, and is editor of the poetry blog, *Poem Alone*.

Notes on Contributors

John Delaney

After retiring as curator of historic maps at Princeton University Library, I moved out to Port Townsend, WA, and have traveled widely, preferring remote, natural settings. Since that transition, I've published *Waypoints* (2017), a collection of place poems, *Twenty Questions* (2019), a chapbook, *Delicate Arch* (2022), poems and photographs of national parks and monuments, *Galápagos* (2023), a collaborative chapbook of my son Andrew's photographs and my poems, *Nile* (2024), a chapbook of poems and photographs about Egypt, *Filing Order: Sonnets* (2025), and *CATechisms* (2025), poems and photographs about my senior cat.

Salvatore Difalco

Salvatore Difalco is a Sicilian Canadian poet and storyteller, living in Toronto, Canada.

Rory Doherty

Rory Doherty's fiction and poetry has appeared in *Howth Castle*, *Side Show*, *ARTWIFE Magazine*, *ANTAE*, *Bull*, *Northern New England Review*, *Firework Stories*, *Blessings in Disguise—Eyes Welled Up Anthology* (PoetsChoice Press), *The Write Launch*, *Hemingway Shorts*, Vol. 10 (2025), and *Exacting Clam*. He holds an MA in Creative Writing from Boston University and completed doctoral studies in Humanities (PhD ABD) at the University of Texas at Dallas.

William Doreski

William Doreski lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He has taught at several colleges and universities. His most recent book of poetry is *Cloud Mountain* (2024). He has published three critical studies, including *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors*. His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in various journals.

George Freek

George Freek's poetry has appeared in numerous journals and reviews. His poem 'Night Thoughts' was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Notes on Contributors

Cal Freeman

Cal Freeman (he/him) is the author of the books *Fight Songs* and *Poolside at the Dearborn Inn*. His writing can be found in many publications, including *The Glacier*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, and *North American Review*. His hybrid collection, *The Weather of Our Names*, has just been released by *Cornerstone Press*.

Maria Grech Ganado

Maria Grech Ganado (b.1943) has won National Book Prizes for 4 of her 8 poetry collections in Maltese or English, has been published in English in the USA, UK, Australia and Cyprus, as well as in translation to 15 other languages. In 2005 she co-organised an international seminar (RE-VISIONS) with LAF (Literature Across Frontiers) and Inizjamed in Malta. She has been awarded by the State, the University of Malta and her hometown, Floriana. Maria has 3 children and 3 grandchildren.

Mike Guerin

Mike Guerin is a writer and drama teacher from the mountainous uplands of North Cork. He writes poetry, plays, and prose and has had work published in journals nationally and internationally. In 2022 he won the Listowel Writers Week short story competition. His plays have been performed by drama groups throughout Ireland. His first professional production was at INK Short Play festival in 2023.

Douglas Haberman

Douglas Haberman is a student in the poetry concentration of the MFA program at Western Colorado University. His home is in California, but he has lived, studied, and worked overseas for more than 17 years, including 13 years in Europe.

Francisco Izukiri

Francisco Izukiri (he/him) is an Italian poet based near the Venetian Lagoon. His poetry weaves love, grief, art, and ecology into lyrical yet civic narratives. He writes in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Minnesota Review* (Duke University Press) and *IHRAM Quarterly Magazine*.

Notes on Contributors

John Menaghan

John Menaghan has published 4 books with Salmon Poetry (*All the Money in the World*, *She Alone*, *What Vanishes*, and *Here and Gone*), received 6 Pushcart Prize nominations, and had poems appear in numerous journals, including *Ambit*, *The Hopkins Review*, *Brilliant Corners*, *Poetry Ireland*, *Atlanta Review* and *American Arts Quarterly*.

Soonest Nathaniel

Soonest Nathaniel is a poet, digital media strategist, broadcast journalist, and spoken word artist. His poetry collection, *Teaching Father How to Impregnate Women*, was selected as a winner of the RL Poetry Award. His second book – *Burying The Ghost of Dead Narratives* – was published in collaboration with the British Council. A Rhysling Award and Pushcart nominee, Soonest was selected in 2023 to be a fellow of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa; he was also a 2021 Langston Hughes Fellow at the Palm Beach Festival and Poet Laureate for the Korea Nigeria Poetry Festival.

Damen O'Brien

Damen is a multi-award-winning Australian poet. His prizes include The Moth Poetry Prize, the Peter Porter Poetry, and the Cafe Writers Open Poetry Competition. Damen's poems can be found in *Aesthetica Literary Journal*, *Arc Poetry Magazine*, *Poetry Wales* and other journals. His latest book is *Walking the Boundary* (Pitt Street Poetry, 2024).

Jim Paterson

Jim Paterson is a Scottish writer who taught in the Highlands for years, before moving to Perpignan. Recent work in *City of Poets*, *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears* and *PoetryBus*. Two pamphlets, *Grit 1* and *2*, from the lamented Urchik Press. Bilingual book, *RSVP*, with Michel Borla, just published in France. Substack: https://substack.com/@jimpaterson1?utm_source=user-menu

Notes on Contributors

Elina Petrova

Elina Petrova lived in Ukraine until 2007, where she worked in engineering management. Her debut book was in Russian. In the U.S. she published *Aching Miracle* (2015) and *Desert Candles* (2019) poetry books, and an award-winning chapbook *A Bird from Ukraine* (2026). Elina's poems appeared in *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Passages North*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Texas Review*, *Porter House Review*, *Sequestum*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *Pedestal*, *FreeFall*. A short film featuring her poem won Best Cinematic Poetry at the 2023 Miami Chroma Film Festival.

John P. Portelli

John P. Portelli is a Professor Emeritus at the University of Toronto. He has published eleven academic books and twelve collections of poetry, two collections of short stories, and two novels. His works have been translated into English, French, Italian, Turkish, Arabic, Farsi, Greek, Spanish, Slovenian and Serbian. After living in Canada for 46 years, now he lives between Canada, Malta and beyond. His latest collection of poetry is entitled *The Lost Coyote* (2026, Sulfur Editions and Horizons Malta).

Michael Salcman

Michael Salcman is a former chairman of neurosurgery, University of Maryland, and president of The Contemporary Museum, a child of the Holocaust and a survivor of polio. Poems in *Blue Unicorn*, *Hopkins Review*, *Hudson Review*, *New Letters*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Raritan* and *Smartish Pace*. Books include *Clock Made of Confetti* (nominated The Poets' Prize), *The Enemy of Good is Better*, *Poetry in Medicine: classic and contemporary medical poems*, *A Prague Spring* (Sinclair Poetry Prize), *Shades & Graces* (Daniel Hoffman Legacy Book Prize), *Necessary Speech: New & Selected Poems*, and *Crossing the Tape* (2024).

Stephanie Sant

Stephanie Sant is a Paris-based Maltese filmmaker and singer-songwriter. During her MA in Photography at Central Saint Martins, obtained in 2016, she opened up to cinema and the performing arts, being involved in projects shown at the Biennale Arte in Venice and the London Design Biennale. In 2024, she was selected alongside 50 filmmakers from around the world to participate in a workshop run by Werner Herzog in the Canary Islands. She is currently working on her 5th short film that will be shot in Brittany, France, and on her debut studio album.

Notes on Contributors

Gerard Sarnat

Gerard Sarnat's a multiple Pushcart/Best of Net Award nominee. Sarnat's widely published, including four collections, by *Rattle*, *Brooklyn Review*, *Tokyo Poetry Journal*, *Gargoyle*, *New Delta Review*, *Buddhist Review*, *New York Times*, *Oberlin*, *Northwestern*, *Yale*, *Pomona*, *Harvard*, *Stanford*, *Dartmouth*, *Penn*, *Columbia*, *Johns Hopkins*, *NYU*, *Brown*, *North Dakota*, *McMaster*, *Maine*, *British Columbia/Toronto/Chicago* and *Virginia* university presses. Gerry's a Harvard Medical School-trained physician, Stanford professor, healthcare CEO, devoted energy/resources to climate justice, serving on Climate Action Now's board. He's been married since 1969, has three kids, seven grandsons — and looks forward to future granddaughters. gerardsarnat.com

Andrew Zammit Montebello

Andrew Zammit Montebello has been a lifelong writer and reader. Since he was young, he'd voraciously consumed stories that bridged genres and took inspiration for his own writing. He has honed his craft by writing and publishing short stories online and has taken a unit on creative writing at the University of Malta.

Annie ZH Sun

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 *Pseudopod*, *Hex*, *IHRAM Press*, *Behind the Revolving Door* Anthology, and others. She is the winner of the Horror Competition in Edinburgh Writer's Club.