

PIDGEONHOLES

VOLUME 3



DÉPAYSEMENT

EDITOR'S NOTE

The past three months have been a challenge.

I have been consumed with work, with family, and with promoting a quarter and special volume perhaps a bit beyond my abilities as a single human being. While I have been busy, I have felt outside of everything, stretched thin, and I have not been at home, even in my own skin.

This volume captures that, and is fittingly dubbed *dépaysement*, from the French term describing the feeling that comes from not being in one's home country. Many of the pieces here explore an aspect of this feeling, but I will not guide you. There is no map now. No table of contents. Just stories. Read on, and let us share the aches, the worries, the fears, the strangeness, and the triumphs.

“THE WILLOW SWITCH”

LOUIS RAKOVICH

“What took you so long?” Peter asks. “Come in.”

The room is dark. A lantern is flickering in the corner. Mother Abrahams is standing by the table, holding a willow switch stained with brown. Emily is sitting in the chair.

She's Peter's wife now, but I know her from before. I tried to speak to her once, a few years ago. She was pretty. I thought she'd understand for some reason. But nothing came out, same as always. Just mumbles. She laughed.

Never mind that.

A tree branch is knocking on the windowpane. Outside is dark too.

“Thank you for coming,” Mother Abrahams says. “We need two men to hold her.”

I shake my head, trying to say, no, it's not a problem, I'm glad to help. I think Mother Abrahams understands.

She gestures toward Emily. “Hold her arms. Good.”

“I think it's gone now,” Emily says. “It left. I felt it go away.”

“It only wants you to think that,” says Mother Abrahams. “It's afraid.”

And she takes her book from the table, and reads from it, and lifts the switch. I close my eyes. Emily screams. Mother Abrahams reads another passage. Strikes again. Reads more. Emily screams. I lose track of the sequence – the reading, the whoosh of the switch in the air, the screaming, all mixed together now.

Something scratches the windowpane.

I open my eyes.

Peter's eyes are closed.

In the window behind Mother Abrahams' back, what I had mistaken for a branch before is a hand. The demon smiles – sharp teeth, a face both a man's and a woman's, beautiful, hideous. Eyes dark and burning at the same time.

Mother Abrahams strikes. Emily screams.

I don't say anything. If I tried, only mumbles would come out.

About the Author:

Louis Rakovich writes fiction. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *LitroNY*, *Goldfish Grimm*, *Firewords Quarterly*, *Bad Dream Entertainment*, *Spark: A Creative Anthology* and *Phobos Magazine*, among others. He grew up in Jerusalem, Israel, and currently lives in New York City, where he is working on his first novel. You can find more stories by him at louisrakovich.com.

“ECZEMA’S LOVER”

IRINA KLISHCH

We grew up in a greenhouse. Where the pale abyss of the ocean ate at the sand like a roach, where my mother left us stranded. The world was different then: everything a stain of blue hues and silver bleach. My sister’s skin morphed into sandpaper, smelling of fumes and sour cider. I watched this happen. She grew more ill with each day, until she resembled nothing but a wet sponge, a small roach with the belly of a ripe peach. I wasn’t worried.

We grew up in a greenhouse. Buried our mother’s bones in the yard until they grew into an apple orchard, towering over us like lampposts – like light, like telephone wire. We had seen her death coming. The paper always announced murder twenty-five hours prior. For the final supper, we ate with forks in our elbows, a big meal of spices and sauces.

We grew up in a greenhouse. The world was different then! Plastered our necks with orange marmalade, dipped our fingertips in honey and made the fish lick them. We grew up in a greenhouse, our liver a glass vase, our tongues: black worms floating in the Atlantic.

About the Author:

Iryna Klishch is a young emerging author currently studying Creative Writing at Denison University. She hopes her words find you.

“512”

OWEN LUCAS

How long am I
 Living ghost
Before I leave
 The newspaper
With its golping
 Explosions and
Sacks of Rome
 And lingering
Fallsout (blood
 Tidewise rush
From the doors
 Of the elevator
Ajar!): how long,
 How long ghoul
The tidy seat with
 These untidy
Ideas that garland
 My temples in
The simple time
 Half an hour
After waking?

 Breakfast will
Concrete
 Love make,
Signal breath into
 Its solly place,
Placate the bloodgod
 Rearing his
Hands of root:

Pale out,
Barren dark!

About the Author:

Owen Lucas is a British writer living in Norwalk, Connecticut. His poetry, fiction and translations have been published in more than fifty journals in the U.S., Britain, and Canada. He is an editor-at-large at Potluck Magazine. Look for new work in upcoming issues of Plume, Sakura Review, Really System, Monarch Review, Big Lucks and Tribe. For more: owenlucaspoeems.com

“FLAN”

TABITHA CHIRRICK

I drop the flan halfway to the table. It oozes into an unceremonious pool of custard and caramel sauce on the rug, but I can't say sorry, even though Mami says I always must. No words come when I look up and see Abuela's funny head.

A stormcloud blooms from her gray hair. It grows toward the ceiling as her faded eyes narrow at the mess by my feet. Silvery strands of wind glide out of the cloud like snakes from a hole and slither through the dining room until the linen curtains billow in their wake.

Lightning cracks through the storm, flashing images which evaporate into mist. I see Abuela humming as she stirs a wooden spoon through bubbling, golden sugar; Abuela sitting in her bed upstairs with a photograph trembling between her hands; Abuela, running her fingers through mi muerto Abuelo's dark hair. Te amo, the stormborn Abuela whispers to him, and a torrent of pictures pour from the darkness.

The visions are all of a young couple I've only ever seen framed above the kitchen sink. Dancing, drinking, celebrating, kissing, hugging, holding, and finally, making flan. The man's arms around the woman's middle as she stirs the pot, his nostrils breathing in the nape of her neck. Golden sugar bubbling in their brightly lit kitchen. A kitchen exactly like Abuela's, but brand new.

I jump as Abuela inhales sharply. The storm sucks inside her, like a genie swirling back into its lamp. The howling wind gone, mi familia's chatter from the living room returns. A soft, warm sound, but somehow emptier than before.

“Oh, don't look so sad, mija.” Abuela kneels down and brushes a tear off my face. “We can make another.”

About the Author:

Tabitha Chirrick is a writer of all things speculative, taking inspiration from her comic book-ridden childhood. She makes her home in the gadget and burrito-filled splendor that is Silicon Valley.

“BASKETBALL”

MICHAEL PRIHODA

We lived in the country. My father did what he wanted. One day, I came home to an ostrich, tied up to the basketball hoop in the front drive, the ostrich’s paws (or whatever they have for feet) making noises against the gravel exactly like how bubble wrap sounds when it gets popped, I swear.

My little brother named the ostrich Steve, which my dad said was dumb, but I and my little brother called it Steve anyway for the three months we had it.

One day, I came home and my father had left. But we still had that ostrich.

Until it broke free of its tether and ran off. My brother and I played a lot of basketball after that.

About the Author:

Michael Prihoda is a poet and artist, living in the Midwest. He is the founding editor of *After the Pause*. His publications can be found in various journals. He loves animal crackers and instagrams @michaeldprihoda.

“MY SHADOW”

REBECCA HARRISON

My shadow was bird shaped. They made me stand still while they ran their fingers on its outline. I listened as they counted feathers. They wanted me to talk because when I did, it looked like it sang. I was quiet. When they weren't there, I pretended my words were birdsong. I ran and my shadow flew behind my steps. I moved my arms and watched its wings. I sat in trees and saw it perch.

One day, my shadow wouldn't move. I tried to pick it up, but it went through my fingers. It started fading. I sat beside it until it disappeared. They told me birds live short lives and that was why my shadow died.

I follow flocks now. I run with their shadows. I pretend their shadows are mine.

About the Author:

Rebecca Harrison sneezes like Donald Duck and can be summoned by a cake signal in the sky. Her best friend is a dog who can count. She was a finalist in the first Wyvern Lit flash fiction contest. Her stories have also been published by Hermeneutic Chaos, Fiction Attic, Unbroken Journal, Remarkable Doorways Magazine, The Fable Online, Maudlin House, and elsewhere.

“TIME COLLECTING”

ANNA ZUMBRO

English: You are forty.

This is you: four decades of experience woven into roughened skin and thinning hair. At work you ask the intern who is half your age for help with the new computer program. That was you, once — the brash young tech whiz, brimming with the potential of all the years ahead of you. On candlelit dates you wear the hipster glasses that make you look young, gloss over the years in your stories, demur when she asks your age even as you try to deduce hers. There will be time, if all goes well, to find out if who you are is good enough.

Spanish: *Tienes cuarenta*. You have forty.

Two score trips around the sun, completed and stored in your back pocket, ready to be whipped out when needed to demonstrate independence to your parents or authority to your children. Can you lose years the way you’ve so often lost your keys? Your other intangible possessions — fear, cold, hunger — do not stick around forever.

Your daughter’s screams wake you each night, and you rush to her bed to offer comfort. She is eight years old and shaking, unable to lose the terror of a bad dream. Maybe the secret of losing well comes with the gaining of years.

Russian: *Тебе сорок*. To you are forty.

It is one more gift to open, this new number. Like the handmade striped sweater you receive from your mother, it is both welcome and not, and you wear it regardless. Sometimes you divide the number into equal slices, like a loaf of babka: eight spans of five, four spans of ten, six spans of seven with one not completed. Yet.

Astronomical: 0.24-166.1 years. Your age depends on the planet.

Your daughter grins as she waves her homework assignment and announces that on the planet Mercury she is 43 years old. “I’m older than you!” she giggles, and her youthful myopia amuses you enough that you do not point out that your age would

increase on Mercury, too. You are her North Star, ever reliable and never changing. But this reveals your own myopia. Even the stars move, grow, and die.

Mathematical: $60 \text{ sec/min} \times 60 \text{ min/hr} \times 24 \text{ hr/day} \times 356 \text{ days/year} \times 40 \text{ years} = 1.26$ billion seconds (approximately).

There's a new kid at the youth center where you volunteer, 14 or 15 by the looks of him. He doesn't talk much but agrees to a basketball game. He's energetic and has a knack for free throws, but hasn't learned how to change direction quick when you fake him out. Sweating on the bench during a break, you ask his grade, and he asks your age. "Over 1.26 billion seconds and counting," you say.

The boy laughs. He says he'd like to play another game, if you aren't tired. You nod and stand. You're not tired, not yet.

About the Author:

Anna Zumbro lives in Washington, DC. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Cricket, Daily Science Fiction, freeze frame fiction, and other publications. You can follow her on Twitter @annazumbro.

“PURDIES”

SHARI J. CRANE

Why dress a sow in silk and brand it “final” draft?

Why not—

aye the deadline’s in five minutes
draft—or the publish or pillory draft
or why can’t I catch a bligh draft or
the cow-pie tenure bye-bye draft

And why do true poets shoulder the manky blanky?

Why not—

the mouldy snoggers a dragging muddy
poetry above moss and mirror licked
with snot and a bleating against paper

This isn't prying, but when did
Understood and Is get divorced?

About the Author:

Shari J. Crane is a physician and author from Coronado Island. She writes poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, and will be a contributing writer for the 2015 *A Room of Her Own* writer’s retreat. She has 14 publications ranging from *Coronado Lifestyle Magazine* to *Academic Radiology* and *Gastroenterology*, and forthcoming publication in *The Beechwood Review*.

“BLOODY”

ZAIN SAEED

I called him Bloody as an inside joke. When he ran at folks and they ran from him I held my breath and held back my laughter because otherwise I would either throw up or laugh out loud, neither of which was a nice thing to do. Bloody could smell death and I could convince him to kill. We were not savages. We asked them “if” and they told us yes, we could, but make it a surprise, please, Rottweilers scared them. I called him Bloody for a laugh. His tail never wagged.

We had done five yesterday but today there would be only one. We had not written to her because Bloody had not smelled anything, or maybe he hadn’t told me, so I was surprised when I got her letter with a return address.

“5:34 p.m., please. I’ll be in the park. Please be punctual. Love, Theresa. “

I had never seen or heard of Theresa but she had heard of us. I asked Bloody if he was okay with it and he said he wasn’t sure, he had never killed anyone who wasn’t already dying, it did not feel right. He did not usually speak but when he did he spoke smart things, just like this, but always with a far-away look in his eye, as if hiding a lie, or a truth from a past life. We considered it further and came to the conclusion that we’d visit her, and Bloody would try to smell death to try and make it easier.

She was leaning against a tree and I had indeed never seen her before. Bloody motioned me to take off his leash and he bounded towards her. I called him Bloody because his fur was the color of dried blood and dirt. She recognized us and straightened up and closed her eyes. I told her to wait, it wasn’t time yet, Bloody had to check something.

Bloody sniffed her air. Bloody sniffed her paws, her knees. Bloody asked her to bend down and sniffed her fur, her neck, the backs of her ears. Then he ran back to me in a frenzy and whispered:

“I can’t smell it, I can’t smell anything!” His tongue was nowhere to be seen and he was shivering uncontrollably.

I hugged him, held on to him, and he cried.

Theresa walked towards us. I told her it was off, it was all off, please, what did you do to him? She sat down next to us, ran her paws through Bloody's hair. She was also crying.

"I don't know," she said, "I'm sorry, I don't know! Bloody's dying!"

I carried Bloody home. He was still shivering but no longer crying, he kept repeating "I can't smell anything, I can't smell anything!"

They began to come out in their hundreds; out of houses, out of dumpsters, on leave from the pound. They began to follow us.

"We can smell him! We can smell Bloody!"

Their chants were loud and the noise of swishing tails was tremendous. There was black and golden and white and blue and grey. I called him Bloody because he'd once asked me to.

I put him on the sofa, threw water on him, covered him in blankets, spoke calming things in his ear, but he continued to shiver. When he was done shivering he went away somewhere. They stayed outside for much longer, heads hanging, lost in thought, trying desperately to smell death in each other and in themselves, even though they knew they never would, that there was no getting out of it sooner now.

About the Author:

Zain Saeed was born and raised in Pakistan and is currently studying linguistics in Freiburg, Germany. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in FLAPPERHOUSE, Bird's Thumb, Cheap Pop, Third Point Press, Bahamut Journal and others. He tweets at @linguistictrain.

“THIS ANCIENT CITY”

MARK ANTONY ROSSI

I found
a child
whose mother
had drowned
pushing her daughter
up a musty attic
in an ancient French city
under water
under attack
under the protection of God.

But where do you pray
when temples wash away
when the street is a cemetery
when the birdsong is a memory
of what used to be
a life of Cajun comfort.

You pray on your feet
and call back the creatures of the air
like a Noah in reverse
to remind them land will resurrect
from a watery grave
and make its mark again
on the dreamer
on the diviner
on the daylight reborn.

About the Author:

Mark Antony Rossi's poetry, criticism, fiction and photography have appeared in The Antigonish Review, Another Chicago Review Bareback Magazine, Black Heart Review, Collages & Bricolages, Death Throes, Deep South Journal, Ethical Specacle, Deep South Journal, Flash Fiction, The Magill Review, Japanophile, On The Rusk, Purple Patch, Sentiment Literary Journal, The Sacrificial and Wild Quarterly. His most recent play "Eye of the Needle" was produced by Grin Theatre, Liverpool, England and its youtube recording is available at

<http://markantonyrossi.jigsy.com>.

“NOT EVEN ONE GRAIN OF SAND LEADS TO THE FINAL QUESTION”

RENE SALINAS

I couldn't stop her. She pulled the trigger.

“Wait!” I said. “Are you sure you want to do this, now?” A frantic second of panic, accompanied by an emphatic sense of inevitability. Too late... I looked, and she looked back with a facial gesture resembling something akin to surprise mixed with desperation — still holding the injection gun.

I could see her face changing.

She placed the gun on the sand...

“DMT,” I said, “is not something you just...” She laid on the top of a dune.

“It's a good thing I brought you here,” I continued, decreasing the tone and intensity of my voice. The dialogue turned internal as she was overtaken by the most powerful hallucinogen known to man and science.

Sitting down on a sand mountain, she looked relaxed; quiet but still active. I could see it in her eyes. They were blinking faster than usual. For reasons unknown to me an imperative sense for essentials crept in as I questioned myself:

Do we have everything we need?

She turned and looked in a convincing fashion. *Maybe she wants to show me something important*, I thought.

She held my hand and began to talk.

I. The Apparation

“My mind lays nestled in my interior life, at home only with my own ideas. I care not for the objectivity or any association of value. I have arrived,” she murmured.

Nothing was ever so beautiful as her smile, which travelled, suspended in silence as she proceeded, trying to explain.

“All my intending should just be transposed into an actual deed. Might as well, right?” She looked with intent to which I responded.

I said, “Right.”

She frowned. It made me feel uneasy. *Maybe this newfound wisdom had given her extra powers, I thought. Now she will be able to see right through me — clearly knowing when I am telling the truth and when not,* I anticipated.

She held my hand as she drifted deeper into her thoughts.

“Have you ever experience the withdrawal of self-imprisonment?” She adventured.

“Let me think,” I replied.

“What? Why do you have to think?” She asserted and demanded. “Trying to make an internal commentary of what one is doing — is just a kind of illusion.” She looked back at me; it took me by surprise.

She made me feel like a child caught while stealing. I felt the need to act; to put on a mask.

To react.

“No,” I meant, “ No, I haven’t,” I assured her. “Sorry,” I apologized, trying to make up for the clear lack of awareness needed for the expansive moment of consciousness.

“I get it,” she kept adding “It can be compared to putting into words something that cannot be put into words.”

“I have been displaced and pushed so hard that it hurts; I have stumbled upon my double-meanings, my many centres, yet no epicentre to claim mine.” She looked down at the sand and began to draw an inward spiral with her index finger — until a calm moment of silence arrived.

I started to realize, maybe becoming monosyllabic was the best choice, so I let out a tentative, “Oh.”

Her normal reaction to that reply would have been a punch in the arm plus a scream. Something like, “*Stop being so condescending.*” But today, given the circumstances, she continued to draw in the sand.

A spiraling, finger painting picture. When she arrived in the centre of the sandy vortex, she exhaled with a serious face; she still had more things to share:

“Yeah! See... my inconsequential morality based on my unskilful thoughts — imbued with desire, aversion, or delusion...” As silence reigned, she continued drawing.

II. Movement of Time or Space?

“Transcends time and space.”

“And/or space...”

“Can you just feel it?” She asked in confidence, putting her hand at the side of her mouth, in case someone would hear her.

It had been two or maybe three hours since the last round of questions. I had a finite number of clouds counted on my way to deciding the exact colour of this desert landscape as well as singing “*Dazed and Confused*” by Led Zeppelin, albeit only internally. The fear of interrupting the flow of events was always present and palpable.

She interjected again, this time an appeal:

“Guide me with some space? Where guiding me becomes the efface.”

“Just to clear my head; Emptying my mind.”

“Saving both time and space... Would you find the will to replace?”

“Time — Space.”

She let the last letter resound, before she did the same with the next.

“Space — Time.”

She had slowed down so much that when she pronounced Time it felt as if time indeed was slowing down to stillness.

She inhaled and continued with flawless nature...

“My past is over as my future becomes present. Moreover, this timeless lady that conducts — with an enchanting melody of gentle sounds, through impetus constructs. Arranging Time as an intimate unit of measure. A careful entwine of harmonious pulses, a devoted beat of finite proportions — filling my emptiness in outpours of themes. Behold perception — through a myriad of paths in motion without an obvious connection. Composing lines in ridden destiny; hiding shadows of a time never left behind.”

She looked down and fell silent again.

As soon as she finished, I interrupted the mood with one of my more subtle comments. “Poetic,” I said. Affected by the silence, the contemplative mood created, I felt I got my notebook out.

III. **Chromatic Aberration**

It had been the best part of five hours. Most of them had been used by the silence in her with me trying to remember a poem in the distance. Scribble after scribble trying

to put the words together, again, my thoughts surreptitiously left out a gesture or a phrase.

“Was it time or space then?” I asked, still trying not to interrupt the moment.

She looked at me, pale, tired, with crystal clear eyes, sandy clothes and her dreadlocks tied up with my handkerchief. Looking at the sand, she just interrupted my questioning as if she hadn't been through with the speech and I had rudely interrupted the flow.

“Shh!” — She continued emphatically, opening her hands like some sort of conductor, moving constant waves of air from one part to the other in a harmonious fashion. I dared not interrupt, so I looked at the sand just for a few seconds when she began sharing:

“Listen to the concealed tune that lies behind the dream - castles placed on a sandy dune. One iridescent stream of sunshine alone will softly cry, on a fragment of a tearful light; as it mourns — the refulgent prism of lament can't but uphold the reflection with intent. A rainbow, hoping for a constant unfolding of colour, but the untrained eye nascent only an infinite array of gradients of sorrow through enchanted melodies of irony that fail to borrow; the essence that lies playing with notes undefined. The conductor bathed by harmonious reveries, but they all decline; suddenly, an asinine duplicate, disguised by the dark enticed by the straight and narrow line. Still, we stand waiting for the next show as our human consciousness dissolves through the mind to our spine it liquefies.”

I had put the pen down; I devoured the moment. Silence had amplified every nuance, every syllabic compound, every intention inherent of meaning. Each and every word continued to permeate and resound and made me think only in terms of wilful thoughts which in turn placed my emotions upside down. A sudden rush of abandonment took over.

I placed my hands on her arms.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

What was about to happen, depended on the outcome and the tone of the answer.

“Yes, yes!” She replied, “Everything is fine now.”

“Good,” I nodded.

I reached for the gun, loaded a new dose, and injected myself.

About the Author:

Rene Salinas. An IT technician from the UK that loves to write; has participated for years in national and international competitions. Driven by the need of exploration in writing and the desire to follow in particular the path laid by Jack Kerouac and his views onto the methodology of ‘Spontaneous Prose.’

“HIBERNACULA”

D.S. WEST

Following the icy path, watching your step but not trying not to fall 'cause you fall hardest that way, you spot movement on an up-ahead tree. The scrawny skeleton of a seagull perches on the highest branch of a frozen palm tree. The dead bird's beak is perfectly intact, yellow and black, to make the speaking creepier: “Your decision lies between the whole and the part.”

The ill-defined creature is more or less accurate. Nothing makes sense during the winter months. Nothing excepting death. (Cough.) *Accepting* death. Nothing else penetrates. “Love is the ideal peeling instrument for scraping bones clean,” the gull squawks.

Tugging at cloves of garlic around your neck, your personal protection against paranoia, you tell the songless songbird what's been on your mind this long Colorado winter. “Then love isn't what I thought it was,” you explain to the dead thing, no trace of feathers. “Any beauty we find in this phantasmagoria, we have to fill in ourselves.”

“Motherfucking paint by numbers. [SQUAWK!] and die by numbers.” The gull attempts to spread or flap what're no longer wings. Stubs. “Fuck-ing monochrome! Transient banality [SQUAWK!] As you, materially, allegedly-actual are.”

“Yeah man,” you tell the thing that should but doesn't frighten you. Though dead and cold, the planet persists. Who could blame its inhabitants for blending in? You reach over your head, feel around in your open backpack. You pull the first can of spray paint you find. (Riot Violet, your favorite besides Plump-lips Pink.) “Life's supposed to be a peep show.” You show the bird, dead no eyes, the color and you shake the can.

“Spray, spray away! Spray through your days. But keep the backs of the eyelids painted too. Outsides don't take so kindly to violets. [SQUAWK!]”

The weather turns for the worse. A gust from the East cuts through the valley, rending the bird skeleton. Skull-gull's intact bill falls from the tree to the ground, equally ineffectual. You poke at it with your steel tipped boot, coming unlaced. How long's it been? You can't feel a thing.

You whisper, the camera trained on your lips. Chapped. Cracked. “The distance between surfaces is meaningless.”

[Cut to--]

A surfaced rock in the central Pacific, the spot you meet with your talking ocean pals meet to sing songs and enjoy the tropical climate. You follow the finger of your friend the clumsy pun-prone oyster and find your other friend, the clumsy affable bowhead whale, ferrying a pack of untrained a capella seals on its back. The seals wave to you with their animated flappers (no fingers), barking that godawful seal bark but in harmony, repeating the chorus to a song as they pass, “Spring, you don’t knooooow! (the seal with the deepest voice, alone, says ‘do you?’) How we’ve missed you.”

The mermaid beside you, seashell sports bra gives you a high-five. A merman with curly apple hair and a tribal jellyfish tattoo on his shoulder begins kissing the back of your neck, zeroing around while the mermaid coils her scales up three-and-a-half times in your lap. It’s about to get weird.

Intimacy closes in. There’s bound to be a song. Under the circumstances, it’s likely to include several measures of art film violin. Before any of you take to throat singing, a gull lands on your shoulder, an oil-slick rainbow trout hanging out the mouth. Not just any rainbow trout; your spiritual advisor, Dr. Gordon Pym Erasmus, waving his one good remaining un-chomped fin from the mouth of his lover of many years, Glenn the Murderous Seagull.

You take a look around from the surface of your surfaced rock. Painless, bare-naked ocean as far as your eyes can take you. Head back, laughing into the fat bellies of equatorial clouds, you celebrate your good fortune. Colorado, man. There’s noplac sweeter in the springtime.

After the violins caught fire, before a big ensemble number, the merman dances around you awkwardly; it’s awkward between you now. But the mermaid pecks you on your shoulder. Her lips grace you where your backpack strap once rested. You feel a tinge of guilt. Why do you let the winter get to you like that? Come February, you’re ready to throw in the towel. Crawl inside a hole in the ground, chill with sleepy, scary animals that don’t sing or talk. Get bitten, get sick and die. Find a hole in the wall, with

people who unwilling to share this or any rock with you. Get drunk, get drunker. Have unprotected sex with someone compatibly depressed, get sick and die.

Glenn the gull says, beak to your ear so none of your other undersea friends can hear-- not even Erasmus, studying the merman's tattoo, asking if he's read any Hilda Doolittle--"Mount Olympus. Center of volcano. [SQUAWK!] Fortress of Solitude."

He continues rattling off real and mythological places. What is it with loudmouth birds, not letting you feel sorry for yourself? The mermaid is intuitive, to make her a better kisser; she dives before the nimbus cloud overhead catches up with the sun. Some friends can't stand for you to have a good time.

The gull keeps on and on. "Holodeck mirrorhouse. Asgard. Empyrean. Kosmos. Intercourse, PA; Middlesex County, MA..."

You lick your chapped lips, strain your imagination making-believe you're not dehydrated. That isn't this hot out, that you didn't forget your water bottle again, looking for a hole in the wall that hasn't disappointed you yet.

About the Author:

D.S. West is a writer, artist, and hopelessly lost pedestrian in Boulder, CO. West's prose has appeared in *Thrice Fiction*, *Beyond Imagination*, *Crack the Spine*, and *Loud Zoo*. A list of his published work can be found at his pitiful excuse for a website, icexv.wordpress.com/.

“ONE GIANT LEAP FOR CLOWNKIND”

J. TYLER RUTHVEN

“What’s that, Karen?”

She stayed focused on her paper and crayons, brown ringlets hanging motionless as she drew. She finished and handed me the paper.

A clown in a space suit on the moon.

“You’ll see it when you get there, Daddy,” she said. The dog barked and she ran after him.

I was worried I would say something about that clown as I stepped off the lander.

“One small step for Clown...”

I looked at Buzz and saw Earth reflecting off his face-shield, cloudy surfaces forming eyes and nose above an Antarctic smile.

“What are you looking at Neil?”

About the Author:

J. Tyler Ruthven has two kids that alternate on an hourly basis in engendering feelings of fury and joy. He would like to create something for them more substantial than TPS reports so works with his fingertips to build stories or with his hands to hammer together slides and beds. Hopefully it will be enough.

“MARBLES”

E.N. LOIZIS

My father kept his marbles in a jar under his bed. He won the first one fifty years ago, from a red-haired kid named Hercules with an appetite as glorious as his name. This First Marble lies apart from the rest, in a small, wooden box the color of ripe cherries.

Father sits staring at the tire swing hanging from our oak tree in the garden. When I was ten, I fell off that swing and broke my wrist, after Zoe cast an apple at my head for kissing her boyfriend on the cheek. Father carried me in his arms and sang to me all the way to the hospital that day, his voice cracking ever so lightly at the edges.

I take the First Marble out of its box and hold it in front of him. He blinks. There is a flash behind his blurry gaze, a storm raging within. Memories crash and flood the corners of his eyes, only to draw back again, leaving an empty shore and scattered debris all around.

Father sits in his chair as life happens in front of him, without him, in spite of him. As I put the Marble back in its box I know – all he sees across the garden is a tire hanging from a tree, swinging aimlessly in the passing wind.

About the Author:

E.N. Loizis is a Greek writer trapped inside the body of a technical translator who lives in Germany. She writes flash fiction, poems and short stories while pretending to work on her novel. You can find her at: www.enloizis.com

“GOOSEBERRY JAM”

JENNIFER TODHUNTER

It was a night for the record player. A box of forty-fives, a bottle of Bordeaux and a shallow bowl of orange cape gooseberries. The pop of the cork echoed against the walls, the new moon hiding from the belt of stars stretching overhead outside.

Robert Johnson's Stella pined away as I applied lipstick to my cupid's bow, and blotted it against the inside of my wrist. The warpaint was the colour of blood -- the same colour of the wine. It took awhile to find the barbecue lighter reserved for sparking candles. Somehow, it ended up under the coffee table in a shoebox containing old pictures of us in happier times. Polaroids with notes written in permanent red marker.

The mood changed once the flames from a plateful of candles shone, their flickering falling and building with the music. The blues danced with anyone. I flipped Robert over and stuck the needle in his groove, then poured myself a glass of wine.

It was summer -- canning season. Mason jars lined my kitchen counter. I found a ripe chunk of Stinking Bishop in the refrigerator and a row of sesame thins in the cupboard. A wonderful combination with the gooseberries. It was a feast of strange proportions. Another glass, another record. Billie's song about fruit hung in the air while I ate.

Our pictures shredded easily. I would've thought it more difficult to pull the memories apart. They floated like flankers from the fire, through the opening of one of the four-ounce jam jars, and pooled once they reached the bottom. Two years of memories stuffed into a glass prison.

I slid the leftover gooseberries into the jar, topping our pictures like icing. The last piece of the Bishop coated my tongue before the wine washed it down. It was enough. The rest of the bottle joined our shards and the gooseberries. One more song, a bit of stardust. Every evening should end with Etta.

The wicks were drowning in their pool of tears, spilled over the course of the evening. The wax was hot when touched, coating my finger and forming a cast. It poured slowly

over the top of the wine, forging a seal. Thicker and thicker, until there was no chance of remembering. I freshened my lipstick and blotted it on the top of the lid before placing your jar on the mantel.

It was the best jam yet.

About the Author:

Jennifer Todhunter is a number nerd by day, word fiddler at night. She enjoys dark, salty chocolate and running top speed in the other direction.

“THE PRICE OF SATISFACTION”

KATHY STEINMANN

January 12

A large box of the finest chocolate truffles, giftwrapped, topped with a red bow:

\$35.95

Cinnamon hearts, just in case Tamara doesn't like chocolate: **\$5.00**

Cinnamon hearts? Hmm. Maybe she won't be keen on them either. What's something nobody can resist? Ah. Assorted jelly beans—a flavor for every palate: **\$7.75**

Bouquet of long-stemmed red roses: **\$74.99**

Posh hotel suite reservation. Not sure which hotel to book. I'll have to check the prices and see how much money is left on my credit card after I get the rest of the stuff I need. **\$???? \$285.00**

Missing You greeting card with velvet-flocked hearts. A disgustingly sappy lovey-dovey note forged with Jeremy's signature and the room number. And lots of X's and O's on the bottom. Can't go cheap on this, or Tamara might get suspicious: **\$9.95**

Oh! Can't forget a card for Jeremy, ditto, ditto, etc., etc., forged with Tamara's signature. I can copy her handwriting from our school annual: **\$9.95**

Sledgehammer to smash the memory card in the spy cam I hid last week. The spy cam that caught him cheating with her. Tamara. Ha! Tramp-mara. Trash-mara. Tart-mara: **\$54.99**

Gun to kill them both, untraceable: **\$500.00?**

Ammunition. Never done this before. Don't know how much it'll cost: **\$????**

On second thought, no need for a gun. I'll use the sledgehammer in the garage. One sledgehammer to crush her perfect porcelain complexion, to demolish Jeremy's smug smile: **\$N/C**

Heavy-duty tarp to wrap the body: **\$16.99**

Guess I'll need two tarps: **\$33.98**

Rental car to dump the corpses and take my luggage to the airport: **\$49.99**

Trip to Tahiti after I'm done: **\$5450.00**

Satisfaction: **Priceless**

December 12

Unexpected expense: **\$50,000.00** (for the guy who's going to break me out of this jail cell).

Satisfaction: **\$56,012.55**

About the Author:

Kathy Steinemann has loved writing for as long as she can remember. As a child, she scribbled poems and stories. During the progression of her love affair with words, she won multiple public-speaking and writing awards. Her career has taken varying directions, including positions as editor of a small-town paper, computer-network administrator, and webmaster. She's a self-published author who tries to write something every day. You can read more of Kathy's work at KathySteinemann.com.

“CHAIN LINK FENCE”

ROBERT BOUCHERON

The little stucco house has a chain link fence
around the back and side yards,
four feet high, with a gate in front,
good for keeping a dog in
or the neighbor children out.
Like a coat of mail, it seems to me,

the fence sags from old age and rust:
it's not at all the right thing.
Soon after I buy the property,
I drag the doghouse to the curb
for scavengers, as custom says,
and overnight it disappears.

Later, fingers pinched by the gate,
I see that the fence can be dismantled.
A handyman unscrews
aluminum bolts, yanks posts from the ground,
and lays the debris at the curb,
and overnight it disappears.

I blink my eyes in the morning sun.
What else can I get rid of?
A nasty cough, a pile of old books,
songs and reproaches stuck in my head
for many years, this solitude
I wear like a threadbare cloak.

About the Author:

Robert Boucheron is an architect in Charlottesville, Virginia. His academic degrees are B. A. 1974, Harvard University, and M. Arch. 1978, Yale University. His writing appears in *Aldus Journal of Translation*, *Bangalore Review*, *The Biscuit*, *The Cossack*, *Conclave*, *Construction*, *Digital Americana*, *Gravel*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *JMWW*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Milo Review*, *Montreal Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Origami Journal*, *Poydras Review*, *The Rusty Nail*, *Short Fiction*, *Slippage*, *Virginia Business*.

“DYING IN MARYLAND”

PHILIP HANSON

The lieutenant came to consciousness staring up into some distant tree branches, thinking “hypoxia.” Hypoxia? From West Point: Anatomy. Not enough oxygen. He lay hurting, not moving, his body an exposed nerve, reduced to a solitary constricted throb. Had his hands gone blue? A gray Confederate, hands blue. Ironic hypoxia. He was in some woods somewhere unknown. No, Maryland. Sharpsburg. They waited for Jackson. No, Jackson had come. The lieutenant thought he lay in the East Woods where Lawton’s men had hidden. No. He hadn’t been with Lawton. He pulsed, squeezed his eyes shut. Even that hurt. Where were they? Where was he? One soldier said they had fought so long the sun had gone backwards and night would not come. *They’d gone back to Virginia.* Except him, the blue lieutenant. Back in Virginia across the Potomac. He lay on his back, under trees, staring into the blue daylight sky.

He’d retreated with Longstreet. But he’d stumbled upon a Union picket. They opened fire. He’d heard a “thunk,” like that of a mallet striking a tree trunk, a musket ball striking his horse, near the shoulder. The horse broke, ran, veering, stumbling, hysterical, cough-crying like a heartsick child; the lieutenant had been hit twice, once in the knee. He hugged his horse in an empathy of pain. Near a thicket, the horse buckled and fell. The lieutenant had kicked himself free and rolled to the ground. He had crawled in amongst the trees. He must decide now whether to struggle or give in to death here in the shaded woods. After minutes (?) hours (?) he decided he would try to crawl. His first move to roll to his side led to searing pain across the left half of his chest. He lay contemplating this, as the pain slowly rolled back to its dull state. He would have to ignore pain. He moved a little, pulling himself more than crawling—resembling a man at Second Manassas whose legs had been sheared off by a shell—toward sunlight at the edge of the trees. The trees were at the upper edge of a long downward sloping hill, which ended at a shabby farmhouse. A young black woman, dressed in a discarded potato sack, stood in front of the house. A farmer came out behind her and fixed his gaze on her. The lieutenant thought, slipping out of consciousness, they had slaves in Maryland without the inconvenience of dying to keep them.

Semi-conscious now, his mind drifted. Coming into Maryland Jackson's new horse reared and fell back and threw him. Jackson was badly bruised and he had to enter Middletown in an ambulance. Two young girls waved Union flags at him. Jackson said, "We have no friends here." The generals had hoped Maryland would rise up when the Confederates entered the state, but the people regarded them in sullen silence. In Frederick, the lieutenant found a farmer who made cider with a hand machine. The man was friendly until the lieutenant paid him with a Confederate dollar. Somberly the farmer cut a Maryland dollar with a scissors to make his change.

When the war began the Charlottesville parties came to a new frenetic life. The long period of dread that something was about to tear had at last come to fruition and with it a kind of release. Rebecca Hampton. He'd known her since he was five. Their families had been intimate for two generations. She could dance and ride. The war had come on so rapidly whatever he felt about Rebecca had been upended. Her big eyes turned liquid when he left. The Molly Capers party. General Capers off to war. Molly a politician's wife for decades, knew everyone. Doted on him, his brothers, Rebecca. It had all been there in front of him. The parties swam in his dreamscape. Costumes. Charades. Acting out Tacitus' account of Nero. Colonel McCutcheon as Nero ordering the Christians soaked in oil, torches to light his grounds. Nero's suicide. The colonel never cracked a smile. Played it straight, went off to die at First Manassas. A disciplinarian, like Jackson. Shot by his own men. Accident? Rebecca doing Lady MacBeth. Molly Capers just right to be Desdemona. Playing at tragedy, until the last. A little bit of a hush around that stuff of a white woman and a black man. Molly had to take the part. Only she had the authority. Blood ran hot, the party got quiet when he killed her. Scotch. Brandy. Singing. Molly at the piano, Rebecca. "The Bonnie Blue Flag." Dancing. Flirting. The shrieks of the partying women right with him now. Living in the moment. Feeling the dread. Tacitus said the nobility danced in the streets at Nero's suicide. "*Qualis artifex pereo.*" Nero's decadence put them off. They never felt much for Nero's slave women, though. An old West Point instructor told the lieutenant how Nero was rumored to have used the women wasn't recordable.

He came to at the sound of men's voices. It must have been late afternoon, judging by the light. Five or six Confederates, enlisted men, all in tatters surrounded the farmer and the black women. Something in their manner. Another black girl there now. Smaller, younger than the first. The first kept her arms around the smaller one. The

soldiers laughed, men without boundaries. He could hear the shrieks of the women at the parties. Hilarious, anxious. Some Georgia captain told him about a slave owner who held orgies. The master, the overseer, house slaves, all playing with the women however they wanted. Afterwards a crop of high yellow babies to sell. The voices of the men down the hill rose in anger. The farmer put his hand on the girl's back and shoved her toward the Confederates. The women at the parties danced and shrieked in their drunkenness. One of the Confederates pointed a gun at the farmer. The lieutenant's mind dizzied. He was in two places at once. Slipping away, hearing women scream.

About the Author:

Philip Hanson studied creative writing at the University of California, Berkeley, where he received his Ph.D. in English. His short fiction has appeared in *The Berkeley Fiction Review*, *The Copperfield Review*, *The Blue Hour Magazine*, *Other Voices*, *The Dan River Anthology*, and *Undercurrent*. He is currently an associate professor in the writing program at the University of San Francisco.

“HOTEL CHARLIE ECHO”

J.D. KOTZMAN

Jewel stirred on the top bunk of my dorm room bed, meandering along the last stretch back from the other place. I waited below, on a patch of checkered shag that blanketed the cold vinyl floor, hunched over a 1940s-era Smith Corona. A half-finished story, oddly titled “Hotel Charlie Echo,” poked from its ancient, grimy carriage. An incipient masterpiece, I felt sure, though I couldn’t seem to bang out the ending. Instead, I uncrossed my legs and reached for a blank cassette from one of the tall, neat stacks that encircled me. I wanted to make her a mix tape, play it for her, over and over, so she would remember all of this, me. When her narrow green eyes blinked open, she sat up on one elbow, brushed a wisp of blond hair from her face, and yawned. I should go, she said, her voice drowsy. You’re trying to work. No, you shouldn’t, I assured her. I’m not really a writer. Anyway, it’s only a prop. See, I said, lifting the machine to reveal its hollow insides. Oh, I get it, she said, smiling at me in that aching beautiful way only she can.

Beside the typewriter, a telephone—an old jet-black rotary model that gathered so much dust, like some forgotten exhibit in some forgotten corner of some forgotten museum—thundered to life. I lifted the receiver and clutched it to my ear, wincing as a blast of static hit me. Hello, I yelled over the crackling line. Is anyone there? I thought I could make out X, an ex who vanished ages ago and hadn’t spoken to me since, muttering some kind of message. What, I shouted, unable to comprehend. We ... connected ... mistake, she repeated, louder this time. I called ... got you, she continued, her glumness palpable, despite the interference. It’s nice to hear your voice again, at least, I said, hoping to console her. But my nostalgic lapse engendered only a low, mirthless laugh. Are you drunk, we asked each other, just before the connection spit out its final, feeble clicks and died.

As if on cue, Y and Z, two bygone school chums, burst into the room, trumpeting a plot to storm the quad in protest, their esoteric agenda, as always, confounding me. Y, who’d arrived in the garb of a Continental Army general, stood at attention, a toothy grin spread across his pasty face, while Z, donning fuzzy white ears and painted-on whiskers, hopped around him like a deranged Easter bunny. You should come with us, Z coaxed, bounding to the window for a peek at the expanse of snow-shrouded

lawn that glistened through the dingy glass. I have an extra pair, he cheerily offered, his back to me as he twirled a gloved finger above his leporid headpiece. I considered following them, joining their merry, harebrained crusade, but the stark truth dissuaded me: none of this existed. That arcanum, well, that and the angel in my bed, the one who dreamed of me, *dreamed me*, held me captive here. I needed to tell her something, something important, but she'd already started drifting away again, off to

About the Author:

J.D. Kotzman works in the health policy field and lives in the Washington, D.C., area with his girlfriend and two pugs, Grendel and Ginger. Previously, he has served as an editor and writer for several print and online news publications. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Speculative Edge*, *Straylight*, *Crack the Spine*, the *An Unlikely Companion* collection (a project of *Spark*), and *Inscape*.

“GROUNDERS”

SARAH GLADY

She lives at the playground in the park that is pretty green most of the year, or when the monsoons come and grab the weeds out of the ground. Or, rather, she doesn't live at the playground, she probably lives nearby, maybe at the school, (the one with the portables), no, I mean the houses next to that school. That's where she lives.

In any case, she's a pilot. She watches as other pilots, with other planes for that matter, steal her sky space above the playground. Their shadows, long and reaching like the others, pull steady against the weeds that came out with the flood waters. This makes her angry, but she holds these things close to her heart, just like Mary, but it's not the voice of God moving her here, no it's definitely those other pilots taunting her with their shadows.

Sometimes children come there after the monsoons. They're a threat as well, but she can handle a few kids every now and then, I mean, who are we kidding, they're no pilots, and they're much easier to fold and bend into neat small packages and lay at the foundation of the playground. You see, pilots don't have time to be unorganized. She knows this. At the school, (the one with the portables), they teach the children about rows and rows of numbers and how to package these numbers with words in a way that will let the children some day understand what it takes to be a doctor, a salesman, a plumber. But never a pilot, no, she shakes her head, no, being a pilot is something that needs the voice, sorry, no—the will of God. You see, flying the planes above the floodwaters means you have to know who to bring onboard and who to leave on the ground. She'd like you to know she calls these folks “grounders”, but that's not an official pilot term, that's something she just thought of a number of years ago.

The grounders are the ones upon which we're going to build our cities. They all take a little bit of folding, some crunching and snapping, she says, but after the first few bends, they stack together nicely. Sometimes, when it hasn't rained in a while, I know she likes to arrange them altogether into a great throne, almost as high as the swings, to watch her park and guard against the other pilots. God goes with her she thinks, so this park should be safe.

She hasn't flown in years. She is pretty sad about this, it's another thing she carries with her, only this weight she thinks is closer to Elizabeth bearing John, because she knows she will get her planes back one day, and then the weight within her will bend with joy, just like the Baptist, because that's her place. That's where pilots should be after all, in the sky, you see.

But the rains are coming again and soon the tall sharp weeds are going to be pulled from the ground and start to unravel her last layer of packages. As a pilot, she doesn't have much use for organizing numbers like the children in the school, but she does know that this disintegration will upset her keen sense of order. No matter. She will go with God and wait out the rains like Noah and begin again with new rows of new packages of children, all neatly bent, cracked, and arranged, and laid out as the foundation of tomorrow. Then upon this rock she will finally fly once more.

About the Author:

Sarah Glady holds an MA in literature from Arizona State University. Her work has been featured recently in McSweeney's Internet Tendency, PANK, Cartridge Lit, and unbroken. Earlier this year, she was evacuated from the park behind her house due to an aggressive and impressive flash flood.

“TINEOLA BISSELLIELLA”

WILLIAM B. SQUIRREL

The President peered through the telescope and the Moon looked exactly as he had always imagined it: a huge, bone-colored disk, disfigured by great sprays of craters, its pock-marked surface broken up here and there by the smooth rounds of the dusty mares.

“What should I be looking for?” he asked.

The NASA administrator coughed into his sleeve.

“Well?” the President straightened up so his advisors could see his rhetorical eyebrow.

The general elbowed the administrator in the ribs.

“You could look at the edges, I suppose,” said the administrator, and when the general glared at him he added: “Mr. President, sir.”

“The edges?” the President returned to the eyepiece.

He was briefly motionless, bent precisely at the waist, a clockwork figure frozen in its pose, and then he hopped.

“Holy shit!” he said and seized the telescope firmly in both elegant hands to steady his view. “It looks like they’re crumbling away! Like they’re disintegrating!”

“What is it?” he straightened up, this time with both eyebrows raised. “What’s going on?”

The administrator coughed again and the general glared at him

“Well?” asked the President.

The administrator mumbled something and cleared his throat.

“Pardon me?” the President asked.

“Moths,” said the administrator and dissolved into a fit of ragged coughing.

“Moths?” asked the President and his brows met in a frown. “I don’t understand.”

“Moths,” said the administrator when he’d caught his breath. “A massive proliferation of moths: the Moon is infested with them.”

“What kind of moths?”

“*Tineola bisselliella*,” said the administrator.

“I don’t understand,” said the President again.

“It’s goddam moths,” snapped the general. “Common moths. Cloth moths.”

“*Clothes* moths,” said the administrator with a small smile. The general flushed.

“What are they doing up there?” asked the President.

“They’re eating the goddam Moon,” said the general.

“Eating the Moon?” asked the President and glanced up at it.

“Yes, Mr. President,” said the administrator. “They are consuming it at an alarming rate. In five years there will be so many of them on the surface it will no longer reflect the sun’s light, in ten years it will be so small the tidal force it exerts on the earth will be negligible, within twenty-five years it will be gone.”

“Gone?” asked the President.

The administrator shrugged nervously.

“But how?” said the President. “How?”

The administrator shrugged again and the general’s nostrils flared.

“How’d they get up there?” asked the President.

The administrator coughed into his sleeve.

“Well, tell him!” the general’s eyes were bulging.

“Buzz Aldrin,” said the administrator. “We think he, uh, might have, um, we think he may have left a sweater up there. Mr. President, sir.”

“Buzz Aldrin?” the President scratched his forehead. “A sweater?”

“Yes sir, Mr. President, sir,” said the administrator. “A wool one: a yellow cardigan.”

The President bent over the eyepiece again.

“Is there anything NASA can do about this?” he asked.

“Not really,” said the administrator. “It’s not in the budget.”

“General?” asked the President. “Could we nuke them?”

“Too many, Mr. President,” he said. “And the costs of delivering the payload would be astronomical.”

The President was still peering into the telescope. The Moon looked so very solid to him, like it would last forever.

“A yellow cardigan,” he murmured. “How extraordinary.”

About the Author:

William B. Squirrell lives and works in western Pennsylvania. His work has been previously published with Blue Monday Review, Bastion Science Fiction, Bewildering Stories and AE: The Canadian Science Fiction Review.

“LUNGS”

TIFFANY MCDANIEL

He shined the light on my cough,
I remember the cigarettes well.
Somewhere I'm a city again
And this is just how we kiss.

About the Author:

Tiffany McDaniel's writing is inspired by the rolling hills and buckeye woods of Ohio, where she lives. Tiffany's first novel, *The Summer That Melted Everything*, will be published in Summer 2016 by St Martins Press (USA) and Scribe (UK & Commonwealth).

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